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SUMMER
READING
CHALLENGE

Edition



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WITCH
BORN

NICHOLAS BOWLING

WITCH BORN

NICHOLAS BOWLING



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For Mum and Dad

ALYCE'S LONDON 1578

- CITY GATES:
1. LUDGATE
 2. NEWGATE
 3. ALDERSGATE
 4. CRIPPLEGATE
 5. MOORGATE
 6. BISHOPSGATE
 7. ALDGATE

THE CURTAIN

FINSBURY FIELDS

MOORFIELDS

BEDLAM

GUILDHALLS

THE SWAN INN

LONDON BRIDGE

THE HANGMAN

BEAR-BAITING

THE TOWER

SMITH-FIELD

NEWGATE MARKET

ST. PAUL'S

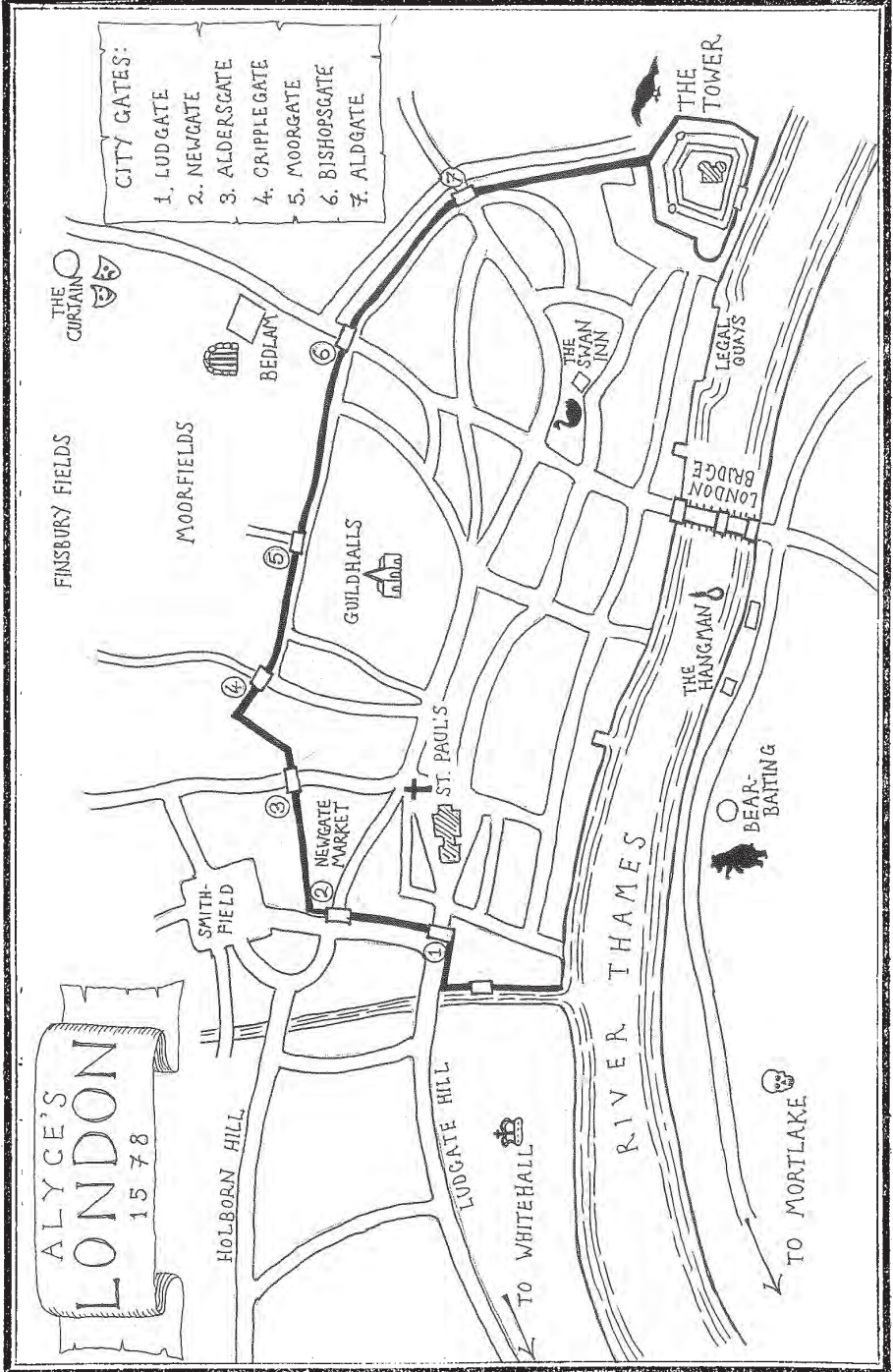
HOLBORN HILL

LUDDGATE HILL

TO WHITEHALL

RIVER THAMES

TO MORTLAKE



The Witch's MOMMET is a most cunning Piece of Sympathetick Magick, by which She may both harme and heal. With such materialls as her Craft allowes, the Witch shall make a figure in the shape of Man or Woman, and thence shall binde it to a livinge Soul through some vitall Matter; that being, some Hair, or Skin, or Spittel, or Blood, &c. In such wyse, whatsoever the Witch may perform upon the MOMMET, this will also bee performed upon the Soul to which it is bounde.

Full many a Witch may choose to craft a MOMMET in her very own Liknesse, and take such Care of this as to safeguard her own Life.

The Arcana, 'On Sympathie'

F O R D H A M , E S S E X

20 November 1577

The knocking came harder this time. Ellen could clearly hear two voices just outside the cottage's window, and behind them a low sea-swell of agitated muttering. It sounded like they had brought the whole village with them.

The house shuddered. She looked at the door, then down at the cooking pot slung over the fire in front of her, and then back to the door again. It wouldn't take much for them to break it down, but it might buy her a little time while they tried.

Hastily, Ellen gathered up the last remaining objects from around the hearth – dried herbs, stones, figures of straw and bone – and threw them all into the pot, poking each one under the surface of the broth with a wooden spoon as she went. Then she heaved the whole concoction out of the fire and left it steaming on the earthen floor.

'OPEN THE DOOR, CRONE!'

Again, the frame of the tiny cottage shook. Ellen sighed.

'Crone?' she murmured to herself, fishing a bonnet from the back of a chair, and stuffing her masses of brown curls underneath. 'I don't look *that* old . . .'

She stood up straight, smoothed out her smock and roughly tightened the laces in her bodice. Her appearance

probably wouldn't count for much once she had opened the door to her visitors, but she wasn't going to make their job easier for them. She glanced at the two beds in the corner of the room, one so small it could have been a cot, and a shadow passed over her face.

I hope she remembers what to do.

More pounding. The door seemed to be coming off its hinges.

I hope she'll be safe.

Ellen took a deep breath, and went to open it. Pale light and cold air, rich with the damp smells of late autumn, flooded the cottage.

The sight that greeted her on the other side gave her a thrill of surprise more than fear. The man in front of her had a quite impossibly handsome face. His high cheekbones, arched eyebrows and pointed beard gave him a slightly devilish aspect that Ellen found rather appealing. Those features were framed by a vast ruff and tall black hat, its huge feathers nodding like the plume of some Greek warrior. And at the centre of it all were his eyes – the kind of eyes that seemed to be all pupil, cold and black as forest pools. He smiled at her.

'Good day, sirs,' said Ellen calmly. At the shoulder of the handsome man stood a taller, thinner companion. In one hand he was clutching a Bible. In the other a noose. Behind them both were the dirty, ugly, absurd faces of the villagers, pressed in a ring around her cottage.

The handsome man cleared his throat and spoke. His voice sounded like a hammer striking an anvil.

‘Ellen Greenlief. By the authority of the *Malleus Maleficarum*, you stand accused of the practice of witchcraft, denying Almighty God and his son Jesus Christ, of sealing a covenant with the Devil, and performing diverse crimes of sorcery and necromancy with which you have cursed and afflicted the good villagers of Fordham.’

There were subdued noises of agreement from the onlookers. Ellen did her best to look underwhelmed, and smiled back at the man.

‘Forgive me, gentlemen, but I suspect you’ve had a wasted journey. I am a poor housewife, no more. I spin. I weave.’ She gestured to a broken spinning wheel that was leant against the outside wall of the cottage.

The handsome man laughed. ‘Ay, I can believe that. It is a web of *lies* and *deceit* that you have been weaving, and most subtly too.’

His smugness showed so plainly on his face, Ellen thought for a moment he might take a bow. A couple of villagers took heart from his reply and cried their approval.

‘She ain’t never been to church!’

‘She turned all our milk sour!’

Ellen sighed, and replied over the handsome man’s shoulder. ‘That’s a matter you should discuss with your cows, Master Garrard, not me.’ There was a titter from one of the children in the crowd. ‘Come, sirs, it is a long journey back to London. Stay awhile and have something to eat, and I’ll see you on your way. I have just made a fresh stew.’

‘She’s lying!’ shouted another of the peasants. ‘It’s *poison*!’

‘I’ll admit I’m not the most talented cook, but that’s a little unkind . . . At least come inside and rest your feet.’

The handsome man continued to smile, although one of his eyes twitched with impatience. He waited for the villagers’ baiting to die down.

‘How very gracious of you,’ he said quietly, his eyes now a pair of black storms. ‘We will be coming into your house, but that is not to say we will be accepting your hospitality.’

Ellen’s face hardened. ‘If it’s evidence of witchcraft you are looking for, I am afraid you will be disappointed.’

‘Yes, of course,’ said the man, drawing close to her. His eyes roamed greedily over her, as though searching for something on her person. ‘No doubt the Devil has taught you most cunning ways of concealing your art.’

Ellen let out a cold laugh. ‘So, if you find what you are looking for, I am damned. And if you don’t find it, I am damned for concealing it? How clever! And I thought I was meant to be the tricky one.’

The handsome man’s face split into a grin, revealing a set of perfectly white teeth. He was inches away now. He smelt of iron and woodsmoke. ‘You may be able to conceal your apparatus, witch, but you cannot conceal your own body.’ Suddenly he grabbed her wrist in a gloved hand, pulled her on to the doorstep, and tore a sleeve from her arm. Her skin prickled in the cold breeze. The crowd gasped.

‘Look upon this, gentlefolk!’ crowed the handsome man, dragging her from the doorway and thrusting her arm up

into the air. 'The witch's poisonous teat, with which she has been feeding her familiar! Who is to say how many more of these she has upon her vile body?'

Ellen looked at the two little pink lumps a few inches up from her wrist. They still hadn't healed after an accident with a toasting fork. Searching the faces of the villagers she found nothing but hatred and ignorance, and she turned back to the man who held her.

'This is madness! That's a *burn*, you fool, can't you see? Show me a wife in this village who doesn't have any imperfections like this!'

'Still she denies it, when the evidence is clear as day! Lies, wicked lies!'

The villagers roared. Some began to pelt Ellen and her house with stones and mud and manure. The handsome man basked in their wild indignation, and spoke to the man at his shoulder.

'Master Caxton, bind her while I search her lodgings.' Then he turned to address his frenzied audience. 'There are yet more unholy discoveries within, too foul for your eyes to look upon.'

'The girl!' a woman screeched. 'She's hiding the girl!'

Ellen stared at the handsome man, whose back was to her now. The noise of the crowd had become overwhelming, and seemed to suck her underneath it like the waves of an incoming tide. Even while he faced away, she still heard his words. They seemed to blossom from inside her own head.

'Yes,' he said. 'The girl.'

Then, without looking at her, he disappeared into the darkness of the cottage.

With practised efficiency, the taller man yanked her arms behind her back and began tying them tightly together at the wrist. Ellen was thinking too hard to feel the rope bite into her flesh, to notice the hotness, the stickiness of her hands and fingers.

The taller man spun her around again, pulled her upright and attempted to force the noose down over her head. Up close she saw his features were nothing like his superior's – they were blank and sallow, expressing precisely nothing. Behind him the villagers' howling faces rippled like a mirage, and beyond them she glimpsed the cool, inviting foliage of the beech woods.

I should have run away with her, she thought. As soon as I saw them I should have run.

The witchfinder's extravagant hat bobbed and emerged into daylight again. His smile still hadn't faded, although there was something more predatory about it now as he marched towards her. His tall, blank companion tightened the noose a little.

'Where is she?' the witchfinder said.

Ellen stared at him. He took another step forward, and nodded to the man holding the noose. It pressed against her windpipe.

'Speak,' he said.

She cocked her head. Tighter still.

'Speak.'

She could feel her pulse behind her eyes.

SARAH

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

DESSEN



SAINT
ANYTHING

CHAPTER



“WOULD THE defendant please rise.”

This wasn't an actual question, even though it sounded like one. I'd noticed that the first time we'd all been assembled here, in this way. Instead, it was a command, an order. The “please” was just for show.

My brother stood up. Beside me, my mom tensed, sucking in a breath. Like the way they tell you to inhale before an X-ray so they can see more, get it all. My father stared straight forward, as always, his face impossible to read.

The judge was talking again, but I couldn't seem to listen. Instead, I looked over to the tall windows, the trees blowing back and forth outside. It was early August; school started in three weeks. It felt like I had spent the entire summer in this very room, maybe in this same seat, but I knew that wasn't the case. Time just seemed to stop here. But maybe, for people like Peyton, that was exactly the point.

It was only when my mother gasped, bending forward to grab the bench in front of us, that I realized the sentence had been announced. I looked up at my brother. He'd been

known for his fearlessness all the way back to when we were kids playing in the woods behind our house. But the day those older boys had challenged him to walk across that wide, gaping sinkhole on a skinny branch and he did it, his ears had been bright red. He was scared. Then and now.

There was a bang of the gavel, and we were dismissed. The attorneys turned to my brother, one leaning in close to speak while the other put a hand on his back. People were getting up, filing out, and I could feel their eyes on us as I swallowed hard and focused on my hands in my lap. Beside me, my mother was sobbing.

“Sydney?” Ames said. “You okay?”

I couldn’t answer, so I just nodded.

“Let’s go,” my father said, getting to his feet. He took my mom’s arm, then gestured for me to walk ahead of them, up to where the lawyers and Peyton were.

“I have to go to the ladies’ room,” I said.

My mom, her eyes red, just looked at me. As if this, after all that had happened, was the thing that she simply could not bear.

“It’s okay,” Ames said. “I’ll take her.”

My father nodded, clapping him on the shoulder as we passed. Out in the courthouse lobby, I could see people pushing the doors open, out into the light outside, and I wished more than anything that I was among them.

Ames put his arm around me as we walked. “I’ll wait for you here,” he said when we reached the ladies’ room. “Okay?”

Inside, the light was bright, unforgiving, as I walked to the sinks and looked at myself in the mirror there. My face was pale, my eyes dark, flat, and empty.

A stall door behind me opened and a girl came out. She was about my height, but smaller, slighter. As she stepped up beside me, I saw she had blonde hair, plaited in a messy braid that hung over one shoulder, a few wisps framing her face, and she wore a summer dress, cowboy boots, and a denim jacket. I felt her look at me as I washed my hands once, then twice, before grabbing a towel and turning to the door.

I pushed it open, and there was Ames, directly across the hallway, leaning against the wall with his arms folded over his chest. When he saw me, he stood up taller, taking a step forward. I hesitated, stopping, and the girl, also leaving, bumped into my back.

“Oh! Sorry!” she said.

“No,” I told her, turning around. “It was . . . my fault.”

She looked at me for a second, then past my shoulder, at Ames. I watched her green eyes take him in, this stranger, for a long moment before turning her attention back to me. I had never seen her before. But with a single look at her face, I knew exactly what she was thinking.

You okay?

I was used to being invisible. People rarely saw me, and if they did, they never looked close. I wasn't shiny and charming like my brother, stunning and graceful like my mother, or smart and dynamic like my friends. That's the thing, though. You always think you want to be noticed. Until you are.

The girl was still watching me, waiting for an answer to the question she hadn't even said aloud. And maybe I would have answered it. But then I felt a hand on my elbow. Ames.

"Sydney? You ready?"

I didn't reply to this, either. Somehow we were heading toward the lobby, where my parents were now standing with the lawyers. As we walked, I kept glancing behind me, trying to see that girl, but could not in the shifting crowd of people pressing into the courtroom. Once we were clear of them, though, I looked back one last time and was surprised to find her right where I'd left her. Her eyes were still on me, like she'd never lost sight of me at all.



*"A touching story about
love and loss." Jacqueline Wilson*

RAYMIE NIGHTINGALE

KATE DICAMILLO

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“Poignant, insightful, and ultimately uplifting.”

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Mercy Watson Goes for a Ride
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Mercy Watson Thinks Like a Pig
Mercy Watson: Something Wonky This Way Comes

Great Joy

**RAYMIE
NIGHTINGALE
KATE DICAMILLO**



WALKER
BOOKS

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For my rancheros ... thank you

One

There were three of them, three girls.

They were standing side by side.

They were standing to attention.

And then the girl in the pink dress, the one who was standing right next to Raymie, let out a sob and said, “The more I think about it, the more terrified I am. I am too terrified to go on!”

The girl clutched her baton to her chest and dropped to her knees.

Raymie stared at her in wonder and admiration.

She herself often felt too terrified to go on, but she had never admitted it out loud.

The girl in the pink dress moaned and toppled over sideways.

Her eyes fluttered closed. She was silent. And then she opened her eyes very wide and shouted, “Archie, I’m sorry! I’m sorry I betrayed you!”

She closed her eyes again. Her mouth fell open.

Raymie had never seen or heard anything like it.

“I’m sorry,” Raymie whispered. “I betrayed you.”

For some reason, the words seemed worth repeating.

“Stop this nonsense immediately,” said Ida Nee.

Ida Nee was the baton-twirling instructor. Even though she was old – fifty at least – her hair was an extremely bright yellow. She wore white boots that came all the way up to her knees.

“I’m not kidding,” said Ida Nee.

Raymie believed her.

Ida Nee didn't seem like much of a kidder.

The sun was way, way up in the sky, and the whole thing was like high noon in a Western. But it was not a Western; it was baton-twirling lessons at Ida Nee's house in Ida Nee's backyard.

It was the summer of 1975.

It was the fifth day of June.

And two days before, on the third day of June, Raymie Clarke's father had run away with a woman who was a dental hygienist.

Hey, diddle, diddle, the dish ran away with the spoon.

Those were the words that went through Raymie's head every time she thought about her father and the dental hygienist.

But she did not say the words out loud any more because Raymie's mother was very upset, and talking about dishes and spoons running away together was not appropriate.

It was actually a great tragedy, what had happened.

That was what Raymie's mother said.

"This is a great tragedy," said Raymie's mother.

“Quit reciting nursery rhymes.”

It was a great tragedy because Raymie’s father had disgraced himself.

It was also a great tragedy because Raymie was now fatherless.

The thought of that – the fact of it – that she, Raymie Clarke, was without a father, made a small, sharp pain shoot through Raymie’s heart every time she considered it.

Sometimes the pain in her heart made her feel too terrified to go on. Sometimes it made her want to drop to her knees.

But then she would remember that she had a plan.

Two

“Get up,” said Ida Nee to the girl in the pink dress.

“She fainted,” said the other baton-twirling student, a girl named Beverly Tapinski, whose father was a cop.

Raymie knew the girl’s name and what her father did because Beverly had made an announcement at the beginning of the lesson. She had stared straight ahead, not looking at anybody in particular, and said, “My name is Beverly Tapinski and my father is a cop, so I don’t think you should mess with me.”

Raymie, for one, had no intention of messing with her.

“I’ve seen a lot of people faint,” said Beverly now. “That’s what happens when you’re the daughter of a cop. You see everything. You see it all.”

“Shut up, Tapinski,” said Ida Nee.

The sun was very high in the sky.

It hadn’t moved.

It seemed like someone had stuck it up there and then walked away and left it.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Raymie. “I betrayed you.”

Beverly Tapinski knelt down and put her hands on either side of the fainting girl’s face.

“What do you think you’re doing?” said Ida Nee.

The pine trees above them swayed back and forth. The lake, Lake Clara – where someone named Clara Wingtip had managed to drown herself a hundred years ago – gleamed and glittered.

The lake looked hungry.

Maybe it was hoping for another Clara Wingtip.

Raymie felt a wave of despair.

There wasn't time for people fainting. She had to learn how to twirl a baton and she had to learn fast, because if she learnt how to twirl a baton, she stood a good chance of becoming Little Miss Central Florida Tire.

And if she became Little Miss Central Florida Tire, her father would see her picture in the paper and come home.

That was Raymie's plan.

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To DLD, with a big hug

CHAPTER 1

Late Spring, 1945

It was a chilly night for the end of May. As he crouched, hidden behind the rubble, Otto could see his breath glow in the moonlight as it curled towards the starry night sky. Helene had noticed too and tapped him gently on the shoulder, then pointed to his ragged black scarf. The scarf was full of holes, from moths, from wear and tear, but he couldn't bring himself to throw it away. It was the only one he had, and his mother had given it to him. Now everything she had given him was precious, and it was just the thing to stop your breath giving you away on a bright moonlit night.

Helene was peering over the perimeter of a large crater a stone's throw from a Soviet supply depot in Kreuzberg, a district south-east of the centre of Berlin. Otto took a look too, despite the fact that he had been taught that only one person should look out from a hiding position at any one time. All the Hitler Youth boys had been told that - it was basic military fieldcraft. Helene knew it too. He had told her himself. She tugged on his collar to pull his head down.

It was vital that they were not seen. At this time of night, breaking the curfew, they could be shot on sight. But neither

of them, nor the rest of their little gang, had eaten that day. And ahead of them was a treasure trove. Otto's stomach turned over at the thought of it. Piled up by the depot perimeter were tins of juicy spam: succulent, spicy processed pork from America, and a mainstay of Soviet military rations. He had a small rucksack on his back and if he could fill that up, none of them would be hungry for several days.

His empty stomach let out a loud gurgle and as the sound of it drifted across the night air a couple of the Soviet guard dogs began to bark. They set off the Siberian ponies and camels, and a strange braying echoed across the Berlin ruins. The Russians used the camels as pack animals. 'Kuznechiks' he'd heard they called them. They were Bactrians, shaggy two-humped beasts; Otto remembered that from school. It was bizarre, seeing them out there in the street, rather than in Berlin Zoo, and Otto had quickly learned they were not as friendly as they looked. Their minders were even worse. When he had approached a camel to pat it, in the days after the Russians had arrived, a soldier had cuffed him so hard he had knocked him to the ground.

They heard footsteps in the distance. This, almost certainly, was the perimeter guard. Helene lay still, her face pressed against the rubble. Otto did too, trying to breathe as slowly and quietly as he could.

The footsteps were almost upon them now, and this was the awful moment when you never knew whether the guard could see you or not. He might be pointing his rifle at them at this very moment.

But the sound of footsteps continued, even though the guard had been close enough for them to smell harsh tobacco smoke as he passed. Otto stretched out his arm to look at his watch. It was one his father had given him as a fourteenth birthday present, two years ago. He had been careful to keep it well hidden whenever he had been anywhere near the Russians. Those soldiers were fascinated by anything mechanical, especially something as small and delicate as a wristwatch. In the first few weeks of the occupation it had been common to see Russian soldiers, of all ranks, with three or four wristwatches glinting on each arm. They just took them at gunpoint from any German civilian foolish enough to still be wearing one.

Now Otto and Helene waited. Two minutes passed, then the footsteps began again, echoing faintly in the distance. After they passed by, Otto mouthed, 'Two minutes and thirty-five seconds,' to Helene. She nodded and held up three fingers of her hand. This was a familiar routine. Give the guard three circuits. The first time they tried this, at a supply depot on the far side of Görlitzer Park, they had timed the guard there at three minutes and then nearly got themselves shot when he returned in under two. When they talked about it afterwards they guessed he must have stopped somewhere for a chat or a piss that first circuit. Anything could delay a guard on his path, so it was always best to time several circuits to be sure.

This one was almost as regular as clockwork. Each time around, two minutes twenty or thirty seconds. That gave

them plenty of time to nip across the perimeter and grab a few tins of spam.

As the footsteps receded for the third time, Otto's heart began to beat faster. This was it. No time for hesitation. They both stood, crouching low, and gingerly crept across the small area cleared of rubble by the camp perimeter. Lit by intense arc lights, their shadows trailed stark behind them. If anyone was awake and watching they would be shot in an instant. This was the most terrifying moment: when you first stood up. It was even worse than being in the middle of a battle. There you went from one horrendous scene to another – the whole thing like the blur of a bad dream where you were watching something happening to you rather than making rational decisions. Here you were completely calm and safe one second, in mortal danger the next.

They reached the depot perimeter in a few moments. Now they hugged the shadows of tents and makeshift corrugated-iron huts. A thin barbed-wire fence surrounded the depot, but it was easy enough to squeeze between the strands. The tins were piled untidily in an old canvas tent, easy enough to see through a tear that flapped lazily in the thin wind.

Helene carefully placed a hand through the gap and quickly picked out tins, one at a time, handing them to Otto to put in his rucksack. They were chilled by the wind and it almost felt like she was taking them out of a refrigerator. Every little clink of metal on metal made them flinch. When he had filled his sack she rolled hers off her shoulder

and gave it to him, along with two more tins. Otto glanced at his watch. 'One minute, at the most,' he whispered.

They heard a voice, drowsy but full of indignation. Someone was inside that tent, most likely a guard who had fallen asleep.

Instinctively they both fled back to the rubble, Otto ripping his shirt on the wire and dropping two of the tins Helene had just given him. The tins clattered to the ground and set off the dogs and camels. Harsh voices shouted across the depot. Otto hugged his rucksack close to his chest as he ran to try to stop the tins rattling together. As they dashed past the crater they had previously been hiding in, a shot whistled past, splintering a concrete wall in front of them.

Further ahead were more derelict buildings. If they could reach them they might be able to hide there. Several more shots rang out. Otto heard a cry as Helene fell to the ground. His legs went weak. A jet of bile lodged at the back of his throat. He looked around, expecting to see her with blood seeping from a wound. But there she was, rolling over and crawling forward, obviously uninjured. There were no more shots. The Russians must have seen her fall and now they would be coming out there to retrieve her body. They were not out of danger yet. He kept running.

Just to the south a flash lit up the sky. A moment later the sound of an explosion rolled over, followed by a cascade of falling masonry. Otto recognised the sound from the scores of air raids Berlin had endured. Another bomb had gone off - probably one with a faulty fuse. Maybe it had

been lying there since the last air raid in March. But there was no time to think about that now.

They scrambled on, keeping to the shadows, until they reached a shattered apartment block, burned out with not a single windowpane still in place. Helene and Otto peered back over the wasteland, trying to keep their breathless gasping from giving them away. The depot was settling now. The animals were quiet. No Russians were coming out to investigate further. It was as if they had shot at a dog and thought no more about it. Otto and Helene stood in the darkest part of the building and waited until their breathing returned to normal and their hearts stopped thumping in their chests.

Otto was desperately relieved to see that Helene was safe. She had lived with his family for a while because her mother had been the Roths' housekeeper in the last year of the war. It had been a phenomenal stroke of luck finding her queuing at the same water pump in the week after the Russians arrived. The moment they realised they had both survived the final catastrophe was one he would remember for the rest of his life. He hadn't recognised her at first. She had come up to him, plainly delighted to see him still alive. When she'd heard the stories about the Russian soldiers molesting every woman they could lay their hands on, she had cut her hair short and looked instead like a beautiful boy.

In the Hitler Youth they had taught them that girls were meek creatures fit only for motherhood and homemaking.

He knew now that was nonsense. She was a wiry girl, and the bravest person he knew. Before the Russians came, when Helene had a shock of blonde curly hair, he had thought she had something of a young lion about her. Now she had hands with cuts all over them, a dirty face and a few curls at the back of her neck. But she was the same Helene. Always thinking of others, and often smiling, despite everything.

‘I thought they’d got you back then, when you fell over,’ he said. He wanted to reach out for her and hug her close, and was surprised to feel his throat tightening up as he spoke. She didn’t notice.

‘That was nasty,’ she said. Then, briskly, ‘How much have we got?’

Otto laid out his stash carefully on the floor. There were twelve. Not bad for a night’s work. The gaudy blue tins, with their American words, seemed like objects from an unimaginable other world of plenty. A world where people were safe to go about their everyday lives and always had enough to eat. For a moment he was struck with a deep longing to be somewhere as safe as that in the world. To wake up in the morning and know his life was not in danger and he would have enough to eat for the day. Where was like that? America, certainly. Canada, Australia? He had been born in the wrong place and at the wrong time.

As he carefully placed them back in his sack he noticed the Cyrillic lettering stamped to the bottom of the tins in red ink, identifying them as Russian property. Those letters would condemn them to death if they were caught

carrying them. The Russians would know at once they had been stolen.

‘Let’s go home,’ Otto said.

‘Home’ was on Skalitzer Strasse in an abandoned derelict hospital with a basement room where the rain only came through in manageable drops rather than a deluge. Back there they would keep their stolen supplies in a stash far enough away from that room to make it plausible they knew nothing about it. Some Russian soldiers had been there once before, but that time all of the gang had been surprised by their kindness. The officer had given them two tins of corned beef, and left with a smile. Otto shook his head at the memory. That was the problem with the Russians: they were completely unpredictable.

‘You’re right,’ said Helene. ‘We need to get back. I’ll carry the food.’

‘No, let me. It’s OK.’

She looked at him fondly. ‘Come on, we said we’d take it in turns. We’ve been through this!’

‘Honestly, I don’t mind.’

She took the bag off him. ‘No further discussion,’ she said in that prim voice she used when she pretended to be a strict school teacher. Then she softened. ‘I’m not having you take any risk I’m not prepared to share.’

They had agreed to take it in turns. If they were caught, one of them could deny all knowledge and only the other would be shot. It seemed like a good idea at the time, and when they had been out earlier that week, Otto had carried

the three loaves they had seized from the field bakery at Kottbusser Strasse and carried them home.

The room grew darker as clouds blotted out the moon. That was good.

‘Let’s get this over with,’ said Helene. ‘Make the most of these clouds.’

Peering round the broken entrance and making sure no one was coming, they dashed over to the next shattered ruin. This was the way to get home. The journey would take them ten minutes in the daytime, but at night they might be home in an hour, if they were lucky.

They worked their way back south. Every building along the way was a burned-out husk. Not a single one had escaped the fighting, or else had been destroyed in the bombing campaign that had blighted the city over the last two years. Otto and his brother Ulrich had been angered by how the Yanks and the Tommies had ruined their beautiful city with their bombers, but when the Russians came they had taken something that had been pretty beaten up and completely pulverised it. In the first few days of the battle for Berlin, Otto had been angry with them for this city-wide vandalism. But now he was beginning to realise it was the Nazis who were really to blame. They had been the ones who had ordered the army to fight on stubbornly when everyone knew the war was lost. It was the Nazis who had hanged German soldiers – many of grandparent age, or boys – from lamp posts with the words ‘Traitor’ or ‘Deserter’ on a sign round their necks. When Otto saw

this, all the Nazi phrases and beliefs that he had heard since childhood began to make no sense. The spell that Hitler had cast on him since childhood began to fade. Now he wondered if that was what had happened to his father. In the week before he went missing, Dr Roth had made no secret that he saw no need to defend Berlin to the last. It had been almost a month now since Otto had seen him, working behind the front line with injured soldiers. Maybe they had done that to him, too? The thought of it made him feel sick, and instead Otto tried to imagine the moment he would be reunited with his father and he could show him the watch he had kept from the Russians.

Helene pointed to a house in front of them, on the other side of the street. That would be their next hiding point. Otto stared at it through the dark. Although it remained upright, and still had a roof, the whole facade was peppered with machine-gun bullets. Those windows, too, were charred and there was black soot around the burned-out frames. Otto shook his head. He could imagine what had happened there. He guessed it would have been a strongpoint for the *Volkssturm*, the militia of youths and older men enlisted by the Nazis to defend the homeland. He could imagine frightened old men and boys his age, crouching behind that window frame with their First World War rifles, and maybe a *Panzerfaust* anti-tank rocket launcher, waiting for the Russians to appear in their street. Their lives would have ended in a hail of machine-gun bullets and flying splinters of glass, followed by the cruel jet

of a flamethrower. Even now, three weeks after the last of the fighting, there was a good chance that a house like that might still contain the remains of the fighters who had died to defend it.

So they crept instead into a shop with a smashed-in front, broken glass crackling under their feet like ice on top of snow. There was a terrible smell in there. It wasn't the smell of death – that sweet, sickly odour which hit you like a wall and made you want to throw up. This was more of a sharp excremental whiff, mixed with stale decaying fabric, like a dirty dishcloth. Almost certainly, there were people in here. Living people. Otto's first instinct was to run, but Helene held him back. In the distance, further up the street were boisterous voices. The language was Russian. They had been drinking and were braying like camels, and had that mad, deranged laughter that warned anyone who heard it that they would make extremely dangerous company.

Helene pulled Otto back into the shadows and both of them started when they saw something move in the corner of the room. Was it a rat? Or a stray dog? There were still some left that hadn't been killed for food. The shape made a grunting noise. The kind of sound someone makes when they are asleep.

The drunken voices were growing nearer. The soldiers were singing. Otto and Helene flinched when they heard the sound of breaking glass. Now the men were directly outside their shop window. There were seven or eight of them. Holding on to each other for support, they moved

down the street like a strange beast of many arms and legs. One of them stooped down to pick up a half-brick and lobbed it towards a window on the other side of the street, where a small pane of glass remained unbroken.

The noise made the creature in the corner shift some more. The men outside shouted at each other and then a fight began between them. The shape froze. Whatever it was, its instincts told it to stay still and silent. The men outside began to abuse each other angrily, then just as suddenly they were laughing and pushing each other about. One of them fell straight into the shop. Otto felt a cold shiver run through him. There he was, carrying twelve tins of Russian spam. If they found him they would shoot him on the spot. Why had he not left his bag a safe distance away?

The soldiers were so close he could smell the alcohol coming off them. Two others barged into the shop to lift the third up by his arms. As one of them bent down, a terrified Otto found himself staring straight into his face. The man made a hissing noise. The sort you would make to warn a cat off a dining table. Then they were gone. Otto could barely bring himself to move. He knew his legs would not support him. He and Helene gripped each other's arms.

Now the shape in the corner moved some more. It was stirring into life.

CHAPTER 2

‘Who are you?’ came a thin voice. Helene felt the tension ebbing out of her. The voice belonged to a terrified child. She stepped into a pool of moonlight so the child could see her.

‘Hello, my name is Helene,’ she said gently. ‘I’m here with my friend Otto. Who are you?’

A tiny shape emerged from a black bundle of woollen blanket. There before them was a spindly little girl with curly blonde hair, crouched ready to spring. She was caked in dirt and held a small kitchen knife in her shaking right hand.

Helene tensed up again when she saw the knife. Even a child could do serious damage with that. ‘Easy now,’ she said, holding her hands open to show she was no threat. ‘We won’t harm you.’

The girl stared at them with a sullen defiance.

‘How long have you been hiding here?’ asked Helene.

‘I don’t know,’ she said, in a pitifully weary voice.

‘Are you here on your own?’

The question seemed to pierce the little girl. The knife came down to her side.

'My Mutti and Papa have disappeared. They told me to wait here for them, and . . .' She began to sob.

Helene moved towards her. The girl recovered herself and held the knife in front of her. 'Don't come any nearer,' she said, trying to sound tough.

'What's your name, *mein Schatz*?' said Helene softly.

'Hanna,' came the wary reply.

'Well, my name is Helene. Hello. When did you last have something to eat, Hanna?'

'Ages.'

'Will you come back with us?' asked Helene. 'We live in a little basement not far from here. You can stay with us if you like?'

'Helene,' muttered Otto in a low voice. He sounded cross but she waved her hand for him to shut up. She could have guessed he was going to object. To tell her they had enough mouths to feed already. That was all true but she wasn't going to leave this little girl here alone.

'But then Mutti and Papa will never find me.'

'We'll leave them a note, a big note, telling them where you are,' said Helene.

The girl sank down to her knees, deep in thought. Helene sensed this was the moment she was giving up on the idea that her parents were going to come back, and that she would, in all likelihood, never see them again. She felt a sob rising in her throat. Her own father was dead and her mother had disappeared in the chaos of the final battle. She was always hoping she would see her somewhere on the streets of Berlin.

‘Go away,’ Hanna said defiantly.

Helene got down on her knees so she was nearer the same height as the girl.

‘Hanna, you can stay if you want, but you’ll be safer with us. We’ll look after you. Won’t we, Otto?’ she added, a little pointedly.

He nodded, reluctantly.

Otto would come round to it, she thought. He was a decent boy and she just knew he would be haunted with guilt if they left her there. Of course they had to bring her home. She would die here on her own. He would see that.

Helene reached out a hand and the girl shrank away from it. Helene was so weary now, but she had to be patient with the scared little girl. ‘OK, how about we sit here for a while and have a chat, so you can get to know us?’ she said.

The girl nodded.

The first glimmers of dawn were lightening the sky, and Helene could see more of her surroundings. Hanna had a stubborn, hostile expression on a face that was thick with dirt.

‘How did you end up here?’ asked Otto softly. Helene could tell by the tone of his voice he was going to let her take Hanna home. He had crouched down too, although she sensed that made the girl even more uneasy. She was still acting like a cornered animal. Helene waved a hand behind her back, urging him to back away.

She was desperate to get home to Skalitzer Strasse. It was the only place where she felt safe, although she knew there was no logical reason to think that. She was anxious too about leaving Otto's younger brother Ulrich to his own devices for too long. Ulrich needed watching, which was difficult as he often went out alone, not telling anyone what he was doing. He was always up to something that might get them killed. But they couldn't rush Hanna into trusting them.

In a flash Helene formulated a plan. 'Here's what we'll do, Hanna. Me and Otto are going to have a rest. We'll probably go to sleep for a while. Now, you can do that too, and know we're here to look after you, or you can sneak off while we're asleep. You'll know. We're both terrible snorers.'

The girl let out a little laugh. Helene sensed she was winning her round.

Helene sat back against the hard concrete wall and curled up, resting her face on her knees. 'Come on, and let me lean on you,' she said to Otto. That was often how they slept when they were away from their home - shoulder to shoulder, heads resting on heads. She liked the feel of him, warm against her.

'I just need to put this bag away from us, somewhere in a corner,' said Otto. 'If the Ivans find us . . .' He didn't need to say any more.

'Good idea,' she said. He was clever like that, was Otto. Sometimes he thought of things she didn't. They were a good team.

Within a few minutes Otto was sitting beside her, snoring softly. It was as soothing as a purring cat. She drifted away moments later. But when they woke up it was fully light, sunshine pouring into the derelict shop. Both Hanna and the bag were gone.

TONKE DRAGT



THE
LETTER
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I THE VIGIL IN THE CHAPEL

Tiuri knelt on the stone floor of the chapel, staring at the pale flame of the candle in front of him.

What time was it? He was supposed to be reflecting seriously upon the duties he would have to perform once he was a knight, but his mind kept wandering. And sometimes he found that he wasn't thinking about anything at all. He wondered if his friends felt the same.

He glanced across at Foldo and Arman, at Wilmo and Jussipo. Foldo and Wilmo were gazing at their candles, while Arman had buried his face in his hands. Jussipo was kneeling with a straight back and staring up at the ceiling, but then he changed position and looked Tiuri right in the eyes. Tiuri turned his head away and fixed his gaze on the candle again.

What was Jussipo thinking about?

Wilmo moved, scraping his shoe on the floor. The others all looked in his direction. Wilmo hung his head and looked a little embarrassed.

It's so quiet, thought Tiuri. I've never known such quietness in my entire life. All I can hear is our breathing, and maybe, if I listen carefully, the beating of my own heart...

The five young men were not permitted to say anything to one another, not even a word, all night long. They were also forbidden to have any contact at all with the outside world. They had locked the chapel door behind them and would not open it again until the next morning, at seven o'clock, when King Dagonaut's knights would come to fetch them.

Tomorrow morning! Tiuri could already picture the celebratory procession: the knights on their magnificently caparisoned horses, with their colourful shields and fluttering banners. He imagined himself among them, riding a fine steed, clad in shining armour, with a helmet and a waving plume. But then he shook his head to rid himself of that vision. He knew he should not be thinking about the external trappings of knighthood, but instead vowing to be chivalrous and honest, brave and true.

The candlelight made his eyes hurt. He looked at the altar, where the five swords lay waiting. The shields hung above the altar, gleaming in the flickering light of the candles.

Tomorrow there will be two knights bearing the same coat of arms, thought Tiuri. *Father and myself*. His father's name was also Tiuri and he was known as Tiuri the Valiant. Was he lying awake now, thinking about his son? Tiuri hoped he would become as worthy a knight as his father.

Then another thought occurred to him. What if someone were to knock at the door? He and his companions would not be permitted to open it. Tiuri remembered something that Sir Fantumar, whose squire he had been, had once told him. During his own vigil in the chapel, there had been a loud knocking at the door. Fantumar had been there with three other young men, and none of them had opened up. And it was just as well, because they later discovered that it had been one of the king's servants, who had wanted to put them to the test.

Tiuri looked again at his friends. They were still kneeling in the same position. He knew it must be after midnight. His candle had almost burnt down; it was the shortest of the five. Perhaps it was because he was sitting by a window. The chapel was a draughty place and he could feel a chilly gust of air. *When my candle goes out*, he thought, *I won't light*

another one. The others wouldn't be able to see him in the dark, which was an appealing thought, and he wasn't worried that he might fall asleep.

Had Wilmo dozed off? No, he just shifted position, so he must be awake.

I'm not spending my vigil as I should, thought Tiuri. He clasped his hands together and rested his eyes on his sword, which he would be allowed to use only for a just cause. He repeated to himself the words that he would have to speak to King Dagonaut the following day: "I swear as a knight to serve you loyally, as I will all of your subjects and those who call upon my aid. I promise to..."

Then he heard a knock at the door. It was quiet, but there could be no doubt. The five young men held their breath, but stayed exactly where they were.

Then there was another knock.

They looked at one another, but no one said a word or moved a muscle.

The handle turned and rattled, but of course the door was locked. Then they heard the sound of footsteps slowly moving away.

All five of them sighed at the same time.

Good, thought Tiuri. *That's it over with.* It was strange, but he felt as though, all throughout his vigil, he had been waiting for such an interruption. His heart was pounding so loudly that he was sure the others must be able to hear it. *Come on, Tiuri, calm down,* he said to himself. *It was just a stranger who didn't know about our vigil, or someone who wanted to disturb us, or to put us to the test.*

But still, Tiuri waited anxiously for another sound. His candle flared brightly and then went out, with a quiet hiss, and he was surrounded by darkness.

He had no idea how much more time had passed when he heard a quiet noise above his head. It sounded like someone scratching at the window!

And then he heard a voice, as soft as a breath. "In the name of God, open the door!"

2 A STRANGER'S REQUEST

Tiuri straightened his back and looked at the window. He could see nothing, not even a shadow, so he might almost have imagined it. If only that were true! He couldn't do as the voice had asked, no matter how urgent it had sounded. Tiuri hid his face in his hands and tried to banish every thought from his mind.

But again he heard the voice, very clearly, even though it was no more than a whisper. "In the name of God, open the door!"

It sounded even more urgent than before.

Tiuri looked at his friends. They didn't appear to have heard anything. But he had definitely heard the voice! "In the name of God, open the door!"

What should he do? He wasn't allowed to open the door... but what if it was someone who was in need of help, a fugitive in search of sanctuary?

He listened. All was silent again. But the voice was still echoing in his ears; he would never be able to forget it. Oh, why did this have to happen now of all times? Why did he have to be the one who heard the plea? He was not allowed to respond, but he knew that he would be unable to rest until he had done so.

Then Tiuri made a decision. Quietly, he stood up, stiff from kneeling on the cold floor for so long. Feeling his way

along the wall, he tiptoed towards the door. He glanced at his friends and thought at first that they had not noticed anything, but then he saw Arman looking in his direction. He knew his friend would never betray him.

It seemed to take forever to reach the door of the chapel. Tiuri looked back one more time, at his friends, at the altar and the shields above it, at the light of the four candles, and at the dark shadows throughout the chapel, between the columns and around the vaulted ceiling. Then he headed to the door and put his hand on the key.

If I open this door, he thought, I'll have broken the rules. And then the king will not knight me tomorrow.

Tiuri turned the key, opened the door a crack and peered out into the night.

A man stood outside the door, dressed in a monk's habit, with the hood pulled down over his eyes. Tiuri could not see his face, as it was too dark. He opened the door a little wider and waited in silence for the man to speak.

"Thank you!" whispered the stranger.

Tiuri did not reply.

The stranger waited for a moment and then said, still in a whisper, "I need your help. It's a matter of life and death! Will you help me? Please." When Tiuri did not reply, he said, "My God, why won't you say something?"

"How can you expect me to help you?" whispered Tiuri. "Why have you come here? Don't you know that I am to be knighted tomorrow and that I may speak to no one?"

"I know that," answered the stranger. "That is why I came to this place."

"Well, you should have gone somewhere else," Tiuri said. "Now I've broken the rules and so I can't be knighted tomorrow."

“You will be knighted and you will have earned your knighthood,” said the stranger. “A knight must help when his assistance is requested, must he not? Come outside, and I shall explain what I need you to do. Hurry, hurry, for there’s little time!”

What do I have to lose now? thought Tiuri. *I’ve already spoken and I’ve opened the door, so why not leave the chapel too?*

The stranger took him by the hand and led him around the outside of the chapel. His hand felt bony and wrinkled. It was the hand of an old man. *His voice sounded old as well,* thought Tiuri. *Who could he be?*

The stranger stopped beside a small, dark alcove. “Let’s hide here,” he whispered, “and we must speak quietly, so that no one can hear us.” Then he released Tiuri’s hand and asked, “What is your name?”

“Tiuri,” he answered.

“Ah, Tiuri. I know I shall be able to count on you.”

“What do you want of me?” asked Tiuri.

The stranger leant close and whispered in his ear, “I have a letter here, with a message of vital importance. One might even say that the fate of an entire kingdom depends on it. It is a letter for King Unauwen.”

King Unauwen! Tiuri had heard that name many times before. He reigned over the land to the west of the mountains, and was renowned as a noble and just ruler.

“This letter must be taken across the Great Mountains to the king in the City of Unauwen,” said the stranger. “As quickly as possible.”

“You don’t expect me...” Tiuri began.

“No,” said the stranger, interrupting him. “The man who shall deliver the letter is the Black Knight with the White Shield. At this moment, he is in the forest, at the Yikarvara

Inn. What I need you to do is to take this letter to him. I cannot do so myself, as I am old and there are enemies all around, who are pursuing me and who know my face.”

“Why do you not ask someone else?” said Tiuri. “The city is full of knights right now, and there must be plenty of men you can trust.”

“I cannot ask any of those knights,” responded the stranger. “They would attract too much attention. Did I not tell you that there are enemies everywhere? Spies are lying in wait throughout the city, just looking for an opportunity to steal this letter. A famous knight is no good to me. I need someone who is unknown and who will go unnoticed. But at the same time I must be able to trust him with this letter. In other words, I am looking for someone who is a knight and yet not a knight! You are the one I need. You have been found worthy of being knighted tomorrow, but you are still young and have no reputation for your valiant deeds. And yet I know I can trust you.”

Tiuri could find no argument to counter his words. He tried again to make out the stranger’s features, but it was still too dark. “So this letter is of great importance?” he said.

“Of more importance than you could ever imagine!” whispered the stranger. “Come, you must hesitate no longer,” he continued, his voice trembling. “We’re wasting too much time! Near this place, behind the chapel, there is a horse in a meadow. If you take it, you can be at the inn within three hours – sooner if you ride quickly. It is about quarter past one now. You can be back by seven, when King Dagonaut’s men will come to fetch you. Please, do as I ask!”

Tiuri knew he could not refuse. The rules that a future knight had to follow were important, but this appeal for his assistance seemed to matter even more.

“I will do it,” he said. “Give me the letter and tell me how to find the inn.”

“My thanks!” sighed the stranger. He quickly continued, in a whisper, “The place where he is to be found is called the Yikarvara Inn. Do you know King Dagonaut’s hunting lodge? Behind it, there is a track that heads north-west. Ride along it until you reach a clearing in the forest. Two paths run on from there. Take the left-hand path and it will lead you to the inn. As for the letter, you must promise me on your honour as a knight that you will guard it as you would your own life and give it to no one other than the Black Knight with the White Shield.”

“I am not yet a knight,” said Tiuri, “but if I were, I would promise it on my honour as a knight.”

“Good. If someone tries to steal the letter, you must destroy it, but only if it is absolutely necessary. Understood?”

“Understood,” said Tiuri.

“And mark this well: when you find the Black Knight with the White Shield, you must ask him: Why is your shield white? And he will respond: Because white contains every colour. Then he will ask you: Where do you come from? You must answer: I come from afar. Only after that exchange should you hand over the letter.”

“Like a password,” said Tiuri.

“Exactly. A password. Do you understand exactly what you need to do?”

“Yes,” said Tiuri. “Please give me the letter.”

“One last thing,” said the stranger. “Be careful. You must make sure that you are not followed. Here is the letter; guard it well.”

Tiuri took the letter. It was small and flat and he could feel, in the darkness, that there were seals on it. He slipped it under his shirt, close to his chest.

“You won’t lose it if you keep it there, will you?” asked the stranger.

“No,” Tiuri replied. “That’s the safest place.”

The stranger grasped his hands and shook them firmly. “Then go,” he said. “And God bless you!” He let go of Tiuri’s hands, turned around and slipped back into the darkness.

Tiuri waited for a moment and then walked, quickly and quietly, in the opposite direction. He looked over at the dimly lit windows of the chapel, where his friends were still keeping their vigil before the altar. “Come on,” he whispered to himself, “You have to hurry.”

And he went in search of the meadow where the stranger had told him he would find a horse waiting.



A PLACE CALLED PERFECT

THEY'VE GOT THEIR EYES ON YOU

HELENA DUGGAN

A PLACE CALLED PERFECT



Sometimes Violet liked silence, but not now. Blindness made silence scary. She pushed her hands under her thighs and swung her legs, trying to remember a happy song.

Suddenly she heard faint footsteps enter the shop at speed, growing louder as they paced towards her. She looked blindly in the direction of the sound.

“I need to speak to your dad,” a voice whispered in her right ear.

“Who’s there?” she gasped.

Then heavier footsteps entered the shop. “I’ve caught you now, you mangy orphan,” a different voice panted.

To Mam, the original dreamer

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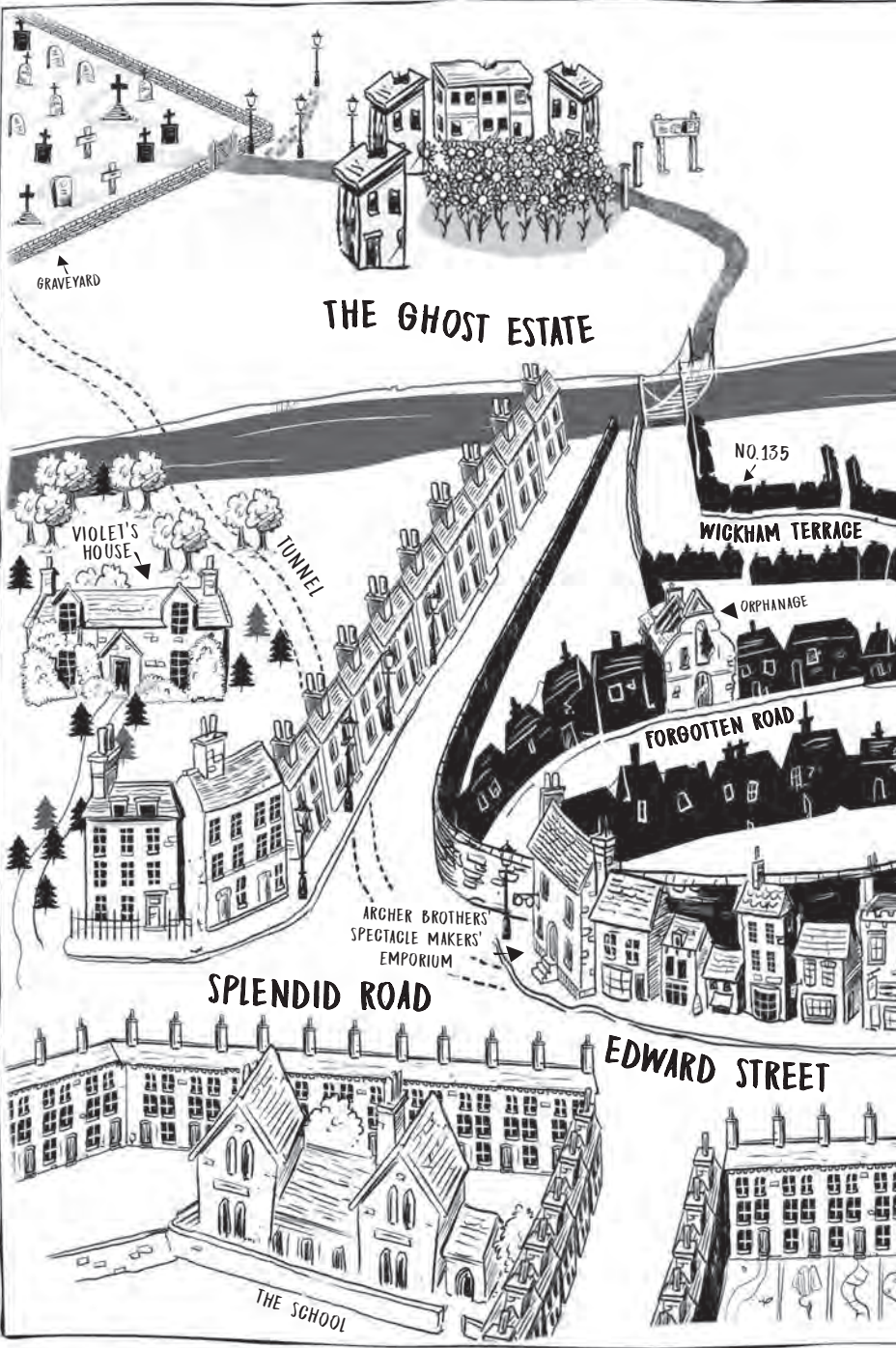


HELENA DUGGAN



USBORNE





GRAVEYARD

THE GHOST ESTATE

VIOLET'S HOUSE

TUNNEL

NO. 135

WICKHAM TERRACE

ORPHANAGE

FORGOTTEN ROAD

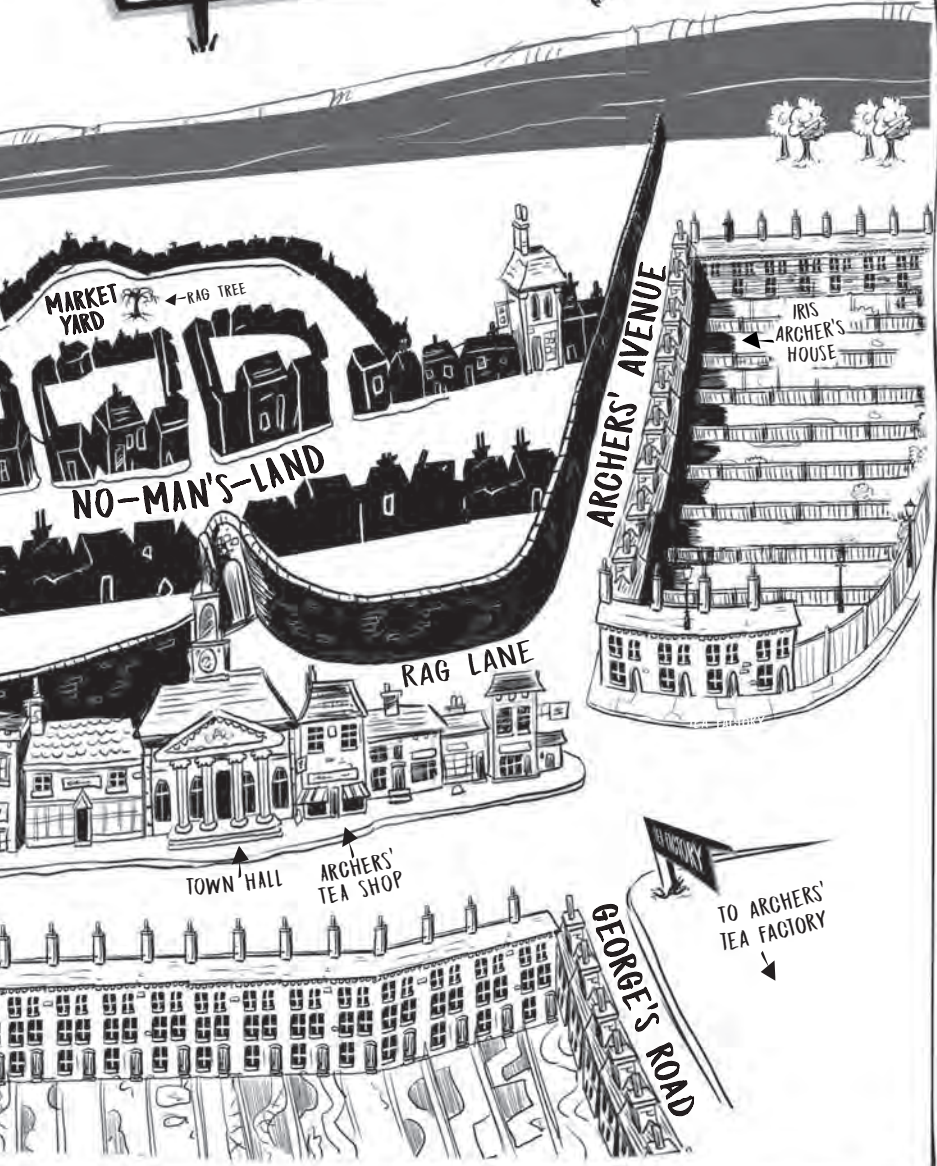
ARCHER BROTHERS' SPECTACLE MAKERS' EMPORIUM

SPLENDID ROAD

EDWARD STREET

THE SCHOOL

WELCOME TO PERFECT



MARKET YARD

← RAG TREE

NO-MAN'S-LAND

RAG LANE

TOWN HALL

ARCHERS' TEA SHOP

ARCHERS AVENUE

IRIS ARCHER'S HOUSE

GEORGE'S ROAD

TO ARCHERS' TEA FACTORY



CHAPTER 1

BOY

He waited. Hidden by dusk and the garden bushes against the bark of an oak tree. Watching. The spot gave him full view of the house and gravel driveway.

Worrying about being seen felt weird.

Perfect had been alive with the news of Doctor Eugene Brown's arrival for weeks. The doctor would help. Boy knew it, more than he'd ever known anything. He just had to get to the man before he changed.

As night closed in, George and Edward Archer strode by and mounted the stone steps to the house. The place lit up and Boy watched them move around inside.

Suddenly light darted across the grass by his feet and Boy pulled back further into the shadows. A silver car

crunched along the driveway towards him and stopped. His heartbeat quickened. The engine purred to silence.

The large door of the house opened and the Archer twins stood silhouetted in the light from the hallway. As Boy watched, statue still, a shiver danced down his spine.

A man got out of the driver's seat; a woman from the passenger's side.

He hadn't imagined the doctor would have company. The woman looked nervous, staring across the roof of the car at the man. He smiled awkwardly at her then walked towards the twins, greeting them with a handshake. The woman followed and the four of them disappeared inside.

Boy ventured a little out of the shadows, stopping short as the doctor called, "Violet. Come in from the car, pet, it's chilly out there."

The back door of the car opened a little, then quickly slammed shut as a breeze rustled the leaves above him.

Boy held his breath and pulled back into hiding. The car door swung open again, and this time a small, frightened girl dashed out across the gravel towards the house.

Boy couldn't help laughing. She sped up, jumped the steps and rushed in through the front door, banging it shut behind her and plunging the yard back into darkness.

The car door hung open and Boy pushed it shut as he

edged closer to the kitchen window. He just caught sight of the girl sliding into the room.

He sat down by the steps to wait.

Night rolled on. The Watchers would be patrolling soon and he couldn't be caught outside the walls again. He'd come back in the morning, early, and speak to the doctor then.

He took one last look in the window. The girl sat between her mam and dad – a proper family. Something inside him stung as he thumbed the rub-worn note in his pocket.



CHAPTER 2



A SILENT PROTEST

Violet woke with a start as the car crunched to a stop over squashed gravel. It was dark. She pulled herself up from the warm leather seat and peered out the side window. The house was big, much bigger than their old one and looked like something from a magazine. The lights were on inside.

She gasped and ducked back down.

Two dark figures, one tall, one small, stood shadowed in the light from the open doorway. Violet's father looked at her mother then unbuckled his seat belt and stepped out of the car.

"Ah, Mr and Mr Archer," her father said, approaching the men, "we didn't expect a welcoming committee."

“Well of course, Dr Brown, we wanted to see you settled,” the taller one said, extending his hand.

“We’ve been preparing all day. The house is spick and span and we’ve the kettle on the boil,” the smaller man said, stepping in front of the larger one to grab her father’s hand. “Leave your stuff in the car and come in for a brew. I’m sure you must all be exhausted.”

“Of course, how kind,” her mother said, reaching the front door to greet both men, “we’d love a cuppa.”

The four entered the house leaving Violet to fume in her seat, seemingly forgotten.

“Violet. Come in from the car, pet, it’s chilly out there,” her father called from across the driveway.

He hadn’t forgotten her after all. That still didn’t mean he cared about her though. He only cared about this job. When he was offered it, her mother had said “it’s a job amongst jobs”. It was probably like winning an Oscar for opticians. Her dad’s exact words had been “I’d be stupid, utterly stupid to turn it down”.

Her dad was an optha...an opthalo...an ophthalmologist, which meant he was an eye surgeon and cut up eyes all day. Violet thought that was disgusting, so whenever anybody asked, she said he was an optician. His work meant so much to him. Other people’s parents always seemed to talk about how much they hated their jobs, but not her dad. Violet was proud of him but that didn’t mean

she was happy to pack up all her stuff and leave her friends just because of his new job. She thought he was selfish and had told him as much through her tears the night he'd announced they were moving.

She pushed open the heavy car door and poked her head out to look left and right.

The driveway was dark and surrounded by large trees. Huge twisted branches played on the wind, sweeping shadows across the gravel. Violet shivered as the leaves began to whisper. She jumped back and slammed the door, locking herself safely inside the car.

Her mam always said she had an overactive imagination. Violet wished she knew how to make it underactive as she looked out on the dark yard and imagined all the monsters that might lurk in the surrounding trees.

She'd have to make a run for it. She took a deep breath. On the count of three. "One, two, threeeee..."

She flung open the car door, jumped out and ran for the house. Without looking left or right, she bounded up the steps and leaped over the threshold.

Just as she slammed the front door, she thought she heard laughter echo through the trees. She slid down the wall onto the hall floor, trying to catch her breath. Surely it wasn't laughter? Then the car door banged and she froze. Was there someone outside? Her heartbeat quickened.

“Violet, is that you, pet?” her mother called from a room down the hallway. “Come in and say hello to our guests.”

Violet shook the dark thoughts from her mind, putting all sounds down to the wind. *There goes your imagination again*, she scolded herself, getting up from the floor.

She pulled off her shoes and threw them down by the door. The hall was covered in shiny, cream tiles perfect for socks. She took a run and slid the whole way into the room straight ahead, coming to a stop against the kitchen table.

Four pairs of eyes stared at her, two in embarrassment, two in shock.

“Violet!” her father snapped. “We have guests.”

Violet didn’t respond.

She’d decided the night before that she wasn’t going to talk to her dad for as long as it took him to change his mind and move them all back home again. She hated not talking to him because she loved him more than a billion pounds. But she didn’t want the same things as her dad. Her mam didn’t really either. Rose Brown was an accountant in a successful firm and had lots of friends in their old town – but she’d told Violet that sometimes you had to do what was right, even though it was hard and you might not want to do it, and that this move was right for their family.

Violet had thought about not talking to her mam either but as an only child that would mean she'd have no one to talk to at all, at least until she made some friends.

Quickly her dad covered the silence, introducing her to the strange men who sat round the kitchen table.

"Violet, this is Mr George Archer."

"Just George is fine," the tall man said, standing up to shake her hand.

She tried not to laugh. George Archer was so tall he couldn't stand straight in the low-ceilinged room. His head bent to one side almost touching his shoulder. Everything about him was long, from his snake-like arms and wormy fingers to his pencil-thin nose that almost divided his face in two. His head was completely bald and creamy white like a freshly laid egg. Clearly uncomfortable, he quickly sat back down.

"And I'm Edward. Pleased to meet you, Violet," the smaller of the Archers said, as he stood to shake her hand too.

Again she had to stop herself laughing. Violet wasn't even the tallest in her class, but she was the same height as Mr Edward Archer. What he lacked in height he made up for in width. He was square, like a loaf of bread. His head was attached straight to his shoulders as if he had forgotten to grow a neck and his eyes stuck out a little as though they were trying to escape from his face.

The two brothers wore the same brown suits and shiny brown shoes. Edward Archer had a funny bowler hat just like the one on her dad's favourite painting of a man with no face. Mr George Archer had the same hat but his rested on the table beside him – he probably wasn't wearing it because it would fall off every time he stood up indoors.

Both of them had weird reddish eyes hidden behind rectangular gold-framed glasses. They looked a little scary until George took his specs off.

“Oh, it's just the glasses. I thought there was something wrong with your eyes!” Violet smiled at the taller twin. “Why are the lenses red?”

George Archer pushed his glasses back onto his nose.

“They're rose-tinted.” He scowled. “We—”

“Well, Violet dear –” Edward Archer quickly interrupted his brother – “it's a funny story really, one we hope your father will help us solve. You see this little town of ours is perfect except for one curious fact: every single inhabitant here wears glasses. After only a short time in Perfect, Violet, you and your family will find that your eyesight starts to get dusty, then the edges of your vision will blur. Eventually you will all go completely blind. We've had numerous scientists come to investigate our situation. They say it's because we're so close to the sun.”

“Mam!” Violet quivered, trying not to cry. “I don’t want to go blind. I like being able to see. I knew we shouldn’t have moved here.”

“Oh no, I didn’t mean to frighten you, Violet dear,” Edward Archer said, kindly. “I assure you the effects are only temporary. They wear off as soon as you leave this town of ours – although I’m quite sure you won’t ever want to leave Perfect, nobody ever does.” The stout man smiled. “In fact, we have found a clever way around our little problem. These glasses work a treat. You’ll find everybody here is wearing them; they’re quite in vogue as they say.” He adjusted his own pair a little, resettling them on his nose.

“You’ll have to visit our spectacle shop, dear, so we can fit you with a pair,” George Archer smiled.

Violet grabbed her mother’s pinstriped skirt.

“I don’t want to wear glasses, Mam, there’s nothing wrong with my eyes.”

“That’s why your father’s here, dear.” Edward smiled. “Hopefully soon nobody will need to wear them.”

The Archers were her dad’s new bosses. “Eugene was headhunted” her mam had said proudly to friends one evening. Violet didn’t think that sounded like a good thing and tried hard *not* to imagine her dad without a head. He’d won an award for his research and had been on the cover of *Eye Spy* magazine. Her mam said the whole world was

talking about it, or at least the part of the world that loved eyes too. She said the Archers had read the article in *Eye Spy* and searched him out for the job.

“It’s only for a short time, Violet,” her mother shushed, looking anxiously at her husband. “Your father will fix the problem.”

“Don’t worry, Violet,” her dad said, reaching to rub her head.

She moved round her mother’s back, away from his arms.

“She’s tired,” he sighed, his cheeks a little red. “It’s been a long day, I think it’s probably time for bed.”

“Oh no, not yet,” Edward Archer said quickly. “You must try our tea. It’s a Perfect tradition.”

“Oh yes.” George Archer smiled, grabbing a teapot and cups from the worktop. “It’s our custom, I assure you.”

A small package sat on the table. Edward opened it, scooped out two large spoons of tea leaves and tipped them into the pot. The package was navy with “Archers’ Tea” printed in ornate gold letters under a brownish picture of the twins in their bowler hats and white aprons.

“It’s you,” Violet said, looking at Edward.

“Eagle-eyed I see.” The smaller twin smiled, pouring boiling water into the pot. “Yes it’s our tea. We own the factory that produces it; it’s a big employer in the town. Something we’re very proud of.”

“I don’t like tea,” Violet said, looking at her mother.

“You’ll like this one,” George Archer replied sharply.

“This tea is a speciality here. It’s harvested daily and delivered fresh to every doorstep in Perfect each morning. It’s made from the Chameleon plant, which is unique to our town. It’s very good for your health and has the most unusual properties. You’ll see what I mean. Most people here drink at least a cup a day. It’s a tea-mad town.” Edward smiled.

Violet didn’t like tea and she wasn’t sure about the Archers; there was something odd about them.

Eugene and Rose looked at each other as they sat down at the table; Violet sat between them. George Archer stared at her from his place opposite, as his brother poured the tea.

“Now imagine the nicest taste you can think of then take a sip,” Edward said, raising his mug.

Violet did as she was told. She imagined her father’s favourite drink, which was hers too – ice-cream sundae. Big chunks of cold vanilla ice cream dunked in fizzy orange. She pictured clouds of froth bubbling over the rim of a glass and could almost taste the burst of flavour. Her mouth watered as she raised the mug of tea. A waft of vanilla tingled her nose. She took a sip, careful not to burn her lips. The tea fizzed as she tasted orange and vanilla heaven. This couldn’t be tea. She opened her eyes

to check no one had swapped the cups, but sure enough, a dull milky brown liquid smiled back at her. She glanced either side at her mam and dad; their eyes were still shut and silly smiles played on their lips.

“I think I’ll have another cup,” her father said, a little later.

“We thought you might,” the Archers replied in unison.

The Browns finished one pot and then had another as Edward told them all about their new home.

Edward was the chatty one and Violet warmed to him a little more than George, who just seemed to snarl and stare. Though, truth be told, she wasn’t sure she liked either of them very much at all. Violet heard her mother say the same thing to her dad as they waved goodbye to the Archers from the steps of their new home a little later.

“They give me the creeps, Eugene,” Rose whispered through a staged smile.

That night, Violet climbed beneath her new sheets in her new room. The town sounded nice enough from what Edward had said and the tea did weigh heavily in its favour. There were some strange things about the place though. Edward had told them about a curfew. He said it was so everyone got a good night’s sleep in Perfect. “Sufficient sleep makes for a happy and healthy town.”

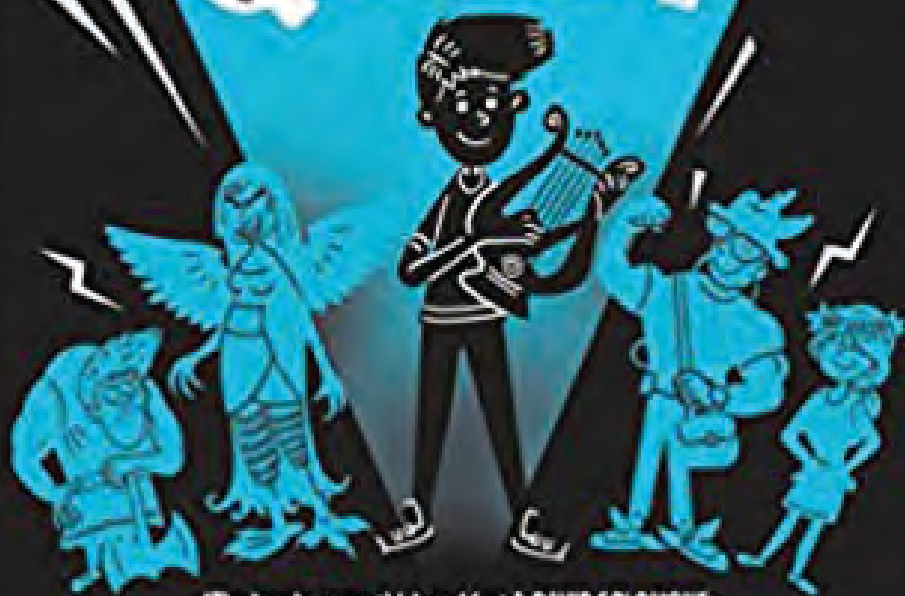
She definitely didn’t like the idea of a curfew or going blind. And anyway, how could she ever live in a place

called Perfect? She'd have to be neat and tidy; she'd definitely have to brush her hair and probably even clean her shoes. It just wouldn't work.

Violet made up her mind: she didn't and wouldn't like Perfect. Then she turned over and slipped into a perfect night's sleep, oblivious to the troubles the morning would bring.

Maz Evans

SIMPLY THE QUEST



"The laughs come thick and fast," DAVID SOLOMONS



Maz Evans

SIMPLY THE QUEST

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For my Dilly

*Heroes come in all shapes and sizes.
Mine is dinky and blonde and would eat
chocolate for breakfast if I let her.*

I love you, my little Hercules.

Also by Maz Evans

Who Let the Gods Out?



1. Mortal Peril

The scream tore through the dawn like a razor blade through toilet paper. Elliot Hooper was the first to respond – if you can call burbling ‘whargihghplfm?’ a response.

Before he entirely knew where he was – or even who he was – another scream shattered the February morning.

Elliot sat up in bed and scratched his head. He caught his reflection in the bedroom mirror. His blond mop of hair was wayward at the best of times, but at this hour, the twelve-year-old sleepy-head thought he resembled a slightly used toilet brush. His fuzzy brain told him that it was early,



although he had only just put Mum back to bed for the umpteenth time. It had been another bad night. Nowadays, they nearly always were.

A third scream forced him into reluctant action.

It definitely wasn't Mum, he knew her screams too well. Were they under attack from Thanatos, Daemon of Death? No – Elliot had squashed him in the Underworld. With a sigh, Elliot realized that this was the third big problem in his life . . .

He rolled out of bed in his school uniform – why change into pyjamas if he was only going to wear the same clothes the next day? – and stumbled towards the bathroom.

He reached it just as his immortal Greek housemates – Zeus, Athene, Aphrodite, Hermes and Hephaestus – were hurtling (flying in Hermes's case) up the stairs. They were greeted by another soul-splitting shriek.

Elliot pressed his ear to the bathroom door.

'What in the name of thirty thermal thunderbolts . . .?' roared Zeus.

'It's nothing, it'll just be—' Elliot began, but was slammed against the wall by the two Goddesses, who formed a protective barrier around him in their full battle-armor and fluffy slippers.

‘Don’t worry – we’re here,’ said Athene, Goddess of Wisdom.

‘Are you OK, Elly?’ panted Aphrodite, Goddess of Love, drawing her crossbow.

‘I’m fine,’ said Elliot, crushed behind Athene’s enormous silver shield.

If Elliot wasn’t panicking, it was because living with a family of ancient immortals had made him no stranger to drama. From the moment Virgo, a Constellation from the Zodiac Council, had crashed into his cowshed three months ago, Elliot had:

- ⚡ accidentally freed Thanatos, Daemon of Death
- ⚡ borrowed Queen Elizabeth II’s Imperial Crown
- ⚡ nearly been expelled from Brysmore Grammar School
- ⚡ learnt how to swear in Latin, Ancient Greek and Satyr.

‘Open up!’ boomed Zeus, hammering at the bathroom door. ‘I command you!’

He was answered by another brain-melting yelp.

Zeus signalled to Hephaestus, God of the Forge.

‘All o’ you – stand back!’ yelled the blacksmith, heaving his gigantic bronze axe with surprising



strength from a hunchback the height of a nine-year-old. ‘We’re coming in!’

‘Wait! Let’s just try the—’ cried Elliot as the bronze axe smashed the wood to matchsticks. ‘Handle,’ he said, pushing open the remains of the unlocked door.

The Gods bundled into the bathroom with a ferocious cry, weapons aloft . . .

But all they found was Virgo, rocking on the floor with a towel over her head.

‘Babe? What gives?’ asked Hermes, after an admiring glance at his reflection.

‘Ere we go again,’ grumbled Hephaestus.

‘Whatever’s the matter, dear girl?’ said Zeus, sheathing a thunderbolt. ‘I haven’t heard a furore like that since I dumped Henrietta the Harpy on Valentine’s Day.’

‘It’s . . . it’s hideous,’ snuffled Virgo.

‘Is it a curse?’ asked Athene.

‘Is it a plague?’ asked Aphrodite.

‘Is it that fringe?’ asked Hermes. ‘Babe, I warned you. Totes off-trend . . .’

‘No . . . It’s . . . it’s . . . it’s . . .’ Virgo slowly lifted the towel from her head.

The Gods gasped.

Elliot just stared.

‘I don’t get it,’ he said, disappointed that Virgo

hadn't grown a second head or an elephant's nose.
'What's wrong?'

'WHAT'S WRONG?!' Virgo shrieked, pulling her hair. 'LOOK AT IT!'

Elliot did. Still nothing.

'Boys . . .' muttered Athene as Aphrodite hugged Virgo.

Elliot shrugged at Hermes.

'E, mate!' the Messenger God whispered. 'Her hair. It's, like, totes *brown*.'

'Isn't it always?' Elliot asked.

'Mate . . .' laughed Hermes with a head-shake.

'My beautiful silver hair!' Virgo cried. 'IT'S GONE!'

'Oh, yeah!' said Elliot slowly. Now he thought about it, she did look a bit different.

'Did you dye it?' said Aphrodite, running her fingers through Virgo's long tresses.

'Babe – never dye your own hair,' said Hermes. 'I tried it once – ended up with a head like a cress plant.'

'I haven't touched it!' squealed Virgo. 'Why would I? It was perfect! I just woke up like this! What's happening to me?'

Elliot caught Aphrodite and Athene exchanging knowing glances.

'It's just your body adapting to being a mortal,'



said Athene. ‘It actually quite suits you . . .’

‘SUITS ME?!’ squealed Virgo at a pitch that could start a football match. ‘Have you forgotten about *today*? My trial?’

‘Fat chance, with you banging on about it,’ mumbled Elliot, pushing past the crowd to reach his toothbrush. He was never a morning person, and five hours sleep certainly wasn’t enough for immortal dramas.

‘You have got to stop getting in such a state,’ said Athene, giving Virgo’s shoulders a reassuring squeeze. ‘If there is any justice, today is the day you’ll get your immortality back.’

‘Listen to Boffin Butt – that kardia’s yours,’ chirped Aphrodite, helping herself to a spray of perfume. ‘Besides, it’s only a trial. The Zodiac Council like to waggle their clipboards around to feel important. Look at Christmas Day . . .’

‘We do not mention Christmas Day!’ snapped Zeus.

‘Exhacshly,’ spat Elliot through a mouthful of foam. ‘Sho schill out. Itsch not vat wig a weal.’

‘Not that big a deal?’ breathed Virgo menacingly. Everyone instinctively stepped back.

‘Uh-oh,’ whispered Hermes. ‘She’s gonna blow.’

‘NOT THAT BIG A DEAL!’ screamed Virgo. ‘For weeks I’ve had to endure mortality! I’ve

suffered hunger, tiredness, every tedious mortal emotion and some toxic reaction in my trousers whenever I eat beans! It's degrading, it's unjust and it's **TOTALLY PANTS!**

Elliot spat his toothpaste down the plughole. 'So I shouldn't mention that zit on your chin?'

'What?! Arrrrrrrrghghgh,' screamed Virgo as she wrestled free from Athene and attacked Elliot with the nearest available weapon, which happened to be a giant pink loofah.

The Gods scrambled to protect Elliot again. Aphrodite held the flailing girl back so Hermes could disarm her. Athene and Zeus grabbed Elliot's arms to drag him to safety as Virgo screamed a curse that could boil an egg.

' . . . and then you can bake it in a pie and **CHOKER ON IT!**' she screeched.

'Elly, have you watered the plants?' peeped an agitated voice behind them.

Elliot turned to see his mum, Josie, standing in the broken doorway, confused and upset. These days, she always was. He tried not to think of his bright, funny Mum who used to cartwheel home from school. She had changed so much in the past year. Everything had.

'Elly?' she asked again. 'You must water the plants. You know what Grandad's like about his



tomatoes. Have you done it?’

‘Yes, Mum,’ said Elliot, who had given up on difficult truths in favour of easy lies. Although he wasn’t sure if Mum really understood either anymore.

The last few weeks had seen a lot of changes in Josie and none of them good. Despite Elliot’s best efforts to care for her, she wasn’t getting any better. She barely remembered anything that had just happened, her moods were getting really unpredictable and she often struggled to find the right words to express herself.

Elliot ignored the dark voice inside his head.

She’s getting worse. Fast, it said.

‘Good boy,’ said Josie. ‘Grandad will be . . . What happened here?’

‘Nothing to worry about, Josie – just children being children,’ said Athene kindly, turning the frail frame of Josie Hooper discreetly from the broken door. ‘Why don’t I poach you an egg for breakfast?’

Josie wriggled free from Athene and held Elliot’s hand. ‘Elly will do it, thank you,’ she said warily.

Elliot sighed. The Gods tried to help with Josie’s care, but increasingly she’d only allow Elliot to put her back to bed, bathe her or make her

food. It was tiring, but Elliot didn't mind.

Yes, you do, his dark voice insisted.

'Well let's go downstairs and lay the table,' said Athene, shrugging an apology at Elliot.

'OK,' said Josie cautiously. 'Have you watered the plants?'

Elliot watched Athene gently guide Josie downstairs. Would today be a good day he wondered? A day when Mum remembered people and places, and stayed happy and calm? Or a bad one, when she became very confused, or angry, or obsessed over a tiny detail, or couldn't recall a conversation from five minutes ago? Elliot hoped for a good day. They hadn't had one for a while. Nor a good night.

Aphrodite smiled and pinched his cheek in a way that would really annoy him if she were anyone but a beautiful love Goddess. Elliot surveyed the carnage around him.

'Sorry, mate,' said Hermes. 'We're all just a bit stir-crazy. Y'know, being, like, totes grounded since Christmas Day ...'

'We DO NOT mention Christmas Day!' Zeus roared.

'Fine,' said Elliot. 'I'd better get started on breakfast ...'

'Breakfast!' said Virgo, instantly brightening and



bounding downstairs. ‘Excellent. I’m famished. Then I’m going to get my immortality back, reunite all my socks with their partners and finally understand long-division!’ She leapt from the bottom step. ‘It’s going to be a super-optimal day!’

Elliot rolled his eyes and headed slowly after her. Girls were so incredibly weird.



MOONDUST
OUT OF DARKNESS WE SHINE

GEMMA FOWLER

MOONDUST

GEMMA FOWLER



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*To Mum and Dad,
For keeping my feet on the ground,
and my head in the clouds.*



Lunar Inc. Base, Civilian Sector
Day-Cycle 02

The Moon has quakes. They were everyday. Part of the routine. Most Lunar Inc. personnel didn't flinch at the sound of the alarm any more. But then, most personnel hadn't been through what Aggie had.

She clung to the edge of her bed as the quake took hold, and listened to the rhythm of her belongings smashing to the floor. Her blinds clattered against the walls, slivers of pale lunar sunlight escaped into the darkness.

She concentrated on pushing her breath into slow ins and outs. But the quake had shaken her memories loose.

They rose up around her in the darkness of her pod like ghosts.

Aggie would relive Adrienne tonight, or not sleep at all. The reactor room started to materialize around her. The phantom smell of smoke and burning metal stung her nose – she pushed it away. Too painful. Too real.

Her heart beat in time with the drone of the alarm. Not the alarm in her pod, but an alarm from a different place, in a different time . . .

The great lumite reactor pulsed – its spinning saltwater jets cooling the violet crystal at its core. Her father was at his desk, his hands a blur as he worked the shaking control panel. Something was wrong. There was too much dust, too much heat—

In her pod, the screen beside her bed flicked on, casting grey light into the room. ‘No, no, no,’ Aggie moaned.

When he saw her, his eyes grew as wild as his red hair. His grip tight and feverish on her arms as he threw her into the clear plastic booth and pulled the hatch. ‘Daddy?’ He was getting in with her, wasn’t he? He wasn’t going back to the reactor, was he?

Outside, in the corridor, the other Lunar Inc. personnel whooped and hollered as they made their way to their shifts, the quake providing nothing more than entertainment for their commute. But Adrienne refused to let Aggie go. Not yet. Not until the part that hurt the most . . .

Her breath fogged the wet glass inside the booth; the hot, thick air sticking like glue in her lungs; the rush of water, the shudder of the reactor room rattling her bones away from her skin—

‘Hey Agatha.’ A strangely detached voice shook from the ceiling, but to Aggie it was distant, underwater, far away—

There was a click, then a popping noise that sucked up all the sound. Suddenly, she was flying . . . She squeezed her eyes shut as a blinding light washed into her small, dark space.

‘Hey Agatha,’ the voice echoed again, ‘your heart rate is currently out of the healthy spectrum.’ This time, Aggie clung to the sound, using it to pull her foggy brain back to reality.

‘No!’

Aggie opened her eyes. She was standing in the centre of her room, covered in sweat, panting. She took a deep, shuddering breath and fell back onto the damp sheets.

It’s not happening again. You’re safe. You’re safe.

Above her head, the small red light of the Eye camera danced in the rumbling darkness.

‘Hey Agatha,’ the voice rang out once more, ‘we’re experiencing a routine moonquake in this sector.’

It was Celeste, the base’s computer system, speaking from the swirling Ether panel beside her bed. The billion electrified atoms that made up the computer’s shifting 3D interface swirled back at her creepily. It always looked to Aggie as if someone had trapped a black hole in a tiny picture frame – a really annoying black hole.

Celeste was the AI system that ran the entire Lunar Base, from operating the giant, gravity-producing domes that kept their feet on the ground, right down to assessing whether you’d had the right amount of vegetables in your lunch. Celeste’s eerie, spinning Ethers and black and red Eye cameras were everywhere on the base. Wherever you looked, Celeste was there looking back. The AI was designed to be a happy, positive and supportive influence

on the personnel; Aggie just found her a bit creepy.

‘For your information, Agatha, the time is currently 6.15 a.m., Lunar East. Your shift begins in fifteen minutes.’

‘Thanks,’ Aggie muttered, as the mattress went from a shake to a dull simmer and finally became still. The quake was over, but despite her best efforts, Aggie’s heart continued to flap pathetically inside her like a frightened bird.

‘How about we try some calming breathing exercises?’

‘I know how to breathe, Celeste,’ she said to the ceiling.

Aggie leant up on her elbows and surveyed the damage to her room; pillows and blankets lay in jumbled heaps around her bed, the old paper books and rocks she’d smuggled up to the Moon from Earth had sprung from her shelves and lay in heaps on the white plastic floor. To her left, a bottle of something that was probably noxious had spilt and was slowly oozing into a puddle under her bed. She silently hoped it wasn’t one of the botched toilet water samples she’d hidden under there a few weeks ago. Though it smelt as if it might be.

Aggie sighed. To be honest, her room didn’t look that much different from the way it usually did.

She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and pulled herself up.

At the first sign of movement the blinds on her round pod window began to lift, allowing crisp, cold sunlight to flood into the room. Aggie lifted her arm to her eyes.

‘No, Celeste! Earth’s sake, I’m awake!’ she grumbled.

The surface was at the start of its day-cycle – days and nights lasted two Earth weeks on the Moon. The light was

faded after the wane, but still stronger than the soft, atmosphere-filtered sun on Earth, and it was just too much at this time in the morning.


Outside, the lunar surface lay like a great tan and grey desert, broken up by a cluster of squat buildings that made up the Lunar Base's Civilian Sector. Not a great view, but if she pressed her cheek right against the glass, Aggie could just make out the glittering cathedral of the Whole Earth Complex, its great rainbow-coloured windows pointing towards the patch of space where the whole distant Earth hung like a marble.

Aggie's pod was part of the messy sprawl of science blocks and dorms which housed all the civilian personnel: surface analysts, astro-geologists, lunar chemists, security guards, management and lifestyle staff, medics, mining operatives, tech engineers, mechanical engineers, admin personnel and all the others Aggie couldn't remember.

Beyond the Lunar Base and spreading out to the horizon were the vast white mining domes and low red buildings of the Prison Sector, where prisoners mined and processed the lumite crystal that powered the Earth. No one from Civilian ever went there, unless you were a guard, or a mine op, or an engineer, or just mental.

'OK, Agatha,' said Celeste, 'please run your diagnostics. I've noticed that your sleeping patterns are currently out of the healthy spectrum. My psychological analysis systems would suggest this is the result of the upcoming tenth anniversary of the Adrienne—'

'Not now, Celeste.'



"A THRILLING READ...FLAVOURED
WITH FAIRYTALES, DRIZZLED WITH A SYRUP OF FEAR
AND SPRINKLED WITH HEART." M.G. LEONARD

The PECULIAR PEGGS of RIDDLING WOODS

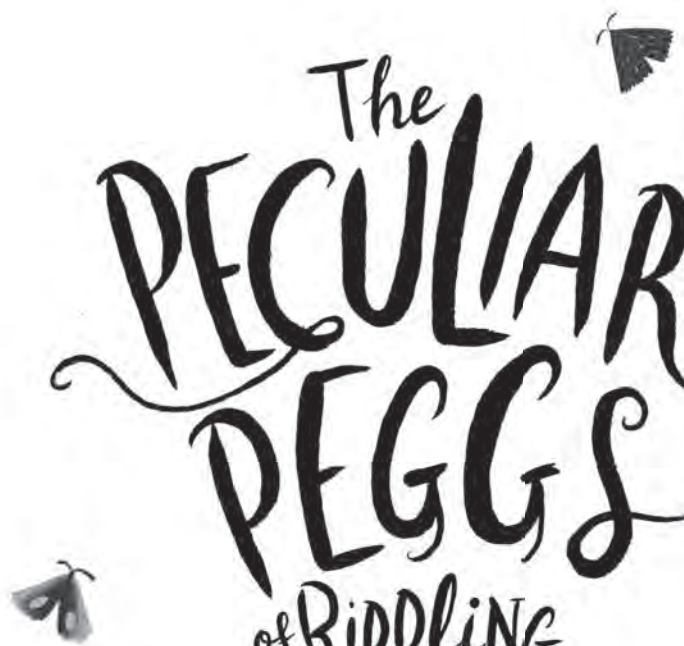
SAMUEL J. HALPIN
ILLUSTRATED BY HANNAH PECK



The
PECULIAR
PEGGS
of RIDDLING
WOODS



The
PECULIAR
PEGGS
of RIDDLING
WOODS



SAMUEL J. HALPIN



USBORNE

A MOST PECULIAR MAP OF SUDS



RIDLING
WOODS
SCHOOL

SUDS
STATION



THE
HELLIGAN
MILLS



MARLEY'S
BARGE

SUDS RIVER



ST
MARGARET'S
PARISH
HALL

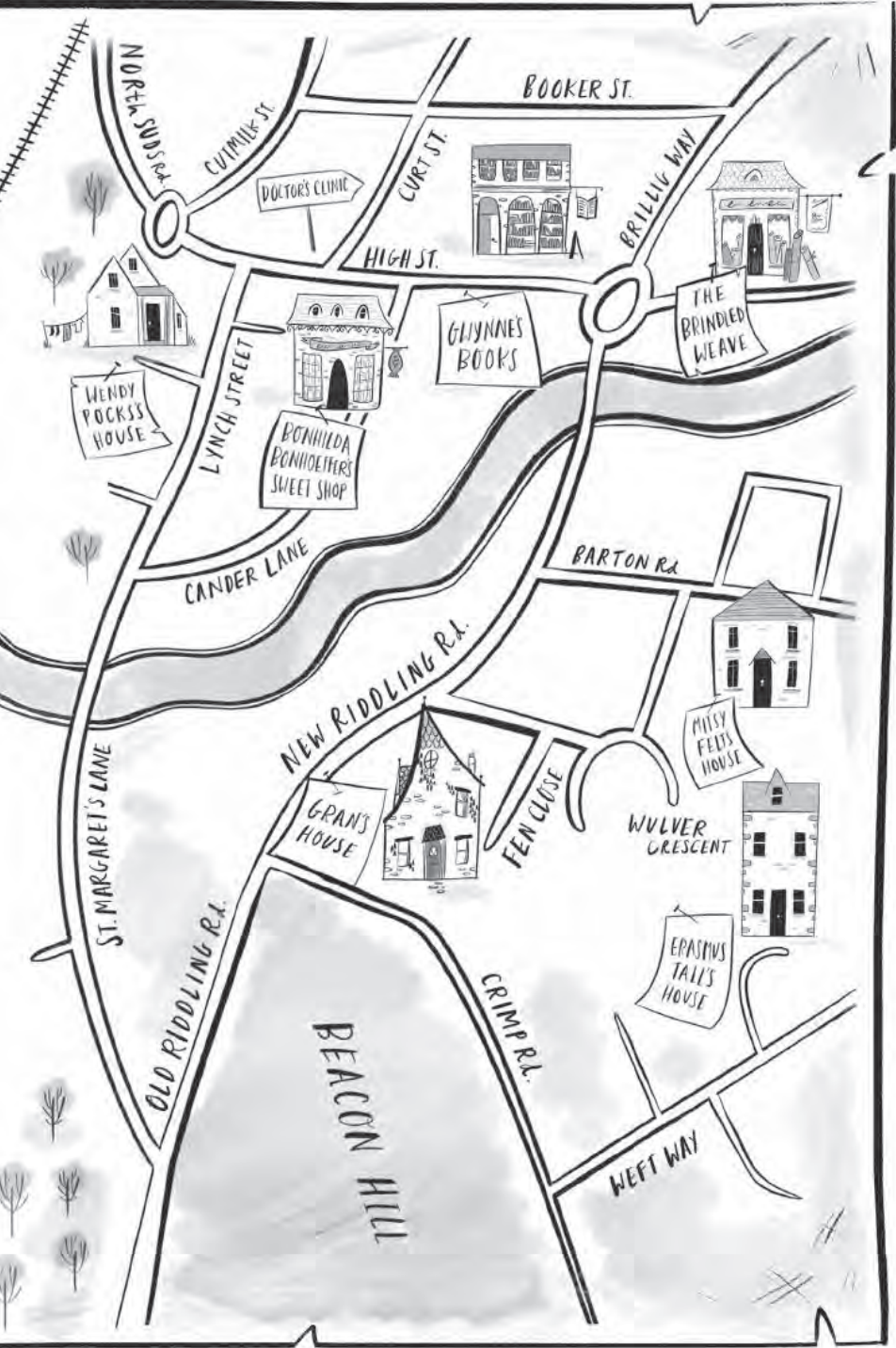


N

S

THE
SUDS
CEMETERY





NORTH SUSSEX

CUMMICK ST.

BOOKER ST.

DOCTOR'S CLINIC

CURT ST.

HIGH ST.

BRILLIG WAY

GLYNNES BOOKS

THE BRINDLED WEAVE

WENDY POCKS'S HOUSE

LYNCH STREET

DONNILDA DONHOETHERS SWEET SHOP

CANDER LANE

BARTON R.A.

NEW RIDDLING R.A.

MISSY FEES'S HOUSE

WULVER CRESCENT

GRAN'S HOUSE

FEN CLOSE

EPASIVS TALL'S HOUSE

ST. MARGARET'S LANE

OLD RIDDLING R.A.

BEACON HILL

CRIMP R.A.

WEEF WAY

To Mum, Dad, Georgina, Julian, Michaela, Camilla, Xavier and Remi

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Prologue

WORRIED



Poppy had been worried for a long time. Stretching her neck, she pressed her flushed cheek and the side of her nose against the cold glass of the train window and tried to focus her eyes on the little stones and tracks hurtling past below.

Breathe, she said to herself, *breathe*.

That was what she knew to do whenever her heart began to play that little game where it thought Poppy was galloping up a mountain when she really wasn't.

I'm not worried, she told her reflection firmly. Her reflection had slate-blue eyes and short, inquisitive hair the colour of rust and bricks, just like she did. Although she didn't think her actual arms were as pointy at the elbows, or as skinny as the ones she could see in the window. Wrestling her jacket out of her backpack,

she hauled it on over the top of her bottle-green cardie to hide the enormously pointy elbows. The cardie was something of her own creation, and it hung over her favourite tangerine-coloured corduroy dress like a bit of moss on an old tree. The dress had two wonderfully big pockets at the front, which were large enough to secrete away all manner of useful things, and Poppy liked to wear it when she was in a creative mood or travelling long distances.

LOOKOUT 4 MUMBLING MARLEY

read a wonky line of graffiti on the wall of the carriage. She wondered spitefully if whoever had spent half an hour gouging it into the plastic was aware that *lookout*, when employed as a verb, was two separate words.

Stop being so boring, she thought.

Poppy had only brought one backpack with her to Gran's. After all, she was only staying in Suds for two weeks of the summer holidays while Dad was away, so she hadn't packed a whole lot of stuff. She'd had that backpack since, well, since a very long time ago. She wasn't the kind of person who needed new things. After all, who wanted new things? Everyone except Poppy.

To Poppy, new things meant new smells. New shoes meant new blisters. A new backpack meant lodging the sharp end of your drawing compass beneath your

finger nail as you fumbled around trying to find your ruler. She didn't like "new". In order for something to be new, something else had to be old, and that in turn meant that the old thing might very well be forgotten.

As with most train journeys that are northbound, the countryside became wilder and greener. The busy patchwork of fields ebbed away into quiet, untamed brushstrokes of leaves and wood, peppered with white flashes from where the chalk seams that ran through this part of the country raised their powdery heads above the surface.

She tried to phone Gran as the train pulled out of the next station to remind her of when to come and collect her. But Gran didn't answer. Gran hardly ever answered. Poppy wasn't worried though. She said so to herself again, *I'm not worried*. Because amongst all the things Gran never did, was forgetting. Gran never forgot.

The train rounded a bend and up ahead Poppy watched as the caterpillar-like succession of carriages vanished into a tunnel up ahead. Poppy's carriage soon flickered to black. She held her breath and counted eight seconds before the train shot out at the other end. She and Mum would do that in the car when they went through tunnels in London. The longest they'd managed was forty-three seconds.

Poppy's heart chugged in time to the train's engine.

Stop it, you stupid thing, she said to the spot on her chest where she imagined her heart must be.

Glancing down the long swaying carriage she noticed, perhaps for the first time, a tall woman at the other end beside the sliding doors. She was looking straight ahead out of the window, her hands clasped around a thin silver cane.

She doesn't look as if she needs a cane, Poppy thought to herself, quietly.

If people did need support getting about, they would use a walking frame nowadays, or one of those nippy little mobility scooters, or those chairlifts that old people sometimes have on the stairs.

The lady was wearing a velvet jacket with an assortment of glittering pins. On her head was a silver cap, and from it poked a feather so curled that it almost vanished against the dark rings of hair spiralling out from underneath. The lady was smiling. A smile that said she knew Poppy was watching her.

Without looking away from the window, the lady removed one of her green gloves and dipped her hand into her pocket, just long enough for Poppy to see her knobby fingers. Poppy's heart gave a thump in her chest. The lady's hands weren't like her face at all. Her face was like glass, but her hands were like speckled paper.

Poppy turned away for a moment, but only so far that she could still see what was happening. From her pocket the lady pulled a small purse that was the same colour as her jacket. Opening the purse, she found a

compact mirror and adjusted one of her curls a little with a hooked finger.

To either side of the train the black trees of the woods which surrounded Suds rose above them like twisted chimneys.

Poppy hadn't noticed the second tunnel approaching, and before she knew it they were plunged into darkness. She held her breath again and counted.

1, 2, 3...

She heard a sharp tap on the carriage floor.

4, 5, 6...

She closed her eyes.

7, 8, 9...

Daylight flooded back in and Poppy could see the rusty eaves of Suds station up ahead. She looked around the carriage. The lady was gone.

How could she be? The train had only been in the tunnel for nine seconds. Perhaps she'd just moved along to the next carriage. But Poppy hadn't heard the doors sliding open.

The voice over the train's speaker garbled something about "Taking all belongings with you" and "This train terminates here".

She heaved her backpack onto her narrow shoulders and positioned herself beside the doors. Then she noticed the lady's purse lying forgotten on a seat. It was almost the exact same colour as the quiet green fabric of the carriage upholstery. Poppy wouldn't have noticed

it if she hadn't been spinning in circles as she struggled to squeeze her arm through the strap of her bulging backpack. The doors opened, a sharp gust of autumn wind plunged into the carriage, and instead of thinking, like she always did, Poppy snatched the purse and stuffed it into one of her wonderfully big pockets.





One CLOTH



“Take the key from around my wrist,” Gran told Poppy when they arrived back at her house. Poppy had visited Gran just once before, when she was three or four and Mum had driven her up for the day. After that, Gran took the train down to visit them a handful of times, but otherwise Poppy only really got to talk to her on the phone. It didn’t matter though, because Gran’s house smelled the same way that she remembered Gran did: of dark wood, musk and sugar. “Go to the cabinet by the fireside and open it just a little.”

Poppy did as she was told.

“Now, using only one hand, lift the lid from the jar wrapped in cheesecloth.”

Poppy obeyed. Churchill, Gran’s miniature pig, sniffed anxiously around the kitchen and then charged

through the door towards his basket, where he curled up cosily by the hearth. A fat log of wood surrounded by bundles of dry twigs blazed silently. Mum always said she could never remember Gran's house without a fire chattering away in the lounge room. "Suds was always seven degrees colder than anywhere else," she would say. "And if you didn't like the weather, all you had to do was look in a different direction, because the temperature in Suds was as changeable as the wind."

"Find the tweezers in the cabinet and take two lumps of sugar." Grandma squinted across the room over the top of her glasses. "Bravo," she said. "Now hold the sugar lumps in your hand as tight as you can without crushing them. Lock the cabinet. Bring me back the key."

Poppy did *exactly* as Gran instructed.

"Put the sugar lumps in my tea, as carefully as you can without making a splash."

When she had done this, Poppy stirred the tea.

"Scrummy!" Gran whispered, slurping her tea noisily. "Ahhhhh!" She smacked her lips.

Poppy was not impressed.

"You'll soon find that I'm not a proper lady, Poppy," Gran told her, noticing Poppy's quiet disapproval. "I don't mean I'm not a girl. I'm very definitely a girl. I mean I talk with my mouth full. I put my elbows on the table. I *like* interrupting people." Gran winked at her with one little eye.

Poppy didn't know what to say, so she changed the subject. "Why do you hide the sugar, Gran?"

Gran drank some more tea and arranged herself more comfortably. She was wearing a crushed silk robe in a colour she called Burnt Brandy, topped with a hat that was dappled like a sun-drunk avocado. Poppy's eyes liked the colour. Burnt Brandy was a colour that made her think of black coffee, amber and chestnuts. The hat was similar to a fez and had a tassel that danced around Gran's blossomy hair. Perched on her nose was a pair of brass pince-nez, framing her glistening sea-green eyes.

Poppy liked looking at her grandma's armchair. It was furrowed and patched, and dotted with hundreds of glistening pins. Gran always said she got all her best ideas while sitting in that chair. She called it the Seat of Wisdom.



Gran was a seamstress and could make any wearable thing you wanted. Think of a costume now; she could make it. A scaled sea monster, the robes of a golden sultan, a goblin made of nothing but leaves and wind. She worked through the night, her long fingers stitching and milling like a spider. Although Gran wasn't famous, her costumes were. You could always tell if she'd made something by the tiny initials she'd embroider into the lining: T.H.

"The sugar *must* be kept locked up," Gran said simply, which was no real answer at all. Then she changed the subject with insect-like speed. "I moved to Suds forty-six years ago when I was twenty-two. The people here aren't any kinder or meaner than any other town. The library doesn't have better books. The post doesn't come any faster, and the mutton pies are just as delicious as the ones two towns over. I didn't come here for any of that. I came to Suds for the *cloth*."

Gran took another sip from her cup, and when her pursed lips pulled away they created a little ripple in her tea.

"There is no better cloth in the whole, wide, wonderful *world* than the cloth they make in Suds."

Poppy cradled her cocoa and nestled up beside Gran's velvet slippers.

"I've seen cloth that changes colour like a cuttlefish, and fabric that crumbles like ancient stones but stitches like new satin."

“Where do they make the cloth?” Poppy asked.

“At the Helligan Mills, just out of town on the river. Miss Crink at the fabric shop says that once a week, on a Tuesday morning, bolts of the most exquisite cloth float down the river in a crate which stops at the brook beside her shop. There is never any left over, because the perfect amount is always made. Not an inch more or less.”

“Who makes it?”

“That”, her grandmother said, “remains a mystery.” She thought for a bit. “Your mum wouldn’t like me telling you this, but since she isn’t with us any more I make those decisions now, so I’m going to tell you.”

Gran cleared her throat and opened a tin of syrupy peaches sat beside her.

“Many years ago, before there were street lamps and car horns, there opened a famous fabric mill in Suds. Merchants came from all over the world to buy their fabric. Nothing was impossible, no colour too specific, no texture too complex. You could take them a toadstool and they’d weave you a red and white spotted fabric with an underside of pleated bone muslin that was so fine you’d think they’d plucked it from a witch’s supply cupboard. They made a voile so light, you could drape it on a ghost.”

“How did they make it?” Poppy wondered if perhaps Gran was exaggerating a little.

Gran finished off the last peach and drank the juice

from the tin. "Some say they made it with the web of the Whistling Spider, others say they used silk threads from the Chinese Devil Worm softened in the stomach of the Skipping Camel. But I say otherwise."

The old woman narrowed her briny eyes and leaned towards Poppy.

"I say magic," she said, and picked her teeth with a needle.

Poppy's neck was suddenly aware of the tiny hairs on the back of it.

"You can't expect me to believe that, Gran."

"Then how else do you explain it?"

Poppy thought for a moment and considered biting her nail absent-mindedly.

"Well, no one can ever really prove they've seen a ghost or what it looks like inside a witch's supply cupboard. So no one could ever prove the materials really ever were that special, could they?"

Gran smiled. "You must be careful not to be too clever, my little button. Overthinking clogs the brain like soggy cereal clogs the sink."

Poppy narrowed her eyes. Gran held out her cup.

"Make me another tea and fetch me a biscuit, would you, pet?"

Poppy put the kettle on the stove.

"Where did we leave off? Oh, that's right," Gran said, unpicking a few of the scales from a pair of beetle wings she was making. "The fabric became even more

famous. The town of Suds prospered and grew...until something odd began to happen.”

The kettle whistled as it began to boil and Poppy poured the hot water over the fragrant tea leaves.

“One by one, like the birds of summer, children began to vanish.”

Poppy put the kettle down and brought Grandma her tea.

“What do you mean? How did they vanish? When did this happen?”

Churchill the pig rested his snout on the edge of his basket, as if listening to the story too.

“I mean just what I say: children began to vanish. One here, one there. They faded away. I remember I was twenty-three when Wilma Norbles disappeared. Wilma was a swimming champion. Every day before school she would swim up and down the river like a seal, until one morning something peculiar began to happen. It started with Wilma’s eyes. Very slowly, little by little, their colour began to fade. Before she knew it, the colour from her hair began to drain away too. The last time Wilma climbed into the river, despite being ten years old, she was as grey as an old woman. People watching from the shore said that she took a deep breath, sunk beneath the water and dissolved like a blob of paint. Some said she was eaten by the old fish rumoured to live in the River Suds. But even I’m not superstitious enough to think *that’s* likely.”

Poppy nodded politely. She didn't quite know if she believed her wily old gran. She was twelve after all, and twelve is the age when one truly starts reasoning what is real and what is fabricated.

"I can see you don't believe me, but let me tell you this: ever since, and ever so slowly, the children of Suds have been dwindling away."

"Where did they go?" Poppy asked. "When was the last time it happened?"

Gran looked at Poppy and answered only one of her questions. "No one knows. Sugar, my button. Two lumps."

Poppy retrieved the sugar, heeding Grandma's instructions.

"And what's happened to the Mills now?"

"They're still there," said Gran, sipping her tea. "Somewhere in the woods outside of town. Riddling Woods. Neglected, ruined and overgrown. Whether the fabric which floats down the river comes from the Mills or not is anybody's guess. People in the village like to say they are haunted."

"Haunted?"

"Haunted," said Gran. "By the ghost of a washerwoman who crouches beside the river's edge, washing the stains from a grey cloth."

"That's not real," muttered Poppy, her chest swimming with unease.

"It might not be real, but it's a fact that people have seen her," said Gran wryly. "Now, while your dad is

away for the next few weeks and you're staying with me here in Suds, I want you to follow four simple rules. No one else seems to bother with them these days, but I'm a bit old-fashioned sometimes, Poppy, and I like to stick to them."

Poppy fetched her notepad from her backpack and wrote down what Grandma said. With each line she wrote, her fingers stiffened and her heart began to dance its familiar dance.



RULES:

- 1) All washing must be done during the day. Bring your clothes in off the washing line (even if they are wet) before six o'clock every night.
- 2) All sugar cubes are to be kept under lock and key.
- 3) At night close your window, lock it, draw the curtains.
- 4) NEVER, DON'T YOU EVER, dust the window sills.



the
Island
at the
End of
Everything

Kiran Millwood Hargrave



the
Island
at the *End* of
Everything

*Kiran Millwood
Hargrave*



*Chicken
House*

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For my husband





Also by Kiran Millwood Hargrave

The Girl of Ink & Stars





'The world shall perish not for lack of
wonders, but for lack of wonder.'

J. B. S. Haldane

GLOSSARY



<i>Nanay</i>	Mother
<i>Ama</i>	Father
<i>Lolo</i>	Grandfather
<i>Gumamela</i>	Hibiscus, a kind of flower common in the Philippines
<i>Tadhana</i>	Fate
<i>Takipsilim</i>	Twilight
<i>Habilin</i>	Something given to someone for safekeeping
<i>Lihim</i>	Secret
<i>Diwata</i>	Guardian spirits, usually of nature
<i>Pitaya</i>	Dragon fruit
<i>Pahimakas</i>	Last farewell





**CULION ISLAND,
THE PHILIPPINES
1906**

There are some places you would not want to go.

Even if I told you that we have oceans clear and blue as summer skies, filled with sea turtles and dolphins, or forest-covered hills lush with birds that call through air thick with warmth. Even if you knew how beautiful the quiet is here, clean and fresh as a glass bell ringing. But nobody comes here because they want to.

My *nanay* told me this is how they brought her, but says it is always the same, no matter who you are or where you come from.

From your house you travel on horse or by foot, then on a boat. The men who row it cover their noses and mouths with cloths stuffed with herbs so they don't have to share your breath. They will not help you on to the boat although your head aches and two weeks ago your legs began to hurt, then to numb. Maybe you stumble towards them, and they duck. They'd rather you rolled over their backs and into the sea than touch you. You sit and clutch your bundle of things from home, what you saved before it was burned. Clothes, a doll, some books, letters from your mother.

Somehow, it is always dusk when you approach.

The island changes from a dark dot to a green heaven on the horizon. High on a cross-topped cliff that slopes towards the sea is a field of white flowers, looping strangely. It is not until you are closer that you see it forms the shape of an eagle, and it is not until you are very close that you see it is made of stones. This is when your heart hardens in your chest, like

petals turning to pebbles. Nanay says the white eagle's meaning is known across all the surrounding islands, even all the places outside our sea. It means: *stay away. Do not come here unless you have no choice.*

The day is dropping to dark as you come into the harbour. When you step from the boat, the stars are setting out their little lights. Someone will be there to welcome you. They understand.

The men who brought you leave straight away, though they are tired. They have not spoken to you in the days or hours you spent with them. The splash of oars fades to the sound of waves lapping the beach. They will burn the boat when they get back, as they did your house.

You look at the person who greeted you. You are changed now. Like flowers into stones, day into night. You will always be heavier, darkened, marked. Touched.

Nanay says that in the places outside, they have many names for our home. The island of the living dead. The island of no return. The island at the end of everything.

You are on Culion, where the oceans are blue and clear as summer skies. Culion, where sea turtles dig the beaches and the trees brim with fruit.

Culion, island of lepers. Welcome home.

A LOVE THAT
TRANSCENDS TIME

A SECRET THAT
COULD DESTROY THE FUTURE

THE LAST BEGINNING

LAUREN JAMES

The image features three overlapping circles of varying shades of gray, creating a sense of depth. The circles are centered and overlap each other. The text is placed within these circles: 'THE' and 'LAST' are in the top two circles, and 'BEGINNING' is in the bottom circle.

**THE
LAST
BEGINNING**

Praise for *The Next Together*:

“A heartbreaking and unpredictable love story spanning time and space.”

Melinda Salisbury, author of

The Sin Eater's Daughter

“Funny, romantic and compulsively readable.”

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**“An explosion of storytelling.
It's everything that I love about
books. Read it.”**

Alice Oseman, author of *Solitaire*

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**“Packed with humour, adventure,
conspiracy and epic romance,
The Next Together is a sensational
debut that is sure to put you on the
edge of your seat and keep you there.”**

Catherine Doyle, author of *Vendetta*

**“At once a sweeping love story and a
high-concept page-turner, this ambitious,
accomplished debut resonates long after the
story has ended.”**

Joanne Owen, *Lovereading.co.uk*



**THE
LAST
BEGINNING**

LAUREN JAMES

WALKER
BOOKS

For my parents, who are always
exactly where I left them.

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*Reports of my death have been
greatly exaggerated.*

– Mark Twain

*To lose one parent, Mr Worthing,
may be regarded as a misfortune;
to lose both looks like carelessness.*

– Oscar Wilde,
The Importance of Being Earnest

PROLOGUE

UNIVERSITY OF ST ANDREWS CAMPUS, SCOTLAND, 2051

“Dad, I’m bored,” Clove whispered into her father’s ear. It was nearly dinnertime and Clove was *starving*, but the evening talk – a very long and technically complicated speech that her mum, Jen, was giving to a group of fellow scientists at her university – wouldn’t finish for another half an hour. Her parents had insisted she come, even though she had been in the middle of a Sim with her best friend, Meg. Apparently, aged eleven, she wasn’t allowed to stay at home on her own, even if she promised not to move from the sofa the whole time they were gone.

“Shh,” her dad, Tom, said. He patted Clove’s arm consolingly. “The exciting bit is coming up.”

Clove didn’t see what could happen to make this evening interesting.

She looked around the lab, which was a lot tidier than usual. Whenever she’d come down to the basement to visit her parents at work in the past, it had been a mess of wires, discarded circuit boards and empty cardboard boxes. Once she could have sworn she saw a mouse nest inside an old computer case, but her dad had resolutely denied it.

Clove tried very hard to tune back into the speech, which was about some kind of grant the university had just received to further fund her parents’ research.

“... there are, of course, still issues to be overcome,” her mum said, “especially with regard to radiation leakage. However, a huge amount of progress has been made. In fact, the rest of the group and I are delighted to be able to give you a demonstration of the technology here this evening.”

The crowd gasped.

“If you would all like to gather round.” Her mum sat down at a large computer in the centre of the laboratory. It was connected to an enormous piece of equipment that took up half of the lab. People moved in closer to watch, wine glasses in hand, as Jen started running a program on the computer screen.

Clove snuck a glance at the buffet table, which was set up near the entrance. There were *chocolate* eclairs. Surely no one would notice if she started eating now. She had to listen to her parents talking about work every day – there was nothing remotely exciting about it. They worked on something called Einstein-Rosen bridges, whatever those were. At a push, she was more interested in her father’s work, which was about computer programming. Clove really liked computer programming.

A blonde teenage girl wearing a long green scarf saw Clove eyeing up the buffet table. She winked at her. Clove twisted back around, trying not to blush at being caught out.

Her dad nudged her arm. “Look, Clove.”

Clove reluctantly turned to see her mum type a final command into the computer. Noise filled the lab – a whirring groan that seemed to shake the walls and vibrate

the air. The scientists shifted, expectantly, and then Clove saw what they were all staring at.

A light had gone on in part of the equipment attached to her mum's computer – a sort of glass box. Sitting in the centre of the box was a single red rose. The noise coming from the rest of the equipment grew louder until Clove could feel the vibrations in her eardrums and chest. The wine glasses trembled, adding a faint high-pitched screech to the sound.

Everyone seemed to be holding their breath. As Clove watched, the noise cut off all at once, and the rose—

The rose disappeared.

Everyone exclaimed in unison. There was a moment of complete silence. Another moment. Then the air inside the glass box shuddered and blurred. When it cleared, the flower had reappeared.

Clove couldn't believe what she'd just seen. Around her, the audience burst into enthusiastic applause.

Her mum stood up from the computer, a proud smile on her face. "What you just witnessed was the world's first ever public demonstration of time travel."

Clove drew in a sharp breath. Time travel? She hadn't realized *that* was what her parents were working on. She hadn't even known time travel was possible.

Her mum was talking again. "It has taken many, many years of research by a dedicated team of physicists and computer scientists to get to this point, and our work has only just begun. The current technology only operates on a small scale, in terms of both object size and time travelled.

With our new research grant, we hope to improve the equipment to allow for travel of living objects, and through time periods of more than a few seconds. We will also target the biggest issue with the current technology: survival.” She gestured back to the glass box.

Clove’s mouth gaped open. The rose’s once vivid red petals had curled up and faded to a putrid brown, the stem was shrivelled and black. The rose was dead.

“Radiation levels experienced during the transfer are too high for anything to survive,” her mum explained. “We will need to eliminate this issue in order to achieve our ultimate goal: human time travel. But I have high hopes that we will all be back here in several years to celebrate just that success.”

The crowd burst into applause once more. Clove, completely overwhelmed with amazement, clapped as hard as she could. Once everyone had quietened down, her mum began answering scientific questions about the equipment, but Clove wasn’t listening. She couldn’t take her eyes off the time machine and the withered rose inside it. Her mum and dad had built an *actual time machine*.

As Clove watched a dead petal slowly fall from the flower, she made herself a promise. When she was older, she was going to work here with the machine – even if it meant spending all her free time between now and then studying. Then one day, when she’d helped to get the machine working, she was going to be the first person to travel through time.



**PART
ONE**

CHAPTER 1

An Unauthorized Biography of Clove Sutcliffe

When we talk about Clove Sutcliffe from an academic perspective, it is clear she had a huge part to play in the history of the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries. Scholars often forget, however, that she was a complex character in her own right, regardless of her historical impact. Her upbringing, parentage and childhood were far from typical, and this is worthy of study in itself.

File note: Extract from *An Unauthorized Biography of Clove Sutcliffe*, first published in 2344

ST ANDREWS, SCOTLAND, 2056

Clove was sulking. She was supposed to be working on a programming problem that her dad had set her, but she'd just had a realization and she needed to dwell on it. Her realization was this: her best friend liked a boy. Clove had thought she would have a few more years before she lost her best friend to a *boy*. It wasn't just any boy, either. Judging by the message that Meg had just sent her, the boy she'd chosen to set her sights on was none other than *Clove's cousin*.

Nuts_Meg 18:02:45 DARLINGGGGG I HAVE A COMPLAINT.
LuckyClover 18:03:14 File it with the appropriate authorities.
Nuts_Meg 18:03:57 I am worryingly close to it, loser.
Nuts_Meg 18:04:02 Anyway why have you been holding out on me??
You have family members who are powerful babes! How could you not tell me about Alec?

As Clove reread Meg's last message, her heart clenched. She should have guessed this would happen. At Clove's sixteenth birthday party, Clove had watched Meg and Alec talking together in the garden. Meg's face had been turned towards Alec's, her mouth curved into a flirtatious grin. Meg's soft blonde hair had fluttered in the wind in that picture-perfect way it always did, like, if you touched it, it would be softer than air. Meg had pushed it away absently as she let out a laugh. Clove hadn't been able to hear her, but she didn't need to – she knew Meg's laugh better than her own.

She should have known then that Alec would destroy everything.

For some reason, just the idea of Meg and Alec together was stopping Clove from being able to get back to her programming. That was unusual, as most of the time programming helped her to feel grounded. She had started it as a way to deal with her hyperactivity. It gave her something to focus her attention on when her parents were frustrated with her endless energy.

When she was twelve she had been diagnosed as a "gifted child with hyperactivity issues", which seemed to Clove a rather extreme way of saying that she was a bit jumpy, intensely focused, and made easily impatient

with inactivity or slow teaching. She could get excessively dedicated to things she was interested in, though, which was one thing her teachers did appreciate. She could program for hours and hours with scant thought to the outside world, until her parents came to her room to force her to eat some dinner (or breakfast, if she'd been working all night).

Clove closed her code, so she could devote her attention to the imminent disaster of Meg's love life. She replied to Meg in a way she hoped didn't express her annoyance.

LuckyClover 18:04:26	being attracted to neither boys nor close blood relatives, it never occurred to me that he was a babe
LuckyClover 18:04:28	Sorry
Nuts_Meg 18:04:55	u r fired
LuckyClover 18:05:12	from being your personal dating website?
Nuts_Meg 18:05:33	Yes
LuckyClover 18:05:49	aw, mannn! The benefits were so great
LuckyClover 18:05:54	oh wait ...
LuckyClover 18:05:59	... there weren't any
Nuts_Meg 18:06:17	girl's got jokes today I see
LuckyClover 18:06:43	yeah whatever. So did I tell you my dad's well cute, want me to set you up?
Nuts_Meg 18:07:03	sure, he's a silver fox.
LuckyClover 18:07:09	Ew
LuckyClover 18:07:11	EW
LuckyClover 18:07:21	well, that backfired
LuckyClover 18:07:33	heterosexuality is gross
Nuts_Meg 18:07:51	don't be heterophobic
LuckyClover 18:08:17	that isn't a thing
Nuts_Meg 18:08:37	it will be if you keep this up
LuckyClover 18:09:15	you must feel so discriminated against

Clove tried not to feel bitter, but if Meg couldn't fall for her, did she really have to fall for *her cousin*?

A message from Spart, their household Artificial Intelligence system, popped up on Clove's watch screen and interrupted her thoughts.

- > Your mother is about to enter your room. Hide any and all illicit substances now.

Clove rolled her eyes at the message. Their AI lived in all their home computers and watches and picked up vocal instructions from anyone near by. Spart organized their lives, and tended to make a general nuisance of himself as he did so. Clove thought this was because her dad had programmed him with a few extra features, including a personality, which meant Spart tended to think he was human.

"Come in," she called to her mum.

"Can you come and sit with us for a moment, Clove?" her mum said after opening the door. Her voice sounded oddly nervous. "Your dad and I want to talk to you about something."

Clove said a quick goodbye to Meg. She was slightly relieved to leave the conversation before it got too serious. Then she followed her mum downstairs to the living room and settled on the sofa. Her curiosity increased as she watched her parents communicate with each other silently. They were so in sync that they sometimes seemed able to talk to each other without speaking at all.

A notification popped up on Clove's watch. Meg had replied to her goodbye with a snap of herself smiling dreamily into the camera. She'd written ALEC <3 across it in red. Annoyed, Clove swiped left to delete the message.

“Clove,” her dad said, after clearing his throat, “we’ve got something to tell you.” He let out an exhale. Clove saw her mum squeeze his hand. “It’s time to tell you the truth. We think you’re old enough now to understand it.”

All Clove could hear was the blood pounding in her ears.

“Now, Clove, we love you. You are a wonderful, beautiful daughter—” He paused.

She stared at him. “What? What is it?” Her words came out croaky.

For an agonizing heartbeat, nobody spoke.

Then her dad continued. “This is hard to say...”

“What?” she said hoarsely. “Just tell me.”

Her dad sucked in a long breath. “When you were born, something happened to my brother ... who was your natural father. Something happened to him and your natural mother.”

Clove felt her face go stiff. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t process anything he was saying. *Adopted. Adopted?* She didn’t feel adopted. Wouldn’t she have guessed?

“We raised you because they couldn’t,” her dad went on. “Genetically, I’m actually your uncle.”

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” Clove asked. She felt betrayed, displaced, horrified, and a hundred other emotions she didn’t know how to put into words.

Her parents exchanged glances. “Your birth mother made us promise to wait until you were old enough to understand,” her mum said. “She was worried you might not be able to handle it. It’s sensitive. But now you’re sixteen, we thought—”

“What?” Clove said, in a choked-off half-laugh. “That *now* I can handle it?”

“It’s more than just you being adopted. It’s also ... because of what happened to your natural parents ... because of who they were.” Her mum stared down at her hands.

Her dad shifted in his seat.

Clove was itching to move, her knee jumping with the hyperactive twitchiness that always came when she was upset. She leant forward to stop it. “Why? Who are they? What happened to them? Is it because they didn’t want me? Is that what you’re saying?” Clove was finding it hard to process her thoughts.

“Oh, Clove,” her mum said. “No, no. It wasn’t like that at all. They loved you very much.”

“Clove,” her dad said, trying to speak calmly. “Darlin’, it’s ... it’s hard to explain. They were—”

“They were *what?*” she demanded. “*Tell me.*”

Clove stared at her parents – her *adoptive* parents, not her real parents at all – and felt the hairs on the back of her neck rise. She didn’t understand. Nothing made any sense.

“I’m getting this all wrong. Clove, I’m sorry,” her dad – *Tom* – said. “Let me explain properly.” He faltered. Her mum – *Jen* – took his hand again. “Maybe it’s best if I just come right out with it. What do you know about Matt Galloway and Kate Finchley?”

Clove knew quite a bit about them. Everybody did – they were famous. There was even a film about them. They were two students who, in 2039, had found evidence that the

English government was developing a biological weapon, with plans to release it on the rest of the world if there was another world war. The students had fled across the border into Scotland with an accomplice. Matt Galloway had been arrested, then later he had escaped from prison and disappeared without a trace, along with Kate. The English government had been dissolved as a result of what the students had found out. As such, they were credited with saving the world from biological attack. No one knew where they were now, though. They'd been missing for over sixteen years – the whole time Clove had been alive.

"The political activists?" Clove felt a little dizzy.

"Matt Galloway was my brother. He's your natural father. Kate Finchley was ... *is* ... your mother. It was us – the three of us – that uncovered the conspiracy by the English government."

Clove let out a noise: a kind of brittle bark. "You?" Surely her dad, who was going grey and spent all of his time hunched over a computer, hadn't... "You shut down the English government?"

"Yeah, that was us." Tom scratched the back of his neck. "Before I met Jen, I wasn't a professor of computer science. I was a hacker. It's not something I do any more. Everything that happened with Matt and Kate sort of scared me out of it."

Clove's throat was as dry as if she'd swallowed a spoonful of flour. She couldn't keep track of everything she was being told. Her dad was a hacker? Her dad wasn't her dad at all? Her real parents were *famous*?

“What happened? Where did they go? How did *you* end up with *me*?” she asked.

“After Matt was arrested,” Tom said, “Kate and I came to my parents’ house, in Scotland. Your mother was pregnant, and gave birth to you here. Afterwards, Kate decided to go back to England, to try and free Matt. He had evidence of the weapon with him when he was arrested, you see, so nobody believed us.” Tom stopped, giving her a chance to ask questions. She blinked mutely at him, and he continued. “Kate thought that if she could break Matt out of prison, they could use the evidence to tell the world about the weapon and make sure it was destroyed before the English military used it in war. We didn’t want Kate to go. It was a crazy plan. How could she break Matt out of prison? She wouldn’t listen, and even though she hated to leave you, she thought it was something she had to do. I agreed to look after you until she returned.” Tom stopped, swallowed.

“She never did,” Jen finished. “Your parents disappeared. We know that Kate managed to break your father out of prison. How, I have no idea – it should have been impossible. But Kate managed it. They even managed to send evidence of the biological weapon to NATO shortly after Matt’s escape without getting caught. The English government was shut down. But we don’t know what happened to your parents after that. Tom didn’t hear anything from either Kate or Matt after the prison breakout – they just disappeared.”

“You just let her – my mother – go off alone? You *stayed here*?” Clove tried to stop her face from twisting into a grimace.

Tom stared at her, but he didn't look like he was seeing her at all. "I've regretted it every day since." He rubbed a thumb across his knuckles. "Officially, they are still classified as missing. That means they either managed to escape to France, or perhaps even back to Scotland, or they were secretly taken prisoner by the English government."

No one spoke for a while. Clove felt wobbly, a little sweaty. Eventually, she said, "Have you never tried to find them?"

Tom scrubbed his hands over his face. "I've enquired about them, and I've got dozens of online alerts set up for any mention of them. But there haven't been any leads in a long time. I would have done more, but I had to be careful. I'm still wanted by the English authorities – I can't go and physically look for them."

Jen patted Tom's hand. "It's been pretty scary over the years. When Tom first told me, I worried all the time that something would happen – that English spies would find him. He'd changed his surname, but that didn't make me feel any safer. I've learned to live with it, and we've been left alone, so far. Technically we're all in hiding."

"We're *in hiding from the law*?" Clove asked.

"Well, I am. The English law, at least," Tom admitted. "Your mum took on a lot when she decided to marry me: a single dad with a six-month-old baby and a secret history of crime."

Jen smiled at him, softly. "You're worth it, hon."

"I don't know how I'd have done it without you." Tom leant over and kissed Jen quickly. Clove couldn't bear to

watch. Her whole world was crumbling in front of her and they were acting like it was nothing.

"So I'm not really Clove Sutcliffe?" she asked, trying to bring them back to what was important.

"You are, legally. I took Jen's name when we married," Tom explained. "But if our family was a little more conventional, you'd be Clove Galloway."

"Galloway," Clove repeated, trying the name out. "Clove Galloway."

Hearing it aloud made it real. Suddenly it all clicked. Matt Galloway and Kate Finchley *were* her parents. Her real, actual parents. There was a film about them. About *her parents*. She'd watched it in a history class once. She'd had to *write a paper* about them.

They were her *parents*. They had saved the world.

Aloud, slightly hysterically, as if it was the most important thing she'd learnt that day, she said, "*MY PARENTS HAVE A WIKIPEDIA PAGE?*"

"They've probably got an IMDB page, too," Tom said, and despite the coldness that had begun to spread through her body, Clove began to laugh, too loud and too manic, and found she couldn't stop.

Eventually, after she'd calmed down and drunk a whole glass of water, Clove managed to ask some more appropriate questions. "Didn't my ... mother leave any plans about what she was going to do after she rescued Matt?"

"No, she didn't. If she had a plan, she didn't share it with me." Tom carefully lined up a coaster with the edge

of the table. "But I didn't push her to. I was done with it – I didn't want her to go. But I couldn't stop her. She was set on saving Matt. And in some ways it was a relief... I was out of it. Free."

"What about me? How could she just leave me like that, with nothing?" Clove's voice cracked.

"Kate left you with me and your grandparents," Tom said. Somehow, to Clove, that didn't seem enough. What was an uncle to real parents? What were her grandparents – who were great but getting kind of old and sleepy – to a mum and dad?

"She always meant to come back. It was only supposed to be temporary. And she did leave something for you," Tom added. "A box of letters. They might tell you more. We never opened them. I promised Kate I wouldn't. Spart, do you know where they are?"

Spart's tinny voice came from his watch.

- > The box is in a filing cabinet in the most eastern corner of the loft.

- > There's a nest of mice in the adjacent box. I have called an exterminator, who will arrive tomorrow at 1300 hours. Does this meet with your approval?

"Thanks, Spart. I'll get it," Jen said.

She stood up, kissing Clove's forehead as she left the room. Clove breathed in the familiar scent of Jen's perfume and wondered again how it had never occurred to her that this wasn't her real mother. Shouldn't she have known,

somehow? Shouldn't she be able to feel something like that?

"Why didn't you tell me sooner?" Clove asked, while they waited for Jen to return.

Tom sighed. "Kate – your mother, I mean – made me promise to wait until you were older, so that you would understand it all properly. I was happy to do that. For a long time when you were young the situation was still very dangerous. We couldn't risk you mentioning anything about it at school. After Matt escaped from prison, the English authorities were searching for him and Kate for years. Even though they had saved the world, Matt's prison break meant that they were the most wanted criminals in England, so I was in hiding. While they could never do anything about me officially as I'm under Scotland's protection, we always thought that they might try to do something to me in secret, to get information about your parents somehow. It was imperative that no one knew who I really was, or where Tom Galloway had gone. Your grandparents – my mum and dad – came into hiding with us. They changed their names too.

"If our location had been leaked, all of our lives would have been in danger. Whatever the English government did to Kate and Matt in the end ... that would have happened to me, and maybe to my parents and to you and Jen too. We couldn't have told you the truth, not back then." Tom smiled slightly as he said, "A part of me did wonder if you knew, though, somehow. Do you remember after you watched the film about them, darlin'? You used to play with Meg at being 'Kate and Matt', running away from the police."

Clove gasped. "I remember that. I always wanted to be

Matt. I used to steal your glasses so I looked like him. Meg was always Kate because she liked her hair.” The memory caused an ache in her chest. What would Tom and Jen have been feeling, watching them play all those years ago? It must have been basically impossible to keep the secret hidden.

“It was just easier not to tell you anything,” Tom continued. “And we’d built up lives here. We didn’t want to have to go on the run. Especially not with our work at St Andrews. Everything was just coming together with the time machine. It wasn’t worth risking it, not when all of our work was at stake too.”

Clove swallowed. She stared at her knees. She knew that Tom was watching her with concern, but she couldn’t meet his eye. It was clear that he was relieved to have finally given up the burden of secrecy.

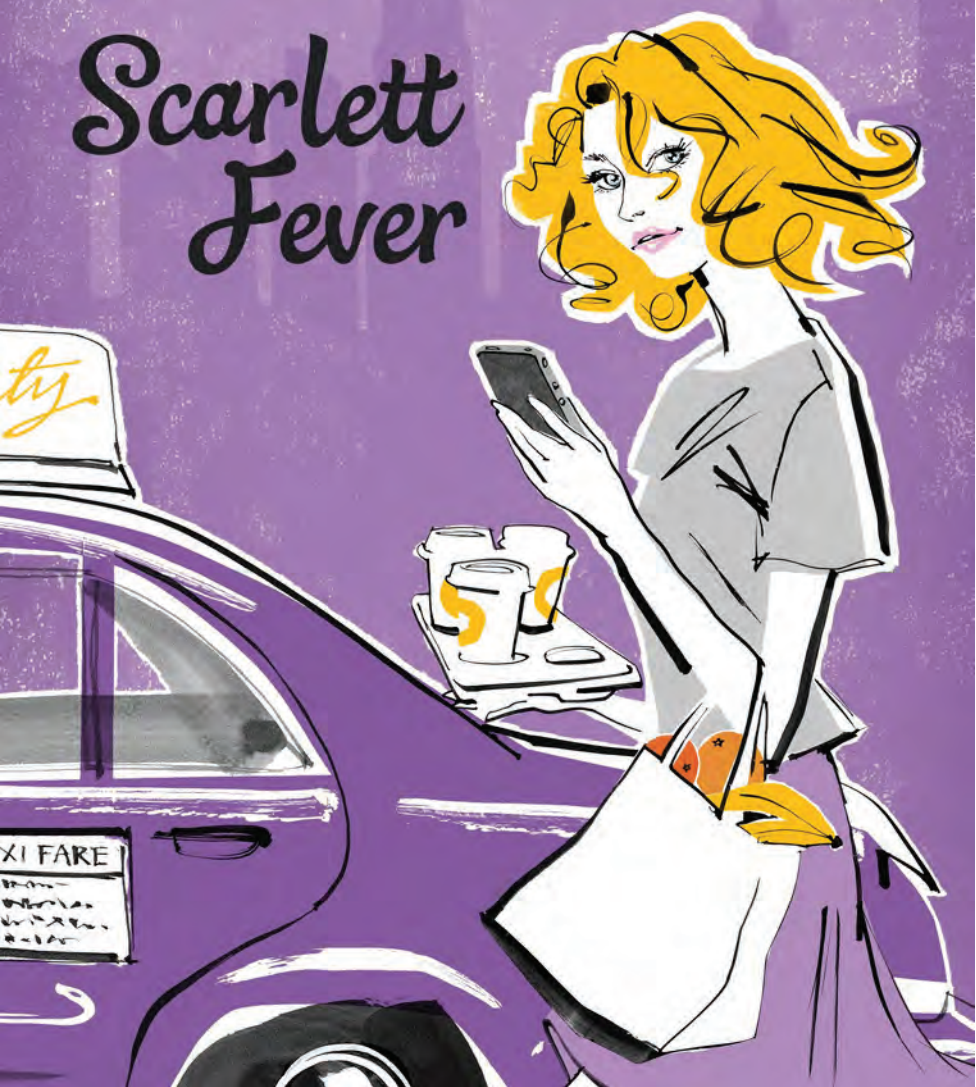
When Jen returned with the box, she put it on Clove’s lap. “Take your time reading through it. You don’t even have to look at it now if you don’t want to. It’s a lot to take in. If you have any questions, we’re here to answer them. We love you, Clove.”

Clove closed her eyes and tried to let Jen’s hug calm her, the way it had throughout her childhood. But all she could think was that it should have been a different pair of hands holding her. Her mother should have been someone else.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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MAUREEN JOHNSON

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ACT I

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*"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't":
Hamlet at the Hopewell Hotel*

So let's set the scene, shall we? Hamlet. In a hotel. But not one of the grand palaces or tourist farms — a much rarer breed. A tiny, privately owned hotel. It would be fair, and possibly even generous, to call the place distressed. The floors squeak, a fine layer of dust covers everything, and most of the furniture in the lobby has an astonishing lean to it, so much so that I actually found myself cocking my head to the side at points.

But what is equally obvious is the true style under the decay. It's there, like good bone structure. The place is an absolute Deco masterpiece: cherry wood, silver lightning-bolt motifs where you least expect them, poison-purple and tiger lily-orange tinted light from the colored lamps. You pass from the lobby into a modest dining room, now converted into a theater. Like everything else, the

chandelier is lopsided, but deliberately so, pulled by a wire draped with silver gauze. The walls are bare but alive with the shadows of a hundred small, guttering candles. The room is in decadent disarray, as if a seedy royal wedding has taken place soon before.

Which, of course, it has. Welcome to the world of Hamlet.

Full disclosure: I wanted to dismiss this production as a gimmick, a cheap bag of tricks. Hamlet in a hotel . . . and next, Othello in an office. Macbeth in a McDonald's. I've seen shows staged in every possible location, but the fact that this one seemed so tied to the establishment — with backstage access to guests — I assumed it was a new step downward in the ever-devolving state of the art.

But this show works. I now think every production of Hamlet should be staged in a broken-down hotel. This is the play where people constantly come and go — royals, courtiers, messengers, servants, students, performers — and events progress from bad to worse to terminal. All is uprooted in Hamlet, no one is sleeping in the right bed, and your stay may be much shorter than you expect. So a hotel . . . of course! Why not?

This Hamlet is also staged like a kind of carnival — a mad, strange circus. It's an uneven production, overacted at points (Stephanie Damler doesn't quite know where to pull back on Ophelia's insanity, and Jeffery Archson's portrayal of Horatio set my teeth on edge). But there are some true laugh-out-loud moments, mostly provided by

the inspired clowning of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, played by Eric Hall and Spencer Martin, respectively. In particular, when Martin careened through the crowd on his unicycle at the start of the show and had an encounter with a closed door — I actually spit-took my drink onto my companion's shoulder. And I'm not normally a spitter.

Like all good things, it will come to an end, so get your tickets while you can. (SHOW CLOSES AUGUST 28, TICKETS AVAILABLE THROUGH TICKETPRO OR FREE TO HOTEL GUESTS.)

Safety for the Stupid

It was four thirty in the morning, and Scarlett wanted answers.

Unfortunately, four-thirty-in-the-morning questions are often of a very different nature than, say, three-twenty-in-the-afternoon questions. At three twenty in the afternoon, the questions you might be asking yourself are, "What's for dinner?" or "I wonder if that button on my cell phone is stuck or completely broken and if I keep pressing it will I fix it or will it fall off?" You can wave those questions off with a quick swing of the hand. They scare easy.

The questions that creep around at four thirty in the morning are not the kind that can be easily dismissed. You can beat them with a shovel, and they'll just keep getting back up. "What are you going to do with your life?" they demand, pulling themselves from the ground with no visible damage. "Who are you, really?"

Hamlet was big on questions. "To be, or not to be," he asked peevishly, "that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them."

In other words, why not just give up? What's the point?

Life is rough — is it easier just not to bother? Lie here and do nothing? Curl up and die? Scarlett Martin knew the whole whiny speech because she had seen the show every single day for the last four weeks, plus rehearsals. It's hard to miss a show when it's in your dining room.

The questions that Scarlett was asking herself at the moment weren't quite that dramatic. They weren't even that specific. What was going through her head was a querulous vibration with a questiony flavor . . . a general "*What the hell is going on?*"

She lay on the twelve-foot-wide main stage platform, her feet propped up on a unicycle ramp. A sheer purple curtain dangled just inches above her forehead. Higher up, silver banners and purple drapes hung from the set walls. Beyond that, tin lanterns were suspended from the ceiling. Around her, theatrical lights were attached to freestanding poles, and a hundred empty chairs pointed in her direction — an audience of no one.

This was the skeleton of the show, stripped bare of flesh and life. It had been closed for two days, and for those two nights, Scarlett hadn't really slept. She tossed in bed for a few hours, then took the steps down the four flights from her room (the elevator was much too loud to use in the middle of the night) and paced the set. She would not, would not, would not look at the pictures of Eric on her phone. Or the saved messages. She would do none of these things, because it was over.

Probably.

Most likely.

Which is why she would not look at . . .

Too late. The phone was in front of her face and she was clicking through the photos. She saw her finger doing it. It was

like she wasn't even in control of her hand. It had gone rogue, disconnected itself from her brain. The hand wanted to see the photos. The hand *always* wanted to see the photos, clicking through them again and again, one hundred and fifty-four in all. Some were action shots from the show. Some were pictures she snapped in quiet when Eric wasn't looking. It was a minor point of pride for Scarlett that she had gotten very good at doing that. If you're going to be a stalker, she figured, you really should be *good* at it. The shame of failure was too great. Ideally, a good stalker could perhaps gain future employment as a spy. Fight crime. Go undercover. Save the world. Yes. That's what the world needed, someone good with a camera phone, someone prepared to spend five hours online looking at the same video clip, someone who really knew how to read into a status message. Surely, all very desirable skills should the perpetrators of terror ever really get into social networking.

The dining room doors opened and a tall figure appeared in the doorway, casting a long shadow as it came farther into the room. Scarlett sat up abruptly, startling the person and causing him to yelp and almost crash into a chair.

"Sorry," she said. "Didn't mean to startle you."

"God . . . what . . . Scarlett?"

Spencer was always the first awake at the hotel, fully dressed in his uniform: white dress shirt, black pants, and black tie. Unlike at the Hopewell, staff at the Waldorf-Astoria had to get dressed up for work. Also, the Waldorf-Astoria had staff — this was another major difference. Spencer worked the breakfast shift there and always woke at an unreasonable hour. He lived on almost no sleep.

“Why are you up?” he said, sitting on the edge of the platform.

“Just the heat,” she said. “Our air conditioner broke again.”

The part about the air conditioner in the Orchid Suite was true. It used to freeze Scarlett and Lola with its powerful, energy-draining, light-dimming gusts, but it had recently given up on emitting anything aside from a painfully loud squeal. So they poached all night long in the hot, damp air. That had nothing to do with why she was awake tonight, though, and Spencer seemed to know that. He looked at the phone, still grasped in her hand.

“Expecting a call?” he asked, nodding at it.

The whole Eric situation had caused tension between Scarlett and Spencer for a little while over the summer, tension that had been resolved when Spencer punched Eric in the face during a fight practice, coincidentally just minutes after Eric sort-of dumped Scarlett and made her cry. The matter had been put down by all involved as an unfortunate accident. Spencer and Eric performed every night from that point on without a problem and everyone acted as if nothing had happened between Scarlett and Eric at all. It had all been swept away, just like the play. A moment of unreality, long past.

Spencer may have pretended all month long that all was well and maintained a never-wavering “I don’t want to know” stance on the whole thing . . . but he had surely noticed Scarlett’s nervous, careful behavior and inability to speak around Eric. Or Eric’s excessively polite, excruciating efforts to make sure it was perfectly clear that nothing was happening. Scarlett had seen the other cast members jump in to fill the holes in the conversation when she and Eric were cornered together. The

Eric situation was a lot of work for everyone. Never mentioned, but always there, always generating a crackle of unpredictable energy.

“It’s nothing,” she said.

“Yeah,” he mumbled, rubbing his face tiredly. “I hope so. Come on. Since you’re up, I need your help.”

Just because she was awake at this hour didn’t necessarily mean that Scarlett actually wanted to *do* anything, but she followed him along to the kitchen anyway. She sat on one of their large wooden prep tables while he set up the coffee station. That was his early morning task, and it only took a few minutes. He pulled a few script pages out of his back pocket and handed them to her.

“This,” he said, “is killing me. The audition is at one. I have no idea what I’m doing. Help me think of something. Read the highlighted part.”

“‘Man holds two ends of seat belt in his hands,’” Scarlett read, as Spencer filled an industrial-size coffee urn with water. “‘He is unable to figure out how they click together. He tries several times. He puts up his hand for help from the flight attendant.’ Seems pretty easy.”

“Seems easy. *Is impossible.*”

He turned off the water and hauled the heavy urn up by its side handles, taking it out of the kitchen. He returned a moment later and sat on the counter. He unbuckled his belt, slipped it from around his waist, and held it up for examination.

“This is a seat belt,” he said, “and I am the guy who can’t figure this out. What is my problem? Look.” He looped the belt around himself and jabbed the end at the buckle. “Seat belts

are just insert and click. That's it. How do you play someone who can't figure that out? Why do they even do safety videos on planes?"

"If I flew," Scarlett said, "maybe I could tell you. What is this for, anyway? Air Stupid?"

"I know. This is my problem. I don't know how to play someone who doesn't know how to fasten a seat belt without acting like an idiot. But the airline won't want the person in the video to seem stupid, because I'm supposed to be playing their typical customer. So I have to *be* stupid without *looking* stupid. I can do looking stupid. Looking stupid is easy. But *this* is harder than Shakespeare. People get Oscars for playing the kind of guy who can't fasten the seat belt. It's a well-known fact."

"Do they give Oscars to people in airline safety videos?"

"They should," he said. "God. This is going to be another Day of the Sock."

It had been four weeks since the Day of the Sock, and yet there was no sign that Spencer was any closer to getting over it.

A casting director had come to see *Hamlet* on its first night. Spencer had impressed him with his skills — fighting, fake falling, backflipping, running into walls on a unicycle. The casting director brought him in to audition for a washing machine commercial, in which he was asked to play a sock stuck in an oversize fake dryer. Spencer spent a good eight hours in the fake dryer, getting callback after callback all day long, until it was down to just him and one other actor. Apparently, eight hours in a fake oversize dryer is not nearly as much fun as it sounds. Especially when the other guy gets the part, and all you get is a headache that lasts for a day and a half.

The Day of the Sock had come to symbolize a kind of curse Spencer thought had come over his career. It cast a pall over his ordinarily high spirits. Since that day, he had been going on auditions several times a week, but nothing was panning out. Casting directors liked him. They called him back again and again. But at the last second, someone else would get the part. Again and again and again. It was wearing him down.

"Maybe you've never been on a plane before?" Scarlett suggested, trying to sound positive.

"I've only flown twice, and even I could master the seat belt," he said. "Anyone can work a seat belt. A seat belt practically fastens itself."

He slumped down a bit, resting his elbows on his knees and running his hands through his dark hair. Scarlett stared at his black tie.

"The tie," she said suddenly. "What if you got it caught in the seat belt? You wouldn't be able to buckle it then."

This made Spencer sit up. He looked at his tie, then yanked on the knot to loosen it.

"Okay," he said, pulling the tie so that it hung low. "I just lean over a little when I'm trying to put on the seat belt, and . . ."

He made sure to dangle the tip of his tie into the imaginary clamp so that it couldn't catch.

". . . oh no! I can't figure out my seat belt!"

He increased his struggle, and began doing a very good simulation of choking himself with the belt-clamped tie. He somehow managed to make it look like it had tightened around his neck, and he gagged and choked and pulled himself all the way down to the floor.

“How’s that?” he asked, opening his eyes in his death pose. “It’s just a starting point. Obviously, I have to work that out a bit.”

“I like it,” Scarlett said approvingly.

Spencer got up and straightened out his shirt and tie. He opened the accordion guard on one of their large and dusty kitchen windows and surveyed the day. It was just before sunrise, the sky a heavy purple-gray, the air already thick and warm. A summer morning in the city, in the pocket of time when the heat was between merely uncomfortable and completely unbearable. Spencer just stared out at the small, paved area that separated their property from the apartment building behind them — just a little plot of concrete with a table and some chairs that no one ever used. He exhaled long and slow.

“What?” Scarlett asked.

Spencer just shook his head and snapped the guard back into position.

“Nothing,” he said. “I should get going. Walk out with me?”

Outside, Spencer’s bike was looking a little worse than usual. It had been the duct-tape special since he was in high school, but now one of the handlebars was bent up and forward, like the horn of a bull.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Oh yeah,” he said, unlocking it. “A little present from yesterday. I went to pick up some new copies of my headshot, and when I came out, this is what it looked like. The whole frame is messed up. Someone must have nailed it with a car. I’m on a lucky streak these days.”

He fastened the bike chain around his waist and squatted down, balancing the bike in his hands and examining the line of vision from seat level. The bike was clearly crooked. He rolled it along as they walked down the sidewalk, and it was obviously a struggle. It kept pulling in Scarlett's direction, sometimes nudging her, and he would drag it back.

"Can you really ride that?" she asked.

"I don't have much choice. It's mostly okay, except that it always wants to go left now, so I have to steer right to keep it straight."

"That's really bad in traffic. There's about a dozen ways to die on that thing."

Spencer stopped and looked at her like she was a genius.

"A dozen ways to die," he repeated. "That's it!"

"What?"

"I'm going to strangle this guy in a few different ways, besides the tie. I'll make everything dangerous. Like when the oxygen mask drops down, I'll strangle him on the cord. I can do the same thing with the inflatable life preserver. I'll make him the most inept passenger of all time. You always think of something!" He yelled some kind of farewell as he wobbled off into traffic at high speed.

It was just dawn now, a violent burst of sun breaking between the buildings on the east side. Scarlett pulled her phone from the pocket of her pajama shorts. The screen displayed the time, signal strength, battery life . . . but otherwise, its face was blank and stupid.

She sat on the front step of the hotel and watched Mrs. Foo, their dry-cleaner neighbor, open the gate in front of her shop.

She waved to Scarlett. Scarlett lifted her arm to wave back. The arm felt tired. The first wave of weariness washed over her; still . . . there was something about this up-with-the-dawn thing. What if . . . she wondered . . . what if she made today the first day of a whole new era? She was literally up with the dawn. School started in less than a week. The show was over. In a few hours, she'd be seeing all of her friends together for the first time since the end of school.

This was the day to begin again, to put Eric behind her, to think about what came next. Something quivered in her, something made of enthusiasm or exhaustion, something that told her that this was the plan. This was the way.

She pulled out her phone again. This time, she gave her hand permission to pull up the pictures of Eric. There was an ERASE ALL button. All she had to do was hit it. That would be a good start.

Her finger hovered over the button for a moment, teasing it, just coming into enough contact. But she didn't press down.

No. Even better. She would go through the pictures one by one and erase them manually. That was more like a ritual, more cleansing. She would wipe out all one hundred and fifty-four of them right now, in her sleeping clothes, on her stoop, in the early morning sunshine in full view of Mrs. Foo and whoever walked by.

Picture one: a very early one of Eric, soon after they met. He was buying a sandwich and didn't even see her take the photo. Kind of historical. She would come back to that one.

Picture two: from an early rehearsal. Same thing. She would come back to these. Better to start in the middle. Back to the

main menu. Scroll, scroll . . .

Picture thirty-nine: Eric in the theater. Very generic. A little blurry. Erasable. She took a deep breath, clenched her free hand into a fist, and hit the TRASH button. Picture gone.

Or was it? Did the phone save trashed pictures? She had no idea. She backed through the menus to check. No, it did not. The picture was gone. Only one hundred and fifty-three left to go.

Scarlett managed to prune twenty-three of the pictures before the second, heavier wave of exhaustion hit. She crept back up to her room, her feet heavy. Her sister Lola was already awake and in the shower. Scarlett dropped down on her bed and listened to the water run in the bathroom next door.

It was six thirty in the morning, and Scarlett felt herself falling under. But before she gave up and just let the sleep come, she said to herself, out loud, "I am making a new start."

Rue Is for Remembrance

After a few hours of fitful midmorning sleep, Scarlett made a second attack on the day and headed for the shower. It always took a moment for the Hopewell water pipes to figure out what temperature you wanted. The default setting was “death by ice or fire.” Scarlett didn’t care at the moment. She would take what came, and what came was cold. Bitter, impossible cold that almost felt good in the heat. She locked her teeth together and accepted it, letting it run down her back. As she reached for her shampoo, she got dangerously close to singing “I’m Gonna Wash That Man Right Outta My Hair,” a song she learned when Spencer was doing *South Pacific* in high school. She stopped herself just as she opened her mouth. New start or not, there was a line to be drawn, and that line was singing musicals to yourself as serious psychological motivation.

Downstairs, the lobby was empty of people. There were a few guests still staying at the Hopewell, but the numbers were coming down dramatically now that the show was closed and the novelty of the theater-hotel was over. The dining room doors were open, and her father was up on a ladder on the stage platform, unhooking a wire and a silver banner from the tired chandelier.

“I’m going to meet Dakota,” she called.

“Come here a sec.”

Working on the set, her dad practically looked like a member of the theater company. He was in his mid-forties, but didn’t look his age at all. He still had the floppy blond hair and trashy-hipster thrift store clothes of the art student he had once been. The older Spencer got, the more the two just looked like brothers, something that Scarlett found fascinating and strangely unnerving. Sometimes — okay, most of the time — her dad just didn’t seem like someone who should be running a business. Nothing against her dad. Not everyone was born to run a hotel in New York. The job had been thrust on him. He’d fought it for a while when he was just out of college. But then he married his true love and had four kids, one of whom developed cancer. After that, like it or not, good at it or not . . . the hotel became his life’s work.

“You know about the dinner plan for tonight?” he asked, releasing the last hold of the fabric and sending it drifting to the floor. “Dinner at Lupe’s.”

“Lupe’s?” Scarlett said, pleased to hear the name of her favorite Mexican restaurant.

“Lola set it up. You four are going. Your mom and I are having a date night. It’s sort of a back-to-school treat, and a welcome back for Marlene. So be back around five.”

This last bit of information took some of the shine off of things. For ten wonderful days each summer, Marlene, the youngest Martin, went away. Her cancer survivor group had a camp in the Catskills where they threw one another into the lake and ate marshmallows, and peace would reign on the

fifth floor of the Hopewell. Scarlett loved her little sister, of course, but she was not prepared to lie and say she was fun to live with.

Her dad climbed down from the ladder and stared up at the chandelier, which was still crooked after being released from the wire that had been pulling it deliberately out of joint.

"Has it always been like that?" he asked.

"Kinda. It's a little worse now."

He *hmmmed*, and the matter seemed to pass from his mind.

"Listen," he said, wiping dust from his hands onto his pants, "your mom and I were thinking . . . since Mrs. Amberson has moved out, and you have school starting . . . you have enough on your plate right now. We don't expect you to have to take care of the Empire Suite or any of the other rooms."

"I don't?"

"Well, Lola is around pretty much full-time this year, and Spencer's been doing a lot. And we won't have as many guests."

He tried to make that sound like it was a good thing that would just save them all a little time.

"And you have your job," he added. "How *has* your job been going?"

"It's fine," she said. "We've worked it out. It's just a few afternoons a week, a few hours here and there. It's not bad."

"Do you want to do it? I know it's college money, but that shouldn't be your big concern."

It was college money. It was a lot of college money. Somewhere out there, a bank account with her name on it was growing.

"All I'm saying is, you can quit. I want you to quit if it feels

like too much. The show is done. You don't have to —"

"No," Scarlett said. "I want to do it. I . . . like it."

A piece of glass fell from the chandelier and landed on the silver fabric, like a dirty, loose tooth. It punctuated their conversation, bringing the matter to a close.

In Biology I, Scarlett had been taught that carbon was the building block of life. They forgot to mention the other element: Element M. Money. Money determined everything. You needed money for your health — they'd learned that lesson when Marlene's medical bills came in. (Though they were never supposed to talk about that. It was a Martin Family Rule.) You needed money for school. You needed money to get across the city, and to do things on weekends. You needed money to go away for the summer, like most of Scarlett's friends had. Summer in the city was hot and terrible, and outside of the city there were *opportunities*. If you had the money. Which most of Scarlett's friends did. Dakota, for example, had been in France at a language immersion program. She had arranged this little picnic in the park to celebrate the fact that they were all back and together. Only Scarlett had been here all along, because she was the most stone broke out of the group.

Scarlett knew better than to resent her friends for being more well off. But sometimes . . . sometimes it was just a *little* annoying that she had to lead a slightly different life from the rest of them. Her dad could pretend all he wanted, but it did make a difference that she had a job. And when the time came for her to go to college, if they could even afford it, every penny in that account would matter. Her friends had more

choices about how to spend their time. They could “improve” themselves. She just had to take what she was dealt.

By the time she reached Central Park, Scarlett was feeling massively sorry for herself. She didn’t exactly see herself as a character right out of Dickens — cleaning chimneys, eating soup made of fishheads and old shoelaces, getting sold to a local blacksmith for a few chickens and a dozen bars of soap — but it was still *pretty bad*. Add to that the fact that Eric was gone, and her tragedy was complete.

Her mood was in sharp contrast to the scene that had been prepared. She found her friends on a quilt of blankets and beach towels. Dakota had a real wicker picnic basket with white-and-green china plates and silverware strapped to the lid. There were cupcakes and tiny sandwiches — all, Scarlett was sure, made by Dakota herself. She had probably worked until four in the morning and then gotten here early to set up. Because that was the kind of person Dakota was. A true friend who spent her nights doing things for others, not wandering around sets looking at pictures and comparing herself to Hamlet. This was a smooth gear change from self-pity to guilt. Scarlett knew she should have gone to Dakota’s the night before to help, but when you’re obsessed, it takes up all your time.

Dakota had outfitted her tall, beanpole frame in a little blue dress and pulled her dark hair up into two very strange little scrunches by her ears. She sometimes dressed a little bit like she was four years old, but she pulled it off about 80 percent of the time. Chloe and Josh were there as well. Chloe managed to be the kind of person you couldn’t resent, even when she wore short short-shorts that showed off her tanned and toned tennis

legs or flashed lasered teeth or wrinkled her nose job. At heart, she was a math genius and a closet nerd. And Josh, Scarlett's closest guy friend, was a goofy redheaded Brooklynite. His parents were both writers, and he was insanely well-read. He'd been in England all summer, supposedly studying literature. In reality, it sounded like he had been drinking beer and chasing every English girl who crossed his path. Josh was a little like that, but it was okay. The others would be coming soon — Mira, probably Hunter, maybe Tabitha. All of them happy, full of stories.

Yes, the summer was done, and everything was going back to normal. This was the part of normal that she was supposed to like, seeing all of her friends. But nothing felt right. She flopped down on one of the blankets and tried to make herself look carefree, but she landed on a stick and it dug into the meat of her thigh, causing her to start in pain. Slings and arrows. Always the slings and arrows.

"So," Dakota said quietly. "The show. Is gone. Today, right? Gone?"

Clearly, Dakota was going to waste no time in getting to the point. Scarlett shaded her eyes and nodded, still trying to look like she didn't have a care in the world, except for that leg wound.

"Good. So Eric's officially out of your house, and now we can get him out of your life and out of your head. Starting *right now*."

"I already started," Scarlett said. "I erased some pictures of him off my phone this morning. I'm making a new start."

"No," Dakota said. "Really."

"I'm serious," Scarlett said, taking a little offense at this. "I'm making a new start."

To be fair, Dakota had every right to doubt her. She had been a little *on message* the past few weeks. She had sent her friends accounts of every single exchange (or non-exchange, as the case may be) that she'd had with Eric. She'd made them examine photos and messages. She had asked for analyses of gestures they hadn't seen and looks she couldn't re-create. She had sent Eric's every move to the far corners of the Internet and the world. And she had made promises more than once that she was going to stop.

So that haunted, twitchy look in Dakota's eye came from bitter experience. But today was different.

"Today is different," she said.

"Look," Dakota said. "Think about it this way. You made out with Eric *twice*. You made out with Josh more than that."

At this, Josh looked over lazily, sensing his name was being invoked.

"What?" he asked.

"I was just saying that Scarlett made out with you more than she made out with this Eric clown," Dakota said.

"Oh yeah." Josh nodded and closed his eyes against the sun.

"It wasn't the same," Scarlett said. "Everyone makes out with Josh."

This was no insult to Josh, and no secret to anyone. Josh was a lovable idiot who was more than happy to let his female friends practice their making-out skills on him whenever they wanted.

"I haven't," Dakota said.

"Whenever you want," Josh said, rolling onto his back.

"I'm just trying to put it in some perspective," Dakota said, "because, you know, I hate Eric and I am trying to explain why he does not matter in a *new* way. For example, you spent more time making out with Josh than you did Eric."

"It's not the same thing," Scarlett said. "It's not just how much *time* you put into it."

"When did you guys make out again?" Chloe asked. "I forget."

"Last winter break," Scarlett said. "And it was different."

"It was three times or something," Josh said.

"Right," Dakota went on. "And notice how that didn't make you crazy? That is because Josh is a good guy, and Eric is a *cheat* and a *sneak*. He is a bad man. Everyone hates him. You have to *get in line* to hate Eric Hall."

"He's not a *cheat*," Scarlett said.

This conversation was a minefield, and with those words, she lifted her foot off a pressure device. Dakota was now set on tick-tick-boom.

"Let's break it down step-by-step," Dakota said. "Shall we? Eric made out with you while he had a girlfriend. A girlfriend of two years, down in . . . wherever it is he comes from. South Carolina or whatever . . ."

"North Carolina," Scarlett said, feeling the need for the facts to be accurate. "And I didn't know about her."

"No. Of *course* you didn't. He made sure you didn't. Because he was *cheating on her*. With you. And do not . . ." Dakota held up a finger on this. ". . . do not give me this stuff about how he really felt bad about it and how he was going to break up with her but he just wanted to wait until he got home. Do not."

“Yeah,” Josh said, sounding very bored that this was happening again. “Don’t.”

“I’m not even thinking about him,” Scarlett lied. “You don’t have to . . .”

“Do you want to know how I *know* you’re thinking about him?” Dakota cut in.

“Nope,” Scarlett replied honestly.

“Because I checked that link to his commercial that you sent me. Remember how you said you were the only person who ever really watched it and how you were embarrassed because the view count was going up really fast? Well, it was at 356 two days ago, and now it’s at 512.”

Scarlett felt her stomach lurch. She had made one of the most basic of life errors, and she saw it immediately: Never give anyone evidence of your crazy.

“I watched it . . . a few times,” Scarlett said, looking down. “You don’t know it was me.”

“It’s a pizza commercial. You were the one who said you were afraid he’d notice because you were the only person in the world who would watch it besides him.”

“Some people *really like pizza*,” Scarlett countered. “And I’m wrong a lot. Can we be done now? There’s a bee on your drink.”

“Can I make a suggestion?” Chloe was chiming in. Scarlett loved Chloe dearly, but she was a notoriously flirty and flaky dater. She had gone through a total of four “relationships” over the summer. As far as she was concerned, the average life cycle of a couple was a week. If they were *very* serious. Taking relationship advice from her was like taking flying lessons from a kamikaze pilot — someone who thought the only way to

land was nose-first into the ground.

"Why don't you call him?" she asked. "Why don't you go and see him? Sometimes you just need to make out one last time to get it out of your system. I've done that."

"Do. Not. Do. That."

That was Dakota, of course.

"I'm always here," Josh added.

Scarlett's problem — the ruling issue of her life right now, her secret inner turmoil — had become a conversational Frisbee. Something to toss around on a bright summer's day when there was nothing better going on.

"I'm making a new start," Scarlett said again.

And then, of course, the phone began to ring. She had set it on the blanket beside her. Dakota got to it first and snatched it away.

"Who is it?" Scarlett said anxiously, her voice betraying her.

"It says 'AAA,'" Dakota replied. "AAA? American Automobile Association?"

Sadly, many people made this mistake. They had been getting a lot of calls from stranded drivers recently.

"Give it," Scarlett said, holding her hand out.

The phone rang again.

"Who is AAA?" Dakota asked, holding the phone back a bit.

"Just give it to me for a second . . ."

The phone rang again.

"That is not an answer."

"It's my boss," Scarlett said with a sigh.

"Oh no. No, no, no." Dakota stuck the phone under her leg. "Not her, either."

"You don't understand," Scarlett said. "You don't know what she's like. Just let me call her and she'll calm down. It's only been three days since she moved out of the hotel. She has separation anxiety."

"That doesn't mean she can call you every ten minutes to do something stupid while she's out getting her butt waxed."

"Thanks for that mental image," Scarlett said. "That's something she might do, if her butt was hairy. Which it probably isn't . . . Great. Now I'm imagining it. Remind me to repay you."

"*De rien*. God, go away for one summer and I'm replaced with an entire cast of freaks. I am never leaving again."

The phone started ringing again. Each ring pierced Scarlett. Mrs. Amberson didn't have a special ringtone, but Scarlett could just tell when she was calling. The calls had a keening, urgent quality.

"Please," Scarlett said. "She won't stop until I talk to her."

Ring.

"You can have your phone back if you tell her that you are staying here today with us. And we will all take turns patting your head and helping you heal your broken heart. That is what is going to happen."

Ring.

"Fine!" Scarlett said, her anxiety peaking.

The phone stopped ringing as soon as it was back in Scarlett's hand. She stared at it for a moment, wondering if she could just let it go, ignore the call.

"Don't," Dakota said. "Don't call her back."

"You don't understand," Scarlett said again. "She won't stop."

The phone started ringing again, proving her point. Scarlett

answered it instantly, preparing herself to tell her boss that she was not available, but she had no chance.

“Where are you?” Mrs. Amberson snapped. “I am getting in a cab right now and coming to get you.”

“What?”

“I’m aware that it’s your day off, but it’s an emergency. *Address, O’Hara!*”

“I’m in the park,” Scarlett said, moving away and lowering her voice. Dakota was squinting suspiciously.

“What’s the closest street?”

“I don’t know,” Scarlett said. “Sixty-seventh or something? On the west side?”

“I will be there in five minutes.”

Scarlett snapped the phone closed and faced her friends. Dakota was staring intently and seemed to have taken a very dim view of the situation.

“She didn’t really give me a choice,” Scarlett explained, getting up. “She’s on her way.”

“I didn’t really hear you fighting her off,” Dakota said.

“It’s her boss,” Josh said. “You can’t fight off your boss.”

“Her boss isn’t normal!” Dakota shot back. “People are allowed to have days off. School starts in two days. This is all the time we get!”

It was useless for Scarlett to try to explain that this was her fate. Outrageous fortune. Hamlet had made some good points after all.



The
ICE
Garden

GUY
JONES



The
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For Isabelle



They called it the Hat. It was a long white hood that masked the whole of Jess's face and neck, over which she wore something like ski goggles. The rest of her body was covered up with a baggy top, trousers and thick gloves so that no part of her skin was exposed to the sun.

'I don't like it here,' she said, lifting the goggles to get at a maddening itch on her nose.

'No one likes hospitals,' replied her mother.

'So, we can go?'

'You're in one of those moods, then.'

Jess sighed, releasing a mouthful of sickly air. The numbers on the lift display began ticking up towards the children's ward. Already, beads of sweat were

forming on the back of her neck, sticking fabric to skin. Summer was the absolute worst time of year.

'It's only a couple of times a month,' said her mother.

'*Only?*' said Jess, her voice rising.

'Must we do this?'

Jess thought they probably must. At least until her mother understood how much she hated this building and everything in it.

The doors opened on the second floor to reveal a woman in a purple dress. She took a step towards them but stopped short at the sight of the Hat. Her mouth gaped like a fish but no words came out.

'Can we help?' asked Jess's mother.

'Oh . . .' she said, recovering herself a little. 'Up or down?'

'Going up.'

'Right. Well. Down for me. Thanks.' The woman took a step back, still staring.

'You can close your mouth now,' Jess said, as the lift doors closed.

'Darling, that was rude,' her mother scolded.

'She didn't hear me.'

'Shame.' They both smiled, without looking at one another. Her mother jabbed the fourth-floor button a few times and tapped her foot. The lift clunked and juddered as it started up again.

'I don't like him,' said Jess.

'He's perfectly nice.'

'He's nice to you. He talks to me like I'm an idiot,'

'He talks to you like you're a child.'

'Exactly.'

'He's a very good doctor.'

'How do you know? You don't have medical training.'

Game, set and match, Jess thought.

'Put your goggles back on,' said her mother. 'There are windows in the corridor.'

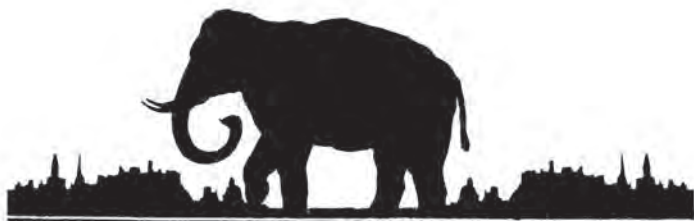
'But, Mum . . .' she started.

'Jessica,' her mother replied, firmly. *Game, set and match*.



**Jane
Kerr**

**The
Elephant
Thief**



THE

ELEPHANT

THIEF

Jane Kerr



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*To AJ, Alexandra and Ben
With love*

Based on a true story



Chapter One

SOMEWHERE IN EDINBURGH

8 April 1872

He couldn't breathe.

His lungs were pumping. His lips were open. But there still wasn't enough air.

The sack covering his head blocked everything. His nose. His eyes. His mouth. Fear burnt in his stomach, sharp and acidic.

He wondered where he was being taken. And why.

But most of all he wondered if he was going to survive the night.

Outside, the horses slowed and the carriage jerked to a stop.

'Move!'

Boy felt a rough shove in the centre of his back, and he toppled, gracelessly, from the carriage. The ground hurt. And he cursed every decision he'd made that night. If he'd been more careful, less cocky, he would have seen the two men waiting outside the abandoned boarding house where he'd been living for the last three months.

But by the time he had, it had been too late. The hood had already covered his face, and his arms had been twisted behind his back.

'Get up, you little runt.'

Heavy hands lifted him to his feet. The night breeze chilled his skin. Somewhere nearby, a door was wrenched open and instinctively, he turned towards it. Then he was pushed, almost stumbling, across the threshold.

Where was he? What did they want with him? Fear pulsed frantically in his chest.

Abruptly, the sack was torn from his head, and he gulped in air. Every mouthful tasted of damp and decay and the sea. He pivoted slowly on his heels, and tried to focus.

He was in an old warehouse. Judging by the sounds and smells, it must be close to the Leith docks. At the far end of the room, a man stood by the only window. A shaft of moonlight turned him into a dark silhouette.

'Boy. So glad you could come.'

The voice was instantly recognizable. And Boy's breath stuttered.

Frank Scatcherd. Leader of the Leith Brotherhood, a collection of Edinburgh's worst criminals and thugs. And

the man who called himself the King.

‘I expect you want to know why you’re here.’ Casually, Scatcherd pushed away from the window. As he walked, his steel-capped boots tapped on the bare floorboards. Boy waited but the King was in no hurry. It was as though he knew that every second hiked the fear a little higher. ‘Well? Nothing to say?’

Now Scatcherd was so close that Boy could see the pattern of the silk scarf tied around his neck. The King liked to look good. His hair was slick with barber’s oil, and a cap tilted jauntily over one ear. It was rumoured that a razor had been sewn into the peak so he could blind a man with a single head jab. But no one knew for certain if it was true.

Boy swallowed, throat as dry as dust, but he said nothing. The silence stretched for several heartbeats. Then Scatcherd slid a knife from his jacket sleeve.

‘So you’re still not talking.’ Deliberately, he rolled the blade in his palm. Forwards and back. Forwards and back. ‘What a pity.’

Boy lifted his chin and stared at the moving knife; the jagged tip was rusty with old blood. And he knew it wasn’t bravery that kept him silent. Right at this moment, he wished he could make any sound at all. But he couldn’t.

‘Well it’s lucky for you, I don’t need your voice.’ The knife stopped moving. ‘I assume you’ve heard of the Wormwell auction?’

Cautiously Boy nodded. Everyone in Edinburgh knew

about the auction. Walter Wormwell owned the Royal Number One Menagerie, the most famous travelling show in the country. But two weeks ago, he'd been found lying in his study, as dead and cold as his untouched chicken supper. According to gossip, he'd left behind a large collection of zoological animals and an even larger collection of debt. Tomorrow the entire menagerie was being sold to settle those bills.

What Boy didn't understand was Scatcherd's interest. Why would the King bother with a penniless bankrupt like Wormwell? Or an auction of zoo animals? It made no sense.

'Two days before he died, Wormwell stole money from me. A great deal of money. Naturally, I want it back . . . and you are going to get it for me.'

Boy swallowed, trying to sort through the significance. A part of him was relieved. He was going to be allowed to walk out of here alive. This time, there would be no punishment. No pain.

'I've already had his house searched. Nothing. Not even a penny under the floorboards. The menagerie is the only place left. Of course, I'd prefer to go to the auction myself, but the police are sniffing around. So I've decided to send you . . .' Scatcherd's lips twisted into a smile. 'My pet thief.'

Boy flinched. How could he find a missing fortune when the Brotherhood had failed? And what would he be looking for? Coins? Bank papers? Gold? It had every sign of being a fool's errand.

'My men will get you inside the pavilion.' Scatcherd

jerked his head at the two thugs standing on either side of the doorway. 'From there, you're on your own. Keep your eyes and ears open. Wormwell hid that money and there has to be a trace somewhere. And remember . . .'

Boy waited, heart tripping. Scatcherd raised the knife and gently trailed it along Boy's arm. It stopped at his wrist, just above the ugly tangle of scars.

'The last time I asked you for a favour, you let me down. This is your chance to make it up to me.' Abruptly, Scatcherd's fist twisted, and the blade sliced through skin. Boy clenched his teeth against the pain. 'And if you fail, just imagine what I will do to you.'

Boy hung by his fingertips from the top of the high stone wall, feeling the strain through every muscle. He closed his eyes, and let go. His landing was clumsy but silent.

Finally, he was inside the auction ground.

On the other side of the wall, he heard Scatcherd's thugs muttering to themselves, then their heavy footsteps as they walked away. They'd done their job. Now it was up to him.

' . . . And if you fail, just imagine what I will do to you.'

Scatcherd's words chased through his head like night shadows. He rubbed his wrist and felt the old scars beneath his fingers. He didn't need to imagine what would happen if he failed. He already knew.

But there was no need to panic; he was good at this. Faster, smarter, better than anyone else. And the truth was that in this crush no one would even notice a pickpocket.

They were too busy staring at one of the strangest sights Edinburgh had ever seen.

Two leopards, some tigers, one battered baboon and a handful of camels trudged around Waverley Pavilion. Then came a line of antelope, two hyenas (one spotted, one striped) and a golden lioness whose tail swished as she walked.

Boy had never seen anything like them before – animals that weren't cats, dogs or rats. The only reason he knew their names was because of the auctioneer. Bartholomew Trott liked the sound of his own voice.

‘. . . and finally, one Siberian brown bear sold to the London Zoological Gardens for forty guineas.’ Mr Trott brought his hammer down and smiled the smile of a man making money. ‘London's got a bargain there. He's young, healthy and lively as a trout.’

But the bear was already causing trouble. Jaws wide, he reared up on huge hind legs and fanned out his claws. Boy knew it wouldn't do any good. Escape was impossible. Two keepers were already pulling on his chains and, defeated, the animal fell sprawling to the ground.

Boy turned away, trying to ignore the tug of sympathy. Instead, he examined the pavilion field. Most spectators stood near the curtained stage where the animals were being brought up for auction. A little further back were rows of cages and wagons which housed the rest of the Wormwell menagerie. They were probably the best place to start.

He reached into his pocket and checked for the small blade he carried to slash open pocket linings and cut purse strings. It was still there. He was ready.

An hour later, Boy had found nothing. He'd prised open crates, crawled under wagons and plunged his hand inside several straw-stuffed cages. But just as he'd expected, it was useless. There was no gold. No jewels. No banknotes.

His only real success was hidden in the lining of his jacket – a hoard of stolen pennies, silk handkerchiefs and a lady's scarf pin. He'd even managed to sneak a tin whistle from the pocket of one of Mr Trott's clerks.

Boy reached the last of the cages and sidled around a corner. The path was blocked by a group of animal keepers talking to a man in a crumpled suit. Instinct made him pull back; he was a fraction too late.

'Oi, what d'you think you're doing, lad? Come here. I want a word.'

Spinning on his heels, Boy ran, weaving through the wagons before blending into the crowd again. Only then did he risk looking over his shoulder. The man with the crumpled suit was craning across the heads of the spectators. Boy hunched his shoulders and kept low. His heart thudded.

'Ladies and gentlemen!' Mr Trott's bellow couldn't have been better timed. Everyone turned towards the stage. Four men were lowering a cage on to a raised plinth. Behind the metal bars, a lion glowered sulkily. 'May I present Hannibal – the handsomest beast in the jungle!'

On cue, the lion rose to his feet, opened his jaws and roared. The crate lurched sideways. Boy winced at the screams.

‘No need to be alarmed, ladies. He’s as tame as a spring lamb and gentle as a kitten. I’d climb in there myself if I wasn’t wearing my second-best coat. Now, who’ll start the bidding?’

‘Two hundred guineas!’ shouted one large gentleman in the front row. He must be one of the guests who owned a zoological house or travelling menagerie. Boy had even heard a rumour that an American showman called Barnum had sent a buyer from across the ocean.

‘Two hundred and ten!’

‘Two hundred and twenty.’

‘Two thirty!’

‘Very well. Three hundred guineas.’ It was the large man again, his face half hidden by a grey plume of sideburns. A line of gold buttons curved across his jacket. ‘And I hope he can play the piano for that.’

The crowd laughed as the hammer came down.

‘Sold to Mr Arthur Albright of the Yorkshire Zoological Gardens for three hundred guineas.’ Mr Trott nodded to the winning bidder who smiled through his whiskers as if he had captured the lion himself. ‘Congratulations, Mr Albright. He’s a beautiful animal.’

Mr Trott shuffled his papers and Boy pushed a little closer, a flush of nerves prickling his skin. The final lot had been reached. His time was running out.

PHILIP KERR

THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE
WINTER
HORSES



MUCH OF THIS OLD story has been gathered together like the many fragments of a broken vase. The pieces do not always fit as best they might, and indeed it's quite possible that several of them do not belong here at all. It cannot be denied that the story has many holes and could not withstand much scrutiny. Historians will object—as they always seem to do—and say there is no real evidence that the old man and the girl who are the story's hero and heroine ever really existed. And yet if today you were in Ukraine and dared to put your ear into the wind or perhaps took a trip across the steppe and listened to the deep voices of the bison, the whoop of the cranes, or the laughter of the Przewalski's horses, you might learn that about the truth, the animals are never wrong; and that even if there are some parts of this story that are not exactly true, they could be, and that is more important. The animals would surely say that if there is one truth greater than all of the others, it is that there are times when history must take second place to legend.



IT WAS DURING THE summer of 1941 that, to a man, the management of the State Steppe Nature Reserve of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic ran away. Before he drove from the reserve in his shiny black limousine, Borys Demyanovich Krajnik, who was the senior manager, ordered Maxim Borisovich Melnik—who looked after all the animals on the nature reserve—to run away, too.

“The Germans are coming,” he’d told Max. “Their armies have attacked and invaded the Soviet Union without warning. They’ve already taken the great city of Kiev and they will be here soon. Perhaps as early as next week.”

Krajnik was emptying his desk and packing his bags while he was speaking to Maxim Borisovich Melnik and seemed to be preparing to leave.

“But I thought the Germans were our allies,” said Max, for much had changed in Ukraine since 1919.

“They were, that’s true. But now they’re not, see? That’s just politics. Doubtless they’re after the oil fields of the Crimea. For their war machine. Look, Maxim Borisovich, all you need to know now is that the Germans are fascists and when they get here, they will kill you. Of course, in time our own Red Army will defeat them, but until this happens, you should definitely leave the reserve.”

“But where shall I go?” Max asked Krajnik.

“That’s your problem, Comrade. But my advice is to go east, towards our own forces. Go east as quickly as you can. However, before you can leave, there’s an important order I’m giving to you. Very important. It comes from the central committee.”

Max was astounded that the central committee of the Communist Party even knew he still existed, let alone that they had given him an important order. He couldn’t help smiling at the very idea of this.

“An order for me? What is it, Comrade?”

“The committee orders you to slaughter all of the animals on the reserve.”

“You’re joking, Borys Demyanovich. Or perhaps the committee is joking.”

“The central committee doesn’t make jokes, Maxim Borisovich.”

The smile disappeared from Max’s old bearded face

as quickly as it had arrived. He rubbed his neck thoughtfully; it always seemed to hurt a little when the subject of killing an animal came up.

“Kill all our animals, you say?”

“All of them.”

“What—the zebras? The ostriches? The llamas?”

“Yes, Comrade.”

“Including the Przewalski’s horses?”

“Including the horses.”

“For goodness’ sake, why?”

“To stop them from falling into enemy hands, of course. There’s enough meat walking around this reserve to feed a small army. Deer, goats, bison, horses, chickens—they’re all to be shot. I’d help you myself but, er ... I’ve some important orders of my own. I’m urgently required in Kharkov. So I have to leave today. Now. As soon as I’ve finished talking to you.”

“But I couldn’t kill our animals, Comrade,” said Max. “Some of them are very rare. So rare, their species might even become extinct. Not only that, but some of them are my friends.”

“Sentimental nonsense. We’re fighting a war, d’you understand? And our people are the ones who are facing extinction. The Germans mean to take our land and destroy all of us so that they can live on it. So, if I come back and find that you haven’t carried out my orders, I’ll call the secret police and have you shot. You’ve got a rifle. Now use it.”

“Very well,” said Max, although obviously he had no intention of killing any of the animals; besides, he rather doubted that Borys Demyanovich Krajnik was coming back any time soon. “I don’t like it, but I’ll do as you say, Comrade.”

“I don’t like it any more than you, Maxim Borisovich, but this is a patriotic war we’re fighting. We’re fighting for our very survival. It’s the Germans or us. From what I hear, they’ve already done some terrible things in Poland. So you would do well to be afraid of them.”

And with those words, Krajnik drove away, as quickly as he could.

Max went outside the house and walked back to his simple cottage on the edge of the steppe.

The reserve of which he now had full charge was a hidden, enchanted place that consisted of a zoological park and an open territory of steppe covering more than three hundred square kilometres. A wild, desolate-looking region, it is mostly open grassland and largely treeless except for pockets of dense forest growing near rivers and lakes. The steppe is famous for being as bare as the palm of a man’s hand, where there abides but rain and cold in winter and baking sun in summer, but in truth, the weather is more unpredictable than that.

Max did not think he would miss Krajnik very much. One of the reasons the old man was so fond of the reserve was that people like Krajnik were seldom encountered: there were just six small villages in the

reserve and the nearest city, Mykolaiv, was more than three hours' drive away. Max thought that was just as well, since the whole idea of a nature reserve is to provide a sanctuary from men, where animals can exist without being put to work or hunted for food. In spite of what Krajnik had said about the Germans, the old man had high hopes of them being a real improvement on the Ukrainian Soviet government. And he did not think this hope was unreasonable.

For one thing, it was a German, not a Ukrainian or a Russian, who had loved animals enough to create the sanctuary at Askaniya-Nova. That same German—the baron Falz-Fein—had been the only man ever to show Max any real kindness. Everything he remembered about the Germans at Askaniya-Nova persuaded Max that if they did turn up and try to kill the animals, he could reason with them. After all, he could speak German, although it had been many years since he'd needed to. And so the first thing he did when Krajnik departed from Askaniya-Nova was not to shoot any of the animals but to return to his cottage and look for the German dictionary and grammar book that the baron had given him on his birthday more than forty years ago. And since he had only one small bookshelf with the Bible, a long poem called *Eugene Onegin* and *The Game of Chess* by Savielly Tartakower, Max quickly found these books and started to reacquaint himself with the complexities of the German language.

It was another two weeks before the German SS arrived in trucks and on motorbikes, and took over the main house. They seemed to be in a very good mood and behaved with courtesy when Max presented himself to some of the guards and asked to see the officer in charge. Despite the pirate skull and crossbones on their hats and helmets, they weren't at all frightening to Max. They ushered him into the baron's old study, where he snatched off his cap and introduced himself to a Captain Grenzmann. With his German improving all the time, Max explained that Askaniya-Nova was a nature reserve founded by a German baron, Friedrich Falz-Fein. The captain listened patiently and declared that he was fascinated with Maxim Borisovich's story.

"Was it the baron Falz-Fein who taught you to speak German?" he asked Max.

"Yes, sir."

"I thought so."

"It was here, as a matter of fact, that he taught me. But I haven't been in this room for twenty years."

The captain smiled. "I don't mean to be rude—Max, is it?"

Max nodded.

"But you have to admit it's amusing the way you speak German, as if you yourself were an aristocrat. I mean, it's amusing given the way you look. Indeed, if you'll pardon me for saying so, it's almost as if the swan was inside the ugly duckling."

“I hadn’t thought of it like that, sir.”

“What happened to him? To the baron and his family?”

“I think the baron is still living with his family in Germany, sir. But the old baroness was murdered by the Red Army. I myself was imprisoned and tortured because I had worked for them.”

“And I suppose that’s why you didn’t run away. Because you knew you had nothing to fear from Germans.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And what do you do here on the estate?”

“I’m a sort of zookeeper, sir. Except that there are no cages or enclosures—for most of the animals, at any rate. One or two we keep in enclosures when we’re trying to get them to breed. But most of the animals just roam around free, as nature intended.”

Captain Grenzmann stood up and went to a framed map of the reserve that was hanging on the study wall.

“Show me.”

Max pointed out the main features of the reserve and continued trying to ingratiate himself with the captain, if only for the sake of the animals at Askaniya-Nova.

“Well, thank you, Max. You’ve been most helpful. Not that it’s any of your business, but we shall be here a while, I should think. My men are tired and they badly need a rest.”

“Well, sir, you’ve come to the right place, all right. This is a great spot to recuperate.”

“I’m glad to hear it, Max. You know, we’ve been on the

go since June, without a break. The work has been most challenging. But this is the sort of ghetto that is more to our taste. Tell me, those three horses in the stables. Hanoverians, aren't they?"

"Yes, sir."

"Fine animals."

"You know your horses. Petrenko, the local party boss, often came here to ride with his daughter, sir. I used to groom for him. And to look after the tack for them."

"Perhaps you might do the same for me?"

"Whenever you like. You like to ride, sir?"

The captain allowed himself a small smile. "You could say that. I was on the German equestrian Olympic team, in 1936."

"That's wonderful, sir. You must be an excellent rider."

"Yes, I am. But not quite good enough to win anything myself. Still, Germany took all six golds, you know. Six golds and one silver."

"I'm not surprised, sir, knowing about Germans and horses. No one loved horses as much as the baron. It will be quite like old times, sir, having a German gentleman like yourself riding again at Askaniya-Nova. A real equestrian and lover of horses. That's grand, sir."

"I'm glad you think so."

"You know, it was the baron who first brought the Przewalski's horses here."

"These Przewalski's are the prehistoric horses, yes? The ones that can be seen painted on the walls of ancient

caves by primitive Paleolithic men.”

Max nodded.

“I believe I saw some of these horses at the Berlin Zoo, when I was a boy,” said Captain Grenzmann. “As many as six.”

Max nodded enthusiastically. “Yes, I remember them. We sold Berlin a Przewalski’s stallion and mare. Berlin was very successful at breeding them. The last I heard, there were four Przewalski’s in Berlin.”

“You seem to know a lot about this, Max.”

The old man shrugged. “I helped with the breeding programme. First I helped the baron. And then the management of the State Steppe Reserve. The horses are very rare, you know. Perhaps the rarest horses in the world.”

Captain Grenzmann laughed. “Perhaps. But if you’ll forgive me for saying so, I think they’re rare for a very good reason.”

“It’s true. They’ve been hunted to near extinction. Like the great auk. And they’re difficult to catch.”

“That’s not the reason I meant.”

“No, sir?”

“No. I rather imagine they’re almost extinct because nature just wants it that way. It’s survival of the fittest. You’ve heard of the phrase? What Charles Darwin says, about natural selection. In the struggle for life, some species and, for that matter, some *races* are simply stronger than others. So the strong survive, and the weak

perish. It's as simple as that."

"Oh, the Przewalski's are strong, sir. None stronger. And they're clever, too. Resourceful. Cunning, even."

"Cunning, you say?"

"Like a fox, sir. Too cunning to be domesticated, sir. I suppose that's why I'm so fond of them."

"That's an interesting comparison. But you can't deny that they're also very ugly. And certainly inferior to those beautiful Hanoverian horses."

Max was about to contradict the captain, but the man smiled and raised his hand. "No, Max, please, don't say another thing. I can see we could stay here all day talking about horses, but I have a great deal of paperwork to do. Reports for my masters in Berlin on what my special action group has been doing for the last few weeks. So if you'll excuse me. I must get on."

"Shall I saddle the big stallion for you tomorrow morning, sir? His name is Molnija."

"Yes. Please do. I'll look forward to that."



MAX WAS NOT THE only person at Askaniya-Nova who was fond of the wild Przewalski's horses. A girl had been hiding in the woods at the edge of the steppe for some time, and although she had, like many girls, loved horses as long as she could remember, for some reason that even she could not easily have explained, the wild Przewalski's horses made friends with her. This was just as well since she had no human friends. Her family were all dead, and the few people who inhabited the scattered villages in the region drove her away from their doors because they were afraid—afraid that if the girl was arrested by the Germans, then they might also be arrested. The girl understood this and did not blame them for shunning her; she forgave them for it and told herself she would probably have done the same, although as this story proves, this was clearly not the case.

The girl's name was Kalinka. Her father had kept big Vladimir cart horses for his business, and she had made friends with them. But her relationship with the wild horses at Askaniya-Nova—she had no idea they were called Przewalski's horses—was different. She supposed it had something to do with their intelligence and their curiosity. These animals were unusually clever and possessed a childlike playfulness that she had never before seen in horses. And perhaps, as outcasts themselves, the horses saw something similar in Kalinka; at least that's what she imagined. It's a strange thing, the human heart, right enough, but that's just as true of horses, and wild horses in particular.

Kalinka had awoken early one morning, after spending the night wrapped in a ragged blanket under a cranberry bush, to find one of the horses—a mare—standing over her. Instinctively she knew that, although the horse was wild, it wanted to make friends.

“Hey,” she said. “How are you? Are you after these cranberries? Help yourself. I've had more than enough of them. Too many, probably.”

Kalinka sat up, stroked the horse's nose, and let the animal smell her, recognizing that horses can quickly tell almost all they need to know about a person from her scent. At the same time, this made her frown, for she recognized it had been a while since she'd had a wash.

“Maybe that's why you're not afraid,” she said, stroking the mare's nose. “Because I must smell as much of an

outcast as you are. Maybe it's just soap and civilization that makes animals distrust humans."

She frowned again as her stomach rumbled loudly.

"Sorry about that," she said. "The cranberries are tasty enough, but they don't make much of a meal when you're as hungry as I am."

The mare nodded with what looked to Kalinka like sympathy.

"You wouldn't happen to know where I could get something to eat, would you?"

The mare nodded again, turned around, and looking back at Kalinka as if inviting her to follow, walked on and led her about a kilometre or two away to a blue-painted cottage beside a small lake. The mare sniffed the air carefully as though weighing if it was safe, and then snorted, which Kalinka took as the all-clear to approach the place.

The front door was not locked, and quickly Kalinka went inside and glanced around the one neat room.

"This is nice," she said. She especially admired a handsomely framed oil painting that was leaning against the wooden wall. It showed the veranda of a large white house with lovely garden furniture and flower beds and a beautiful lady in a long white dress. It reminded Kalinka of summers gone and—she hoped—summers yet to come.

"I dislike doing this," she said, taking some bread and cheese for herself and an apple for the mare. "But I dislike starving even more."

When she came out again, they both returned to the cover of the woods and ate the food she had stolen from the blue cottage. Previously she had stolen only from the Germans, which—given that they stole from everyone else—didn't seem wrong at all; but it was very dangerous, and Kalinka had no doubt of what would have happened to her if ever she'd been caught.

Later on, the mare took Kalinka to some of the other wild horses, and she spent the night sleeping between the warm bodies of the mare and her stallion as if she'd been their own foal.

“That was the best night's sleep I've enjoyed since I was at home,” she told the mare and the stallion when she awoke. “Thank you. I'm grateful to you. My old coat and blanket are getting a bit threadbare, I'm afraid. The wind blows straight through the holes.”

The stallion turned and galloped away with what seemed like indifference, but the mare stayed. And because Kalinka had nowhere else to go, she decided to keep the horses company for another day or so.

Which soon became one week and then two.

The wild horses didn't mix with the other animals at Askaniya-Nova, and a longer acquaintance with them revealed to Kalinka that they were very different from the horses she had known before. The first time that one of the wild horses chased and fetched a stick like a dog was a revelation to her. They loved to play hide-and-seek, and they were fond of practical jokes: she lost count of

the occasions on which her hat was snatched from her head and made off with, or a handkerchief nibbled out of her pocket with a stealth that would not have disgraced a competent thief. In the few moments Kalinka tried to find some privacy in the bush or behind a tree, she often found herself disturbed by a horse playing peekaboo. It was at times like these Kalinka was convinced that the wild horses of Askaniya-Nova were almost capable of laughter. Which was more than she could have said of herself. She seldom smiled, and she never laughed. After what she'd been through, it didn't seem she had anything to laugh about.

Certainly, the horses were extremely vocal. The lead stallion made five basic types of sound—the neigh, nicker, whinny, snort and squeal—of which there was a wide range of subtle variations. After a while, Kalinka calculated that the horses were capable of making at least six different kinds of snort, and it was soon apparent to her that the horses could communicate with each other on what was a fairly sophisticated level. This enabled the small herd to work like a pack of dogs. Scout horses were sometimes dispatched by the lead stallion to look for better grass, and the same stallion quickly made the rest aware when his nose told him that wolves were close—although these knew better than to risk attacking the horses. This was hardly surprising, as Kalinka saw how the horses could be very aggressive with each other. She herself was bitten on a number of occasions—painfully,

on the behind, when she bent over. She understood this was meant to be a joke, although it was not a joke she found very funny—and sometimes she was even kicked. Kalinka soon recognized that the wild horses were resourceful to the point of being devious: she saw them unlatch gates, steal food, ambush rival zebras and even count. The horses were extremely fast. They also possessed keen senses of smell, hearing and sight—much keener than her father's horses' and probably as keen as those of any wolf.

They were a little peculiar to look at, however. The mare who had first befriended Kalinka was no more than one and a half metres high at the withers and had a thick, short neck and a low-slung belly. The head and the curved, almost semicircular neck were darker than the horse's body, and a dorsal stripe ran from the stiff, brushlike mane along the broad back to the tail. She possessed no forelock. Her muzzle was pale and the strong legs striped like a zebra's, but the most striking difference from the domestic horse that Kalinka noticed was the short-haired, almost furry tail, which was more like a fox's brush or a sable's pelt. Kalinka soon formed the opinion that this strangely furry tail helped explain the wild horse's demonstrable cunning.

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This book is dedicated to my parents, John and Barbara.

Dad – this is for your bizarrely unwavering support and unflinching faith.

Barbs – this is for that look on your face when I told you the good news.

I owe you absolutely everything and, y'know, I suppose affection towards the two of you...

1

STEPHANIE



Gordon Edgley's sudden death came as a shock to everyone – not least himself. One moment he was in his study, seven words into the twenty-fifth sentence of the final chapter of his new book *And The Darkness Rained Upon Them*, and the next he was dead. *A tragic loss*, his mind echoed numbly as he slipped away.

The funeral was attended by family and acquaintances but not many friends. Gordon hadn't been a well-liked figure in the publishing world, for although the books he wrote – tales of horror and magic and wonder – regularly reared their heads in

the bestseller lists, he had the disquieting habit of insulting people without realising it, then laughing at their shock. It was at Gordon's funeral, however, that Stephanie Edgley first caught sight of the gentleman in the tan overcoat.

He was standing under the shade of a large tree, away from the crowd, the coat buttoned up all the way despite the warmth of the afternoon. A scarf was wrapped around the lower half of his face and even from her position on the far side of the grave, Stephanie could make out the wild and frizzy hair that escaped from the wide brimmed hat he wore low over his gigantic sunglasses. She watched him, intrigued by his appearance. And then, like he knew he was being observed, he turned and walked back through the rows of headstones, and disappeared from sight.

After the service, Stephanie and her parents travelled back to her dead uncle's house, over a humpbacked bridge and along a narrow road that carved its way through thick woodland. The gates were heavy and grand and stood open, welcoming them into the estate. The grounds were vast and the old house itself was ridiculously big.

There was an extra door in the living room, a door disguised as a bookcase, and when she was younger Stephanie liked to think that no one else knew about this door, not even Gordon

himself. It was a secret passageway, like in the stories she'd read, and she'd make up adventures about haunted houses and smuggled treasure. This secret passageway would always be her escape route, and the imaginary villains in these adventures would be dumbfounded by her sudden and mysterious disappearance. But now this door, this secret passageway, stood open, and there was a steady stream of people through it, and she was saddened that this little piece of magic had been taken from her.

Tea was served and drinks were poured and little sandwiches were passed around on silver trays, and Stephanie watched the mourners casually appraise their surroundings. The major topic of hushed conversation was the will. Gordon wasn't a man who inspired, or even demonstrated, any great affection, so no one could predict who would inherit his substantial fortune. Stephanie could see the greed seep into the watery eyes of her father's other brother, a horrible little man called Fergus, as he nodded sadly and spoke sombrely and pocketed the silverware when he thought no one was looking.

Fergus's wife was a thoroughly dislikeable, sharp-featured woman named Beryl. She drifted through the crowd, deep in unconvincing grief, prying for gossip and digging for scandal. Her daughters did their best to ignore Stephanie. Carol and

Crystal were twins, fifteen years old, and as sour and vindictive as their parents. Whereas Stephanie was dark-haired, tall, slim and strong, they were bottle-blonde, stumpy and dressed in clothes that made them bulge in all the wrong places. Apart from their brown eyes, no one would guess that the twins were related to her. She liked that. It was the only thing about them she liked. She left them to their petty glares and snide whispers, and went for a walk.

The corridors of her uncle's house were long and lined with paintings. The floor beneath Stephanie's feet was wooden, polished to a gleam, and the house smelled of age. Not musty exactly but... experienced. These walls and these floors had seen a lot in their time, and Stephanie was nothing but a faint whisper to them. Here one instant, gone the next.

Gordon had been a good uncle. Arrogant and irresponsible, yes, but also childish and enormous fun, with a light in his eyes, a glint of mischief. When everyone else was taking him seriously, Stephanie was privy to the winks and the nods and the half-smiles that he would shoot her way when they weren't looking. Even as a child she felt she understood him better than most. She liked his intelligence and his wit, and the way he didn't care what people thought of him. He'd been a good uncle to have. He'd taught her a lot.

She knew that her mother and Gordon had briefly dated (“courted”, her mother had called it), but when Gordon had introduced her to his younger brother, it was love at first sight. Gordon liked to grumble that he had never got more than a peck on the cheek, but he had stepped aside graciously, and had quite happily gone on to have numerous torrid affairs with numerous beautiful women. He used to say that it had almost been a fair trade, but that he suspected he had lost out.

Stephanie climbed the staircase, pushed open the door to Gordon’s study and stepped inside. The walls were filled with the framed covers from his bestsellers and shared space with all manner of awards. One entire wall was made up of shelves, jammed with books. There were biographies and historical novels and science texts and psychology tomes, and there were battered little paperbacks stuck in between. A lower shelf had magazines, literary reviews and quarterlies.

Stephanie passed the shelves which housed the first editions of Gordon’s novels and approached the desk. She looked at the chair where he’d died, trying to imagine him there, how he must have slumped. And then, a voice so smooth it could have been made of velvet:

“At least he died doing what he loved.”

She turned, surprised, to see the man from the funeral in the

overcoat and hat standing in the doorway. The scarf was still wrapped, the sunglasses still on, the fuzzy hair still poking out. His hands were gloved.

“Yes,” Stephanie said, because she couldn’t think of anything else to say. “At least there’s that.”

“You’re one of his nieces then?” the man asked. “You’re not stealing anything, you’re not breaking anything, so I’d guess you’re Stephanie.” She nodded and took the opportunity to look at him more closely. She couldn’t see even the tiniest bit of his face beneath the scarf and sunglasses.

“Were you a friend of his?” she asked. He was tall, this man, tall and thin, though his coat made it difficult to judge.

“I was,” he answered with a move of his head. This slight movement made her realise that the rest of his body was unnaturally still. “I’ve known him for years, met him outside a bar in New York when I was over there, back when he had just published his first novel.”

Stephanie couldn’t see anything behind the sunglasses – they were black as pitch. “Are you a writer too?”

“Me? No, I wouldn’t know where to start. But I got to live out my writer fantasies through Gordon.”

“You had writer fantasies?”

“Doesn’t everyone?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.”

“Oh. Then that would make me seem kind of odd, wouldn’t it?”

“Well,” Stephanie answered. “It would *help*.”

“Gordon used to talk about you all the time, boast about his little niece. He was an individual of character, your uncle. It seems that you are too.”

“You say that like you know me.”

“Strong-willed, intelligent, sharp-tongued, doesn’t suffer fools gladly... remind you of anyone?”

“Yes. Gordon.”

“Interesting,” said the man. “Because those are the exact words he used to describe you.” His gloved fingers dipped into his waistcoat and brought out an ornate pocket watch on a delicate gold chain.

“Good luck in whatever you decide to do with your life.”

“Thank you,” Stephanie said, a little dumbly. “You too.”

She felt the man smile, though she could see no mouth, and he turned from the doorway and left her there. Stephanie found she couldn’t take her eyes off where he had been. Who was he? She hadn’t even got his name.

She crossed over to the door and stepped out, wondering how he had vanished from sight so quickly. She hurried down

the stairs and reached the large hall without seeing him. She opened the front door just as a big black car turned out on to the road. She watched him drive away, stayed there for a few moments, then reluctantly rejoined her extended family in the living room, just in time to see Fergus slip a silver ashtray into his breast pocket.

2

THE WILL



Life in the Edgley household was fairly uneventful. Stephanie's mother worked in a bank and her father owned a construction company, and she had no brothers or sisters, so the routine they had settled into was one of amiable convenience. But even so, there was always the voice in the back of her mind telling her that there should be more to her life than *this*, more to her life than the small coastal town of Haggard. She just couldn't figure out what that something was.

Her first year of secondary school had just come to a close

and she was looking forward to the summer break. Stephanie didn't like school. She found it difficult to get along with her classmates – not because they weren't nice people, but simply because she had nothing in common with them. And she didn't like teachers. She didn't like the way they demanded respect they hadn't earned. Stephanie had no problem doing what she was told, just so long as she was given a good reason why she should.

She had spent the first few days of the summer helping out her father, answering phones and sorting through the files in his office. Gladys, his secretary of seven years, had decided she'd had enough of the construction business and wanted to try her hand as a performance artist. Stephanie found it vaguely discomfiting whenever she passed her on the street, this forty-three-year-old woman doing a modern dance interpretation of Faust. Gladys had made herself a costume to go with the act, a costume, she said, that symbolised the internal struggle Faust was going through, and apparently she refused to be seen in public without it. Stephanie did her best to avoid catching Gladys's eye.

If Stephanie wasn't helping out in the office, she was either down at the beach, swimming, or locked in her room listening to music. She was in her room, trying to find the charger for her

mobile phone, when her mother knocked on the door and stepped in. She was still dressed in the sombre clothes she had worn to the funeral, though Stephanie had tied back her long dark hair and changed into her usual jeans and trainers within two minutes of returning to the house.

“We got a call from Gordon’s solicitor,” her mother said, sounding a little surprised. “They want us at the reading of the will.”

“Oh,” Stephanie responded. “What do you think he left you?”

“Well, we’ll find out tomorrow. You too, because you’re coming with us.”

“I am?” Stephanie said with a slight frown.

“Your name’s on the list, that’s all I know. We’re leaving at ten, OK?”

“I’m supposed to be helping Dad in the morning.”

“He called Gladys, asked her to fill in for a few hours, as a favour. She said yes, as long as she could wear the peanut suit.”

They left for the solicitor’s at a quarter past ten the next morning, fifteen minutes later than planned thanks to Stephanie’s father’s casual disregard for punctuality. He ambled through the house, looking like there was something he’d forgotten and he was just waiting for it to occur to him again. He

nodded and smiled whenever his wife told him to hurry up, said “Yes, absolutely,” and just before he was due to join them in the car, he meandered off again, looking around with a dazed expression.

“He does this on purpose,” Stephanie’s mother said as they sat in the car, seatbelts on and ready to go. They watched him appear at the front door, shrug into his jacket, tuck in his shirt, go to step out, and then pause.

“He looks like he’s about to sneeze,” Stephanie remarked.

“No,” her mother responded, “he’s just thinking.” She stuck her head out of the window. “Desmond, what’s wrong now?”

He looked up, puzzled. “I think I’m forgetting something.”

Stephanie leaned forward in the back seat, took a look at him and spoke to her mother, who nodded and stuck her head out again. “Where are your shoes, dear?”

He looked down at his socks – one brown, one navy – and his clouded expression cleared. He gave them the thumbs-up and disappeared from view.

“That man,” her mother said, shaking her head. “Did you know he once lost a shopping centre?”

“He what?”

“I never told you that? It was the first big contract he got. His company did a wonderful job and he was driving his clients

to see it, and he forgot where he put it. He drove around for almost an hour until he saw something he recognised. He may be a very talented engineer, but I swear, he's got the attention span of a goldfish. So unlike Gordon."

"They weren't very alike, were they?"

Her mother smiled. "It wasn't always that way. They used to do everything together. The three of them were inseparable."

"What, even Fergus?"

"Even Fergus. But when your grandmother died they all drifted apart. Gordon started mixing with a strange crowd after that."

"Strange in what way?"

"Ah, they probably just appeared strange to us," her mother said with a small laugh. "Your dad was getting started in the construction business and I was in college and we were what you might call normal. Gordon resisted being normal, and his friends, they kind of scared us. We never knew what they were into, but we knew it wasn't anything..."

"*Normal.*"

"Exactly. They scared your dad most of all though."

"Why?"

Stephanie's father walked out of the house, shoes on, and closed the front door after him.

“I think he was more like Gordon than he liked to let on,” her mother said quietly, and then her dad got into the car.

“OK,” he said proudly. “I’m ready.”

They looked at him as he nodded, chuffed with himself. He strapped on his seatbelt and turned the key. The engine purred to life. Stephanie waved to Jasper, an eight-year-old boy with unfortunate ears, as her dad backed out on to the road, put the car in gear and they were off, narrowly missing their wheelie bin as they went.

The drive to the solicitor’s office in the city took a little under an hour and they arrived twenty minutes late. They were led up a flight of creaky stairs to a small office, too warm to be comfortable, with a large window that offered a wonderful view of the brick wall across the street. Fergus and Beryl were there, and they showed their displeasure at having been kept waiting by looking at their watches and scowling. Stephanie’s parents took the remaining chairs and Stephanie stood behind them as the solicitor peered at them through cracked spectacles.

“Now can we get started?” Beryl snapped.

The solicitor, a short man named Mr Fedgewick, with the girth and appearance of a sweaty bowling ball, tried smiling. “We still have one more person to wait on,” he said and Fergus’s eyes bulged.

“Who?” he demanded. “There can’t be anyone else, we are the only siblings Gordon had. Who is it? It’s not some charity, is it? I’ve never trusted charities. They always want something from you.”

“It’s, it’s not a charity,” Mr Fedgewick said. “He did say, however, that he might be a little late.”

“Who said?” Stephanie’s father asked, and the solicitor looked down at the file open before him.

“A most unusual name, this,” he said. “It seems we are waiting on one Mr Skulduggery Pleasant.”

“Well who on earth is that?” asked Beryl, irritated. “He sounds like a, he sounds like a... Fergus, what does he sound like?”

“He sounds like a weirdo,” Fergus said, glaring at Fedgewick. “He’s not a weirdo, is he?”

“I really couldn’t say,” Fedgewick answered, his paltry excuse for a smile failing miserably under the glares he was getting from Fergus and Beryl. “But I’m sure he’ll be along soon.”

Fergus frowned, narrowing his beady eyes as much as was possible. “How are you sure?”

Fedgewick faltered, unable to offer a reason, and then the door opened and the man in the tan overcoat entered the room.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, closing the door behind him. “It was unavoidable I’m afraid.”

Everyone in the room stared at him, stared at the scarf and the gloves and the sunglasses and the wild fuzzy hair. It was a glorious day outside, certainly not the kind of weather to be wrapped up like this. Stephanie looked closer at the hair. From this distance, it didn't even seem real.

The solicitor cleared his throat. "Um, you are Skulduggery Pleasant?"

"At your service," the man said. Stephanie could listen to that voice all day. Her mother, uncertain as she was, had smiled her greetings, but her father was looking at him with an expression of wariness she had never seen on his face before. After a moment the expression left him and he nodded politely and looked back to Mr Fedgewick. Fergus and Beryl were still staring.

"Do you have something wrong with your face?" Beryl asked.

Fedgewick cleared his throat again. "OK then, let's get down to business, now that we're all here. Excellent. Good. This, of course, being the last will and testament of Gordon Edgley, revised last almost one year ago. Gordon has been a client of mine for the past twenty years, and in that time, I got to know him well, so let me pass on to you, his family and, and friend, my deepest, deepest—"

“Yes yes yes,” Fergus interrupted, waving his hand in the air. “Can we just skip this part? We’re already running behind schedule. Let’s go to the part where we get stuff. Who gets the house? And who gets the villa?”

“Who gets the fortune?” Beryl asked, leaning forward in her seat.

“The royalties,” Fergus said. “Who gets the royalties from the books?”

Stephanie glanced at Skulduggery Pleasant from the corner of her eye. He was standing back against the wall, hands in his pockets, looking at the solicitor. Well, he *seemed* to be looking at the solicitor; with those sunglasses he could have been looking anywhere. She returned her gaze to Fedgewick as he picked up a page from his desk and read from it.

““To my brother Fergus and his beautiful wife Beryl,”” he read, and Stephanie did her best to hide a grin, ““I leave my car, and my boat, and a gift.””

Fergus and Beryl blinked. “His car?” Fergus said. “His boat? Why would he leave me his boat?”

“You hate the water,” Beryl said, anger rising in her voice. “You get seasick.”

“I *do* get seasick,” Fergus snapped, “and he knew that!”

“And we already have a car,” Beryl said.

“And we already have a car!” Fergus repeated.

Beryl was sitting so far up on her chair that she was almost on the desk. “This gift,” she said, her voice low and threatening, “is it the fortune?”

Mr Fedgewick coughed nervously, and took a small box from his desk drawer and slid it towards them. They looked at this box. They looked some more. They both reached for it at the same time, and Stephanie watched them slap at each other’s hands until Beryl snatched it off the desk and tore the lid open.

“What is it?” Fergus asked in a small voice. “Is it a key to a safety deposit box? Is it, is it an account number? Is it, what is it? Wife, what is it?”

All colour had drained from Beryl’s face and her hands were shaking. She blinked hard to keep the tears away, then she turned the box for everyone to see, and everyone saw the brooch, about the size of a drinks coaster, nestled in the plush cushion. Fergus stared at it.

“It doesn’t even have any jewels on it,” Beryl said, her voice strangled. Fergus opened his mouth wide like a startled fish and turned to Fedgewick.

“What else do we get?” he asked, panicking.

Mr Fedgewick tried another smile. “Your, uh, your brother’s love?”

Stephanie heard a high-pitched whine, and it took her a moment to realise it was coming from Beryl. Fedgewick returned his attention to the will, trying to ignore the horrified looks he was getting from Fergus and his wife.

“To my good friend and guide Skulduggery Pleasant I leave the following advice. Your path is your own, and I have no wish to sway you, but sometimes the greatest enemy we can face is ourselves, and the greatest battle is against the darkness within. There is a storm coming, and sometimes the key to safe harbour is hidden from us, and sometimes it is right before our eyes.”

Stephanie joined in with everyone else as they stared at Mr Pleasant. She had known there was something different about him, she had known it the first moment she saw him – there was something exotic, something mysterious, something *dangerous*. For his part, his head dipped lower and that was the only reaction he gave. He offered no explanations as to what Gordon’s message had meant.

Fergus patted his wife’s knee. “See, Beryl? A car, a boat, a brooch, it’s not that bad. He could have given us some stupid advice.”

“Oh, shut up, would you?” Beryl snarled and Fergus recoiled in his chair.

Mr Fedgewick read on. “To my other brother, Desmond, the lucky one of the family, I leave to you your wife. I think you might like her.” Stephanie saw her parents clasp each other’s hands and smile sadly. “So now that you’ve successfully stolen my girlfriend, maybe you’d like to take her to my villa in France, which I am also leaving to you.”

“They get the villa?” Beryl cried, jumping to her feet.

“Beryl,” Fergus said, “please...”

“Do you know how much that villa is worth?” Beryl continued, looking like she might lunge at Stephanie’s parents. “We get a brooch – they get a villa? There are only three of them! We’ve got Carol and Crystal! We have more! We could do with the extra space! Why do *they* deserve the villa?” She thrust the box towards them. “Swap!”

“Mrs Edgley, please retake your seat or we shall be unable to continue,” Mr Fedgewick said, and eventually, after much bug-eyed glaring, Beryl sat down.

“Thank you,” Fedgewick said, looking like he had had quite enough excitement for one day. He licked his lips, adjusted his glasses, and peered again at the will. “If there is one regret that I have had in my life, it is that I have never fathered any children. There are times when I look at what Fergus and Beryl have produced and I consider myself fortunate, but there are also

times when it breaks my heart. And so, finally, to my niece Stephanie.”

Stephanie’s eyes widened. What? *She* was getting something? Leaving the villa to her parents wasn’t enough for Gordon?

Fedgewick continued reading. ““The world is bigger than you know and scarier than you might imagine. The only currency worth anything is being true to yourself, and the only goal worth seeking is finding out who you truly are.””

She could feel Fergus and Beryl glaring at her and she did her best to ignore them.

““Make your parents proud, and make them glad to have you living under their roof, because I leave to you my property and possessions, my assets and my royalties, to be inherited on the day you turn eighteen. I’d just like to take this opportunity to say that, in my own way, I love you all, even those I don’t particularly like. That’s you, Beryl.””

Fedgewick took off his spectacles and looked up.

Stephanie became aware that everyone was staring at her and she hadn’t a clue what she was supposed to say. Fergus was again doing his startled fish impression and Beryl was pointing one long bony finger at her, trying to speak but failing. Her parents were looking at her in stunned surprise. Only Skulduggery Pleasant moved, walking

behind her and gently touching her arm.

“Congratulations,” he said and moved on towards the door. As soon as it clicked shut behind him, Beryl found her voice.

“HER?” she screamed. “HER?”

3

LITTLE GIRL, ALL ALONE



That afternoon Stephanie and her mother took the fifteen-minute drive from Haggard to Gordon's estate. Her mum opened the front door and stepped back.

"Owner of the house goes first," she said with a little smile and a bow, and Stephanie stepped inside. She wasn't thinking of this house as her property – the idea was too big, too silly. Even if her parents were, technically, the custodians until she turned eighteen, how could she own a house? How many other twelve-year-old kids owned houses?

No, it was too silly an idea. Too far-fetched. Too crazy. Exactly the kind of thing that Gordon would have thought made perfect sense.

The house was big and quiet and empty as they walked through it. Everything seemed new to her now, and Stephanie found herself reacting differently to the furniture and carpets and paintings. Did she like it? Did she agree with this colour or that fabric? One thing that had to be said for Gordon, he had a good eye. Stephanie's mother said there was very little she would change if she had to. Some of the paintings were a little too unnerving for her taste maybe, but on the whole the furnishings were elegant and understated, exuding an air of distinction that befitted a house of this stature.

They hadn't decided what they were going to do with the house. Any decision was left up to Stephanie, but her parents still had the villa to consider. Owning three houses between them seemed a bit much. Her father had suggested selling the villa but her mother hated the thought of letting go of a place so idyllic.

They had also talked about Stephanie's education, and she knew *that* conversation was far from over. The moment they had left Mr Fedgewick's office they warned her not to let all this go to her head. Recent events, they had said, should not mean she could stop studying, stop planning for college. She needed to be

independent, they said, she needed to make it on her own.

Stephanie had let them talk, and nodded occasionally and muttered an agreement where an agreement was appropriate. She didn't bother to explain that she needed college, she needed to find her own way in the world because she knew that if she didn't, she'd never escape Haggard. She wasn't about to throw her future away simply because she had come into some money.

She and her mother spent so long looking around the ground floor that by the time they got to the bottom of the stairs, it was already five o'clock. With their exploring done for the day, they locked up and walked to the car. The first few drops of rain splattered against the windscreen as they got in. Stephanie clicked her seatbelt closed and her mother turned the key in the ignition.

The car spluttered a bit, groaned a little and then shut up altogether. Stephanie's mother looked at her.

"Uh oh." They both got out and opened the bonnet.

"Well," her mother said, looking at the engine, "at least that's still there."

"Do you know *anything* about engines?" Stephanie asked.

"That's why I have a husband, so I don't have to. Engines and shelves, that's why man was invented." Stephanie made a mental note to learn about engines before she turned eighteen.

She wasn't too fussed about the shelves.

Her mum dug her mobile phone out of her bag and called Stephanie's dad, but he was busy on site and there was no way he could get to them before nightfall. They went back inside the house and her mother called a mechanic, and they spent three quarters of an hour waiting for him to arrive.

The sky was grey and angry and the rain was falling hard by the time the truck appeared around the corner. It splashed through puddles on its way up the long drive, and Stephanie's mum pulled her jacket over her head and ran out to meet it. Stephanie could see a great big dog in the cab of the truck, looking on as the mechanic got out to examine their car. After a few minutes, her mother ran back inside, thoroughly drenched.

"He can't fix it here," she said, wringing out her jacket on the porch, "so he's going to tow it to the garage. It shouldn't take too long to fix."

"Will there be room for both of us in the truck?"

"You can sit on my knee."

"Mum!"

"Or I can sit on your knee, whatever works."

"Can I stay here?"

Her mother looked at her. "On your own?"

"Please? You just said it won't take long, and I'd like to have

another look around, just on my own.”

“I don’t know, Steph...”

“Please? I’ve stayed on my own before. I won’t break anything, I swear.”

Her mother laughed. “OK fine. I shouldn’t be any more than an hour, all right? An hour and a half at the most.” Her mother gave her a quick kiss on the cheek. “Call me if you need anything.”

She ran back outside and jumped in the cab next to the dog, who proceeded to slobber all over her face. Stephanie watched their car being towed off into the distance and then it vanished from sight.

She did a little more exploring, now that she was on her own. She climbed the stairs and went straight to Gordon’s study.

His publisher, Seamus T. Steepe of Arc Light Books, had phoned them earlier that day, passing on his condolences and enquiring about the state of Gordon’s last book. Her mother had told him that they’d find out if Gordon had completed it, and if he had, they’d send it on. Mr Steepe was very keen to get the book on the shelves, certain that it would crash on to the bestseller list and stay there for a long time. “Dead writers sell,” he had said, like he approved of Gordon’s clever marketing ploy.

Stephanie opened the desk drawer and found the

manuscript in a neat stack. She pulled it out carefully and laid it on the desktop, careful not to smudge the paper. The first page held the title, nothing more, in bold lettering:

And The Darkness Rained Upon Them.

The manuscript was thick and heavy, like all of Gordon's books. She'd read most of them, and the odd splash of pretension aside, had quite enjoyed his work. His stories tended to be about people who could do astonishing and wonderful things, and the strange and terrible events that invariably led up to their bizarre and horrible deaths. She noticed the way he would set up a strong and noble hero, and over the course of the book systematically subject this hero to brutal punishment in a bid to strip away all his arrogance and certainty so that by the end he was humbled and had learned a great lesson. And then Gordon killed him off, usually in the most undignified way possible. Stephanie could almost hear Gordon laughing with mischievous glee as she'd read.

She lifted the title page and carefully laid it face down on the desk beside the manuscript. She started reading. She didn't mean to spend long at it, but soon she was devouring every word, oblivious to the creaking old house and the rain outside.

Her mobile phone rang, making her jump. She had been reading for two hours. She pressed the answer button and held it to her ear.

“Hi, sweetie,” came her mother’s voice, “everything OK?”

“Yes,” Stephanie answered. “Just reading.”

“You’re not reading one of Gordon’s books, are you? Steph, he writes about horrible monsters and scary stuff and bad people doing worse things. It’ll give you nightmares.”

“No, Mum, I’m... I’m reading the dictionary.”

Even the brief silence from the other end of the phone was sceptical. “The dictionary?” her mother said. “Really?”

“Yeah,” Stephanie said. “Did you know that *popple* is a word?”

“You are stranger than your father, you know that?”

“I suspected as much... So is the car fixed yet?”

“No, and that’s why I’m calling. They can’t get it going and the road up to you is flooded. I’m going to get a taxi up as far as it’ll go and then I’ll see if I can find some way around on foot. It’s going to be another two hours at least.”

Stephanie sensed an opportunity. Ever since she was a child she had much preferred her own company to the company of others, and it occurred to her that she had never spent a whole night without her parents nearby. A small

taste of freedom and it almost tingled on her tongue.

“Mum, it’s fine, you don’t have to. I’m OK here.”

“There’s no way I’m leaving you in a strange house by yourself.”

“It’s not a strange house; it’s Gordon’s and it’s fine. There’s no point in you trying to get here tonight – it’s lashing rain.”

“Sweetie, it won’t take me long.”

“It’ll take you ages. Where’s it flooded?”

Her mother paused. “At the bridge.”

“The bridge? And you want to walk from the bridge to here?”

“If I speed-walk—”

“Mum, don’t be silly. Get Dad to pick you up.”

“Sweetheart, are you sure?”

“I like it here, really. OK?”

“Well, OK,” her mother said reluctantly. “I’ll be over first thing in the morning to pick you up, all right? And I saw some food in the cupboards, so if you’re hungry you can make yourself something.”

“OK. I’ll see you tomorrow then.”

“Call us if you need anything or if you just want some company.”

“I will. Night, Mum.”

“I love you.”

“I know.”

Stephanie hung up and grinned. She slipped the phone back into her jacket and put her feet up on the desk, relaxing back into the chair, and went back to reading.

When she looked up again she was surprised to find that it was almost midnight and the rain had stopped. If she were home right now, she'd be in bed. She blinked, her eyes sore, stood up from the desk and went downstairs to the kitchen. For all his wealth and success and extravagant tastes, she was thankful that when it came to food, Gordon was a pretty standard guy. The bread was stale and the fruit was a bit too ripe, but there were biscuits and there was cereal, and the milk in the fridge was still good for one more day. Stephanie made herself a snack and wandered to the living room, where she flicked on the TV. She sat on the couch and was just getting comfy when the house phone rang.

She looked at it, resting there on the table at her elbow. Who would be calling? Anyone who knew Gordon had died wouldn't be calling because they'd know he had died, and she didn't really want to be the one to tell anyone who didn't know. It could be her parents, but then why didn't they just call her mobile?

Figuring that as the new owner of the house, it was her

responsibility to answer her own phone, Stephanie picked it up and held it to her ear. “Hello?”

Silence.

“Hello?” Stephanie repeated.

“Who is this?” came a man’s voice.

“I’m sorry,” Stephanie said, “who do you want to speak to?”

“Who is this?” responded the voice, more irritably this time.

“If you’re looking for Gordon Edgley,” Stephanie said, “I’m afraid that he’s—”

“I know Edgley’s dead,” snapped the man. “Who are you? Your name?”

Stephanie hesitated. “Why do you want to know?” she asked.

“What are you doing in that house? Why are you in his house?”

“If you want to call back tomorrow—”

“I *don’t* want to, all right? Listen to me, girlie, if you mess up my master’s plans, he will be *very* displeased and he is *not* a man you want to displease, you got that? Now tell me who you are!”

Stephanie realised her hands were shaking. She forced herself to calm down and quickly found anger replacing her nervousness. “My name is none of your business,” she said. “If

you want to talk to someone, call back tomorrow at a reasonable hour.”

“You don’t talk to me like that,” the man hissed.

“Goodnight,” Stephanie said firmly.

“You do *not* talk to me like—”

But Stephanie was already putting the phone down. Suddenly the idea of spending the whole night here wasn’t as appealing as it had first sounded. She considered calling her parents, then scolded herself for being so childish. *No need to worry them*, she thought to herself. *No need to worry them about something so—*

Someone pounded on the front door.

“Open up!” came the man’s voice between the pounding. Stephanie got to her feet, staring through to the hall beyond the living room. She could see a dark shape behind the frosted glass around the front door. “Open the damn door!”

Stephanie backed up to the fireplace, her heart pounding in her chest. He knew she was in here, there was no use pretending that she wasn’t, but maybe if she stayed really quiet he’d give up and go away. She heard him cursing, and the pounding grew so heavy that the front door rattled under the blows.

“Leave me alone!” Stephanie shouted.

“Open the door!”

“No!” she shouted back. She liked shouting – it disguised her fear. “I’m calling the police! I’m calling the police right now!”

The pounding stopped immediately and Stephanie saw the shape move away from the door. Was that it? Had she scared him away? She thought of the back door – was it locked? Of course it was locked... It had to be locked. But she wasn’t sure, she wasn’t certain. She grabbed a poker from the fireplace and was reaching for the phone when she heard a knock on the window beside her.

She cried out and jumped back. The curtains were open, and outside the window was pitch-black. She couldn’t see a thing.

“Are you alone in there?” came the voice. It was teasing now, playing with her.

“Go away,” she said loudly, holding up the poker so he could see it. She heard the man laugh.

“What are you going to do with that?” he asked.

“I’ll break your head open with it!” Stephanie screamed at him, fear and fury bubbling inside her. She heard him laugh again.

“I just want to come in,” he said. “Open the door for me, girlie. Let me come in.”

“The police are on their way,” she said.

“You’re a liar.”

Still she could see nothing beyond the glass and he could see everything. She moved to the phone, snatching it from its cradle.

“Don’t do that,” came the voice.

“I’m calling the police.”

“The road’s closed, girlie. You call them, I’ll break down that door and kill you hours before they get here.”

Fear became terror and Stephanie froze. She was going to cry. She could feel it, the tears welling up inside her. She hadn’t cried in years. “What do you want?” she said to the darkness.

“Why do you want to come in?”

“It’s got nothing to do with *me*, girlie. I’ve just been sent to pick something up. Let me in. I’ll look around, get what I came here for and leave. I won’t harm a pretty little hair on your pretty little head, I *promise*. Now you just open that door right this second.”

Stephanie gripped the poker in both hands and shook her head. She was crying now, tears rolling down her cheeks. “No,” she said.

She screamed as a fist smashed through the window, showering the carpet with glass. She stumbled back as the man started climbing in, glaring at her with blazing eyes, unmindful of the glass that cut into him. The moment one foot touched the

floor inside the house Stephanie was bolting out of the room, over to the front door, fumbling at the lock.

Strong hands grabbed her from behind. She screamed again as she was lifted off her feet and carried back. She kicked out, slamming a heel into his shin. The man grunted and let go and Stephanie twisted, trying to swing the poker into his face but he caught it and pulled it from her grasp. One hand went to her throat and Stephanie gagged, unable to breathe as the man forced her back into the living room.

He pushed her into an armchair and leaned over her and no matter how hard she tried she could not break his grip.

“Now then,” the man said, his mouth contorting into a sneer, “why don’t you just give me the key, little girlie?”

And that’s when the front door was flung off its hinges and Skulduggery Pleasant burst into the house.

The man cursed and released Stephanie and swung the poker, but Skulduggery moved straight to him and hit him so hard Stephanie thought the man’s head might come off. He hit the ground and tumbled backwards, but rolled to his feet as Skulduggery moved in again.

The man launched himself forward. They both collided and went backwards over the couch and Skulduggery lost his hat. Stephanie saw a flash of white above the scarf.

They got to their feet, grappling, and the man swung a punch that knocked Skulduggery's sunglasses to the other side of the room. Skulduggery responded by moving in low, grabbing the man around the waist and twisting his hip into him. The man was flipped to the floor, hard.

He cursed a little more, then remembered Stephanie and made for her. Stephanie leaped out of the chair, but before he could reach her, Skulduggery was there, kicking the man's legs out from under him. The man hit a small coffee table with his chin and howled in pain.

"*You think you can stop me?*" he screamed as he tried to stand. His knees seemed shaky. "*Do you know who I am?*"

"Haven't the foggiest," Skulduggery said.

The man spat blood and grinned defiantly. "Well, I know about *you*," he said. "My master told me all about *you*, detective, and you're going to have to do a lot more than that to stop me."

Skulduggery shrugged and Stephanie watched in amazement as a ball of fire flared up in his hand and he hurled it and the man was suddenly covered in flame. But instead of screaming, the man tilted his head back and roared with laughter. The fire may have engulfed him, but it wasn't burning him.

"More!" he laughed. "Give me more!"

“If you insist.”

And then Skulduggery took an old-fashioned revolver from his jacket and fired, the gun bucking slightly with the recoil. The bullet hit the man in the shoulder and he screamed, then tried to run and tripped. He scrambled for the doorway, ducking and dodging lest he get shot again, the flames obstructing his vision so much that he hit a wall on his way out.

And then he was gone.

Stephanie stared at the door, trying to make sense of the impossible.

“Well,” Skulduggery said, “that’s something you don’t see every day.”

She turned. When his hat came off, his hair had come off too. In the confusion all she had seen was a chalk-white scalp, so she turned expecting to see a bald albino maybe. But no. With his sunglasses gone and his scarf hanging down, there was no denying the fact that he had no flesh, he had no skin, he had no eyes and he had no face.

All he had was a skull for a head.

"joyfully surreal" *Guardian*

They didn't
teach **THIS**
in worm
SCHOOL!



One worm's tale
of survival

Simone Lia

They didn't
teach **THIS**
in worm
School!



Simone Lia



WALKER
BOOKS

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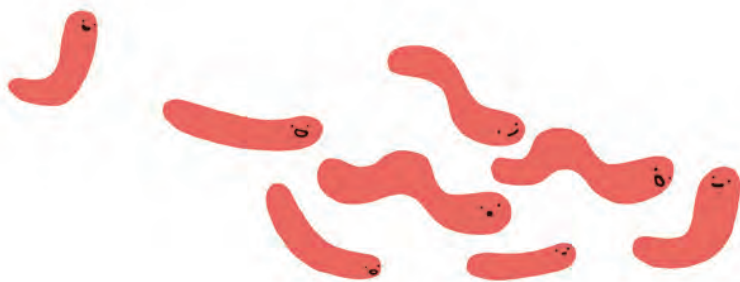
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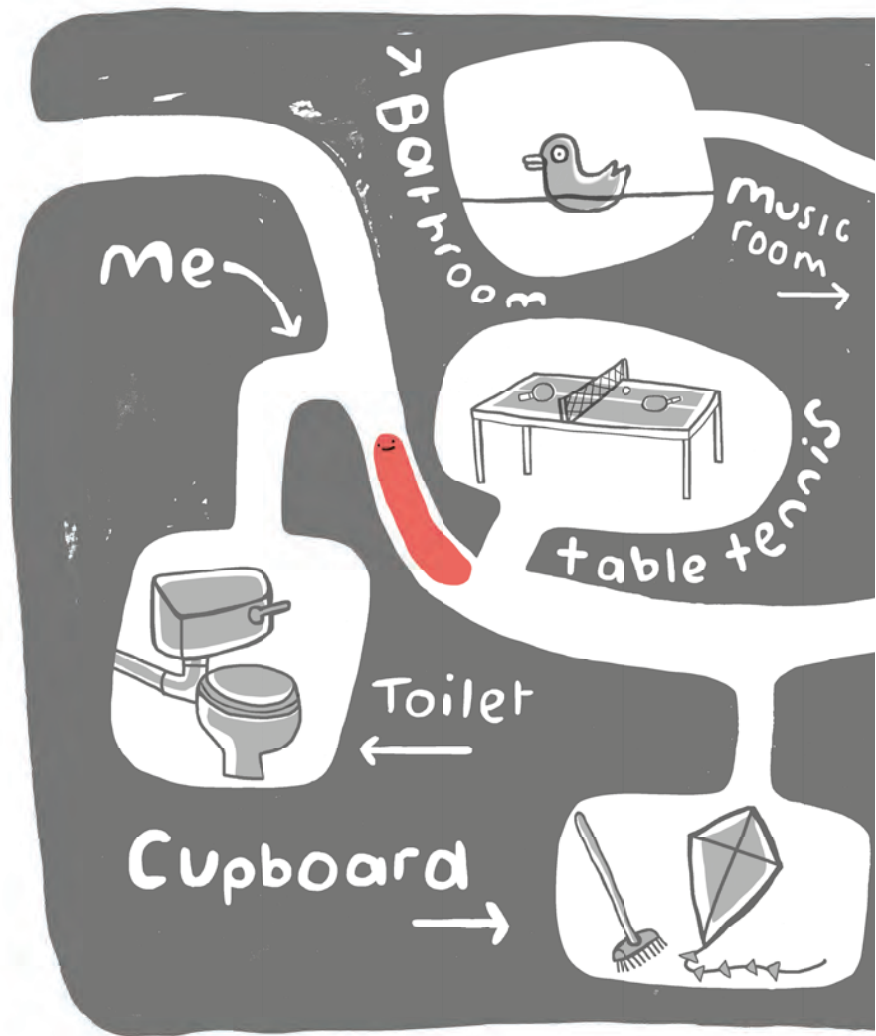


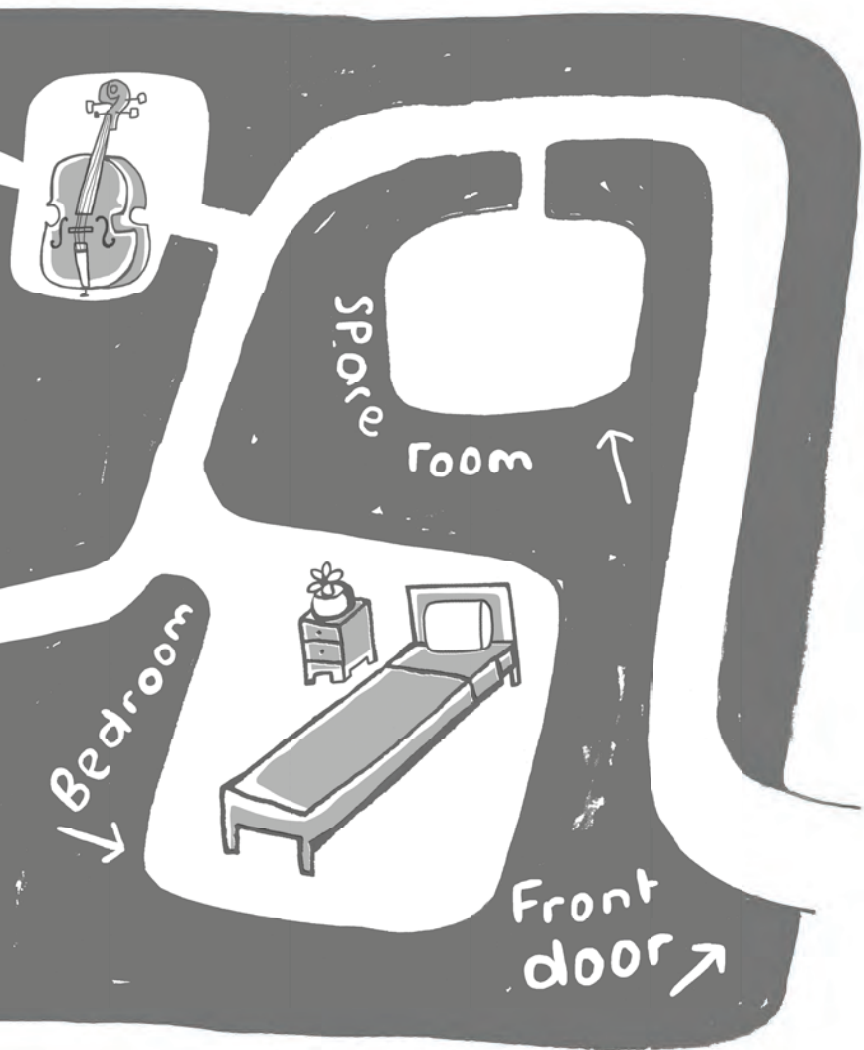
Chapter One



My name is Marcus.

I am a worm and this is where I live.

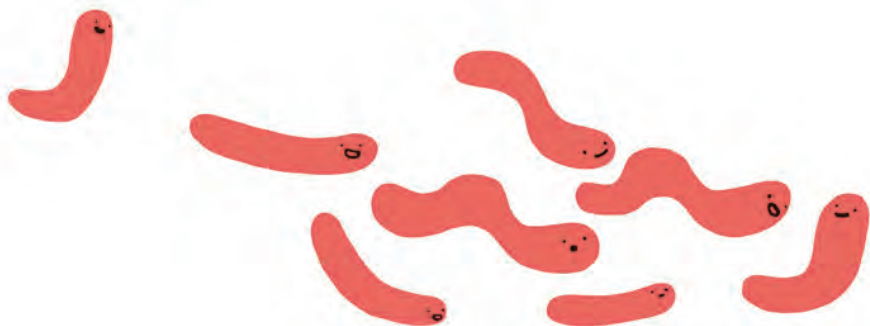





My favourite colour is brown.



That's because mud is brown and I really,
really, really like mud.

My favourite things are other worms.






And my hobby is digging holes in the ground.
There is nothing I enjoy more than making a
complicated underground tunnel system.



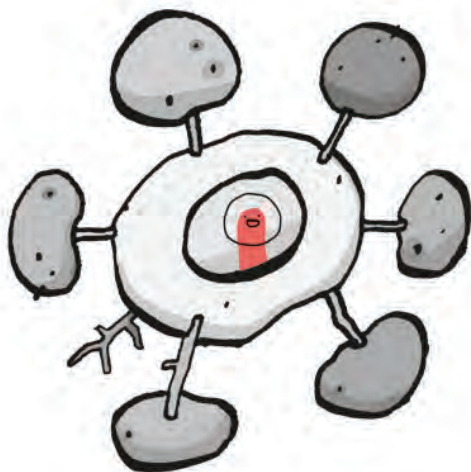
But when I met Laurence,
everything changed.

Let me tell you about
how I met him...



I was digging a hole, like I usually do (like all worms do), but I must have fallen asleep because the next thing that happened was that I was flying a spaceship in outer space.

The spaceship was made out of potatoes.



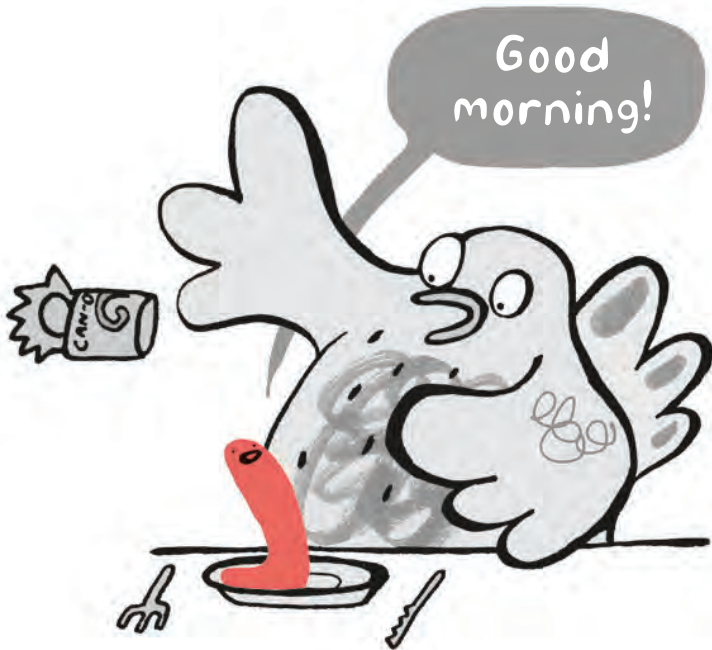
Then, I dreamt I fell out of a can into a cereal bowl. Staring at me was a scruffy, fat bird who looked a lot like a chicken. It was a really good dream until it got to the bird part. The bird had intense and menacing eyes.

The worst thing was that the last part of the dream wasn't a dream at all. I really had been in a can and there really was a big, fat bird staring at me!



What would you do if you were a worm and there was a bird two centimetres away from your face looking at you with his beak open so wide that you could see his tonsils?

Maybe you would do what I did. I smiled a big smile and said in my most cheerful voice,



The bird looked confused. He mumbled “Good morning” back and then opened his beak again with his head tilted at a slightly different angle.

Before he could eat me up, I shouted very



loudly and quickly, “MY NAME IS
MARCUS. MY FAVOURITE COLOUR
IS BROWN, AND MY HOBBY IS
DIGGING HOLES IN THE GROUND.
WHAT IS YOUR NAME AND DO YOU
HAVE A HOBBY, PLEASE, SIR?”

I added a “sir” at the end to be polite.

The bird seemed taken aback. He closed his beak.

“My name is Laurence,” he said.

He was about to open his beak again. “AND WHAT about hobbies?” I asked. “DO you have a nice HOBBY, Laurence?”

Laurence sat down, looked at his fat belly and then looked at me again. “No one’s ever asked me that question before,” he said.



“Really? WELL take your TIME and make yourself COMFORTABLE,” I said, encouraging him to lie down on the sofa. I positioned myself a little bit closer to the window. “I’d love to hear all about your hobby. It is very, VERY interesting.”



I didn't mean to keep shouting, but I was scared and I didn't quite know what I was doing. Laurence didn't seem to notice. He obediently put his feet up.

"My hobby is travelling," he said.

"How fascinating!" I said, trying not to shout as much. "And where have you been to?"

Laurence thought for a while. "That's the problem," he explained. "I haven't been anywhere. I'm terrible at map-reading. I'd love to visit Kenya in Africa, but it's such a long way to fly, I would definitely need a map to get there."

I paused to try to give the impression that I was thinking deeply about what he

was saying.

"Why ... Kenya?"

While he was thinking of his answer, I looked out of the window.



We were in a birdhouse in a tall tree. The latch on the window was too high for me to reach. Even if I could have reached and pushed the window open, I wasn't too keen on wriggling down the tree from that height. They didn't teach us how to do that at worm school.



Laurence was looking at his belly again. Why did he keep looking at his stomach? Was it because it was large, or was it because he was hungry? I decided to keep talking to distract his mind from food thoughts. “Tell me what it is about Kenya that you love so much.”



Laurence sat up. “I’ll show you,” he said, reaching for a glossy travel book

from a pile of books on the floor. He opened it. “This is the Maasai Mara National Reserve. Look at these



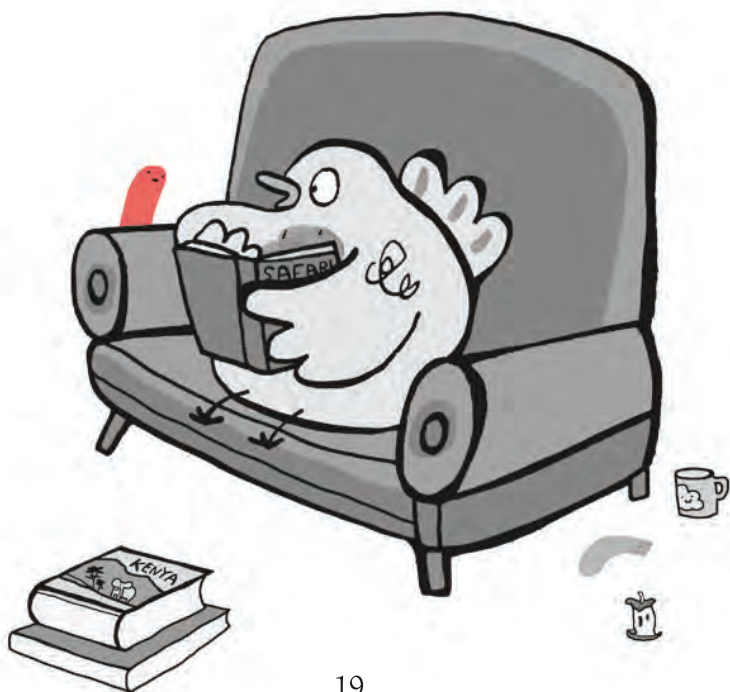
beautiful wide open plains. There are so many animals that live in the nature reserves in Kenya. You just don’t see animals like that around here.” Laurence flicked through pages with photographs of lions, elephants, zebras and wildebeest. He stopped at a page that had pictures of pink birds with skinny legs.



“*This*,” he said, slamming his wing on the page dramatically, “is why I need to go.” Laurence looked at me. “Do you see what I mean?”

“Hmm ... yes,” I said, nodding in agreement, pretending to understand what he meant.

“Thank you. I’m glad that you see it too – that I am actually a flamingo.”



“A flamingo,” I repeated firmly, trying my best not to laugh out loud. Laurence doesn’t look anything like a flamingo.



LAURENCE



He looks like a chicken.

“I don’t belong here with ordinary birds. I belong *here*,” he paused to read the caption at the bottom of the photograph, “in the Lake Nakuru National

Park, with other flamingos. That is my real home, and it is the only place where I can be truly happy.” He slammed the book shut and clasped his wings together.

The thing that stopped me from laughing at Laurence was the fact that I was in a very bad situation. At any moment he would remember how hungry he was and slurp me up like a piece of spaghetti. I needed to use every part of my worm brain to come up with a cunning plan to escape from the birdhouse.

MY WORM BRAIN



Instead, I accidentally blurted out my worst fear:

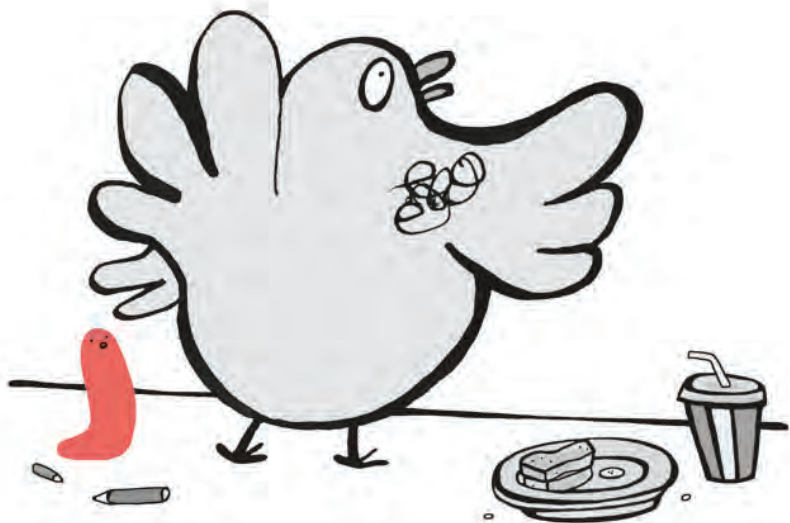


“Probably not,” said Laurence, sighing. “It feels funny eating you for breakfast now that we’ve had a conversation.”

I almost felt relieved at this, but I was not reassured by Laurence’s use of the word probably. Keeping the conversation going seemed like a good idea.

“What’s to stop you flying to that park in Lake Nakuru?” I asked.

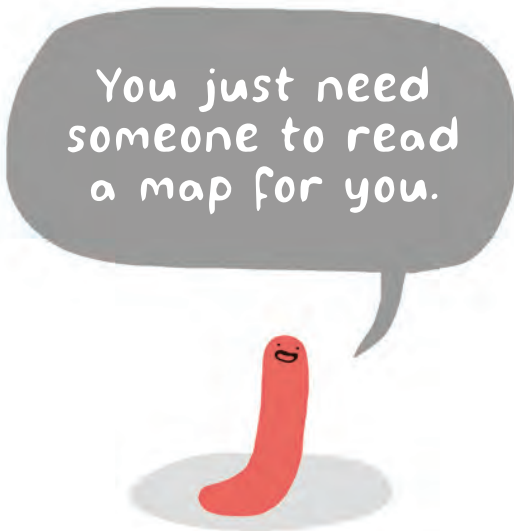
“I told you, I can’t read a map. I don’t know the way,” said Laurence, standing up and facing the wall, unable to meet my eyes.



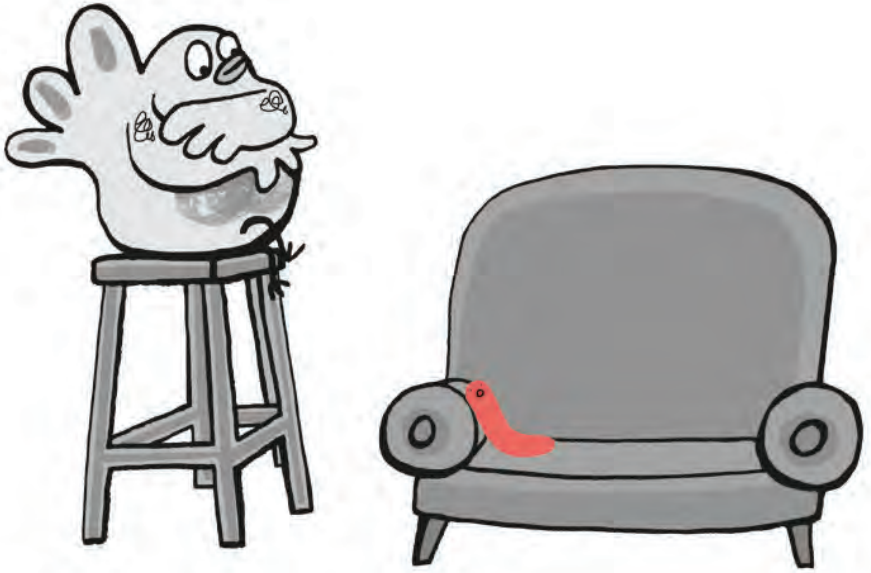
I wriggled on the floor to where he stood and said softly, “Laurence, you must follow your dreams. If Lake Nakuru is where you belong, then surely there will be a way for you to fly there... There will be a way.”

It suddenly felt like we were in a film. It was an excellent film.

If Laurence did fly to Kenya, then he wouldn't be able to eat me for breakfast or lunch or dinner. "There must be a way," I continued.



Laurence sighed, then looked at me with those intense eyes. "Tell me about your hobby again," he said, beckoning me to sit on the sofa.



“Umm...” I was a bit worried about the look in his eyes but thought it might be best to keep talking. “I like digging holes in the mud. It’s very relaxing, and I make escape tunnels to interesting places, like near a tree so that I can eat apples that have fallen on the ground, or near the compost heap, which is fun, it’s a bit like going to the beach and—”



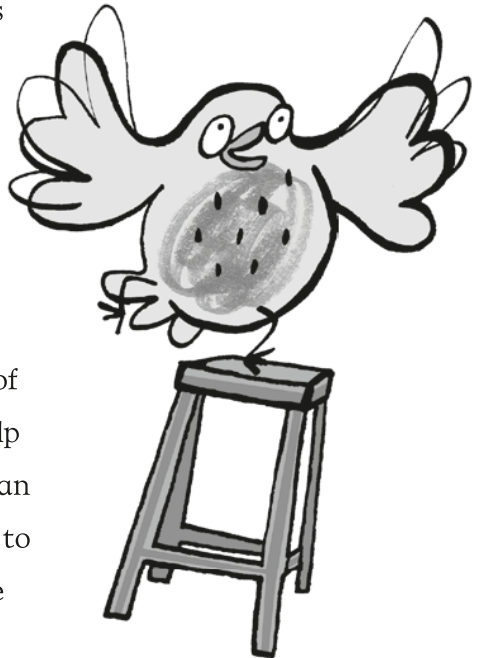
“Don’t you get lost when you’re underground?” asked Laurence, interrupting me. “It must be quite dark down there.”

“No. I always know where I am. I just kind of feel it.”

“That’s THAT, then!” said Laurence, triumphantly laughing and clapping his wings together.

“What’s WHAT?” I asked, feeling quite worried again.

“You, Marcus, with your funny ideas and marvellous sense of direction – you can help me fly to Kenya. You can be the navigator! And to think that I almost ate you for breakfast—”





I was shouting again.

We were going to fly to Lake Nakuru National Park.

I had no choice.

It was either that or be eaten for breakfast.

A HEART OF ICE. A WILL OF STEEL. MEET THE ASSASSIN.



THRONE
OF
GLASS

SARAH J MAAS

BLOOMSBURY

THRONE
of
GLASS

THRONE *of* GLASS

SARAH J. MAAS



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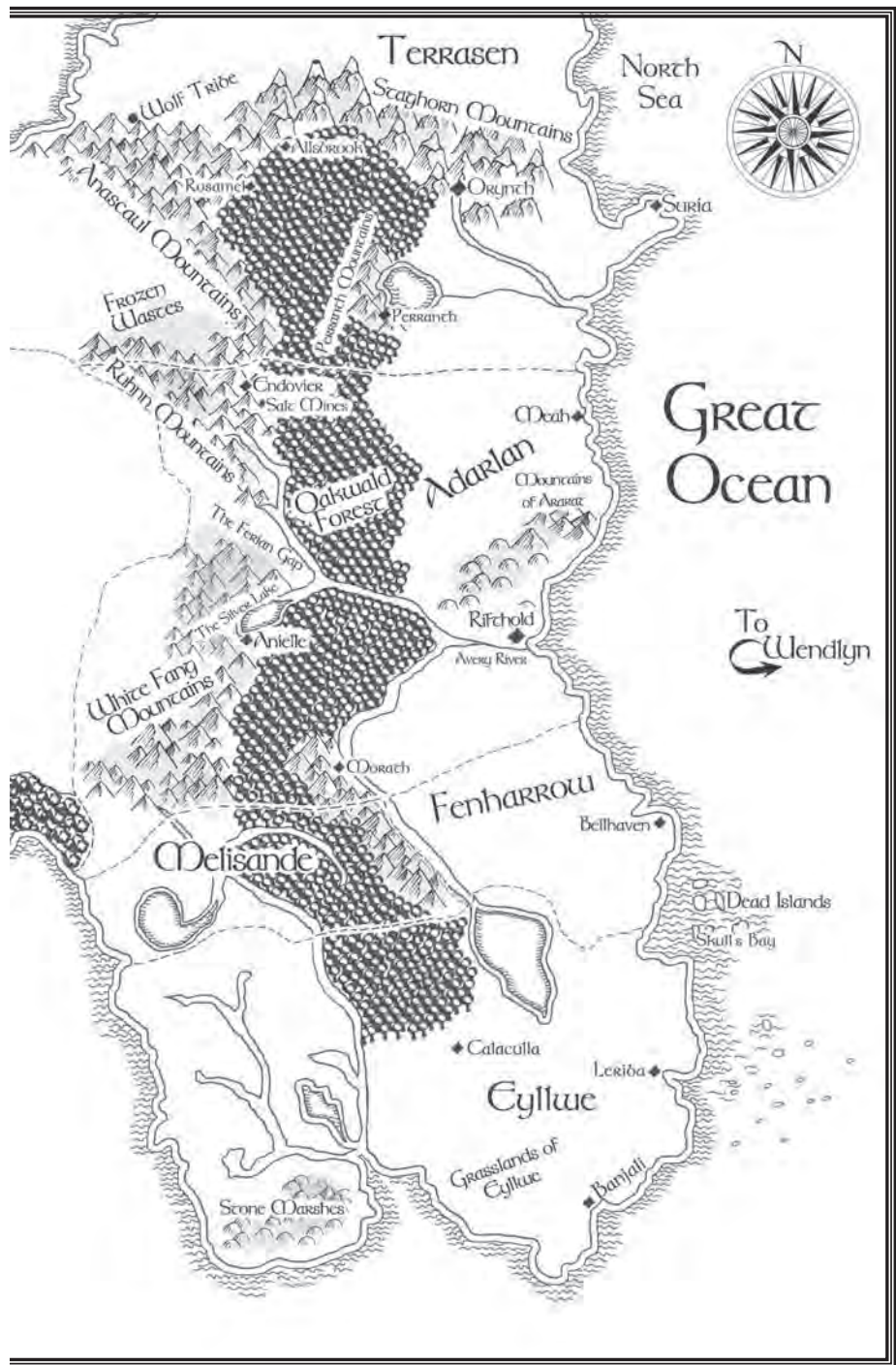
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*To all my readers from FictionPress—
for being with me at the beginning and staying long after the end.
Thank you for everything.*

Erilea





After a year of slavery in the Salt Mines of Endovier, Celaena Sardothien was accustomed to being escorted everywhere in shackles and at sword-point. Most of the thousands of slaves in Endovier received similar treatment—though an extra half-dozen guards always walked Celaena to and from the mines. That was expected by Adarlan’s most notorious assassin. What she did not usually expect, however, was a hooded man in black at her side—as there was now.

He gripped her arm as he led her through the shining building in which most of Endovier’s officials and overseers were housed. They strode down corridors, up flights of stairs, and around and around until she hadn’t the slightest chance of finding her way out again.

At least, that was her escort’s intention, because she hadn’t failed to notice when they went up and down the same staircase within a matter of minutes. Nor had she missed when they zigzagged between levels, even though the building was a standard grid of hallways and stairwells.

As if she'd lose her bearings that easily. She might have been insulted if he wasn't trying so hard.

They entered a particularly long hallway, silent save for their footsteps. Though the man grasping her arm was tall and fit, she could see nothing of the features concealed beneath his hood. Another tactic meant to confuse and intimidate her. The black clothes were probably a part of it, too. His head shifted in her direction, and Celaena flashed him a grin. He looked forward again, his iron grip tightening.

It was flattering, she supposed, even if she *didn't* know what was happening, or why he'd been waiting for her outside the mine shaft. After a day of cleaving rock salt from the innards of the mountain, finding him standing there with six guards hadn't improved her mood.

But her ears had pricked when he'd introduced himself to her overseer as Chaol Westfall, Captain of the Royal Guard, and suddenly, the sky loomed, the mountains pushed from behind, and even the earth swelled toward her knees. She hadn't tasted fear in a while—hadn't *let* herself taste fear. When she awoke every morning, she repeated the same words: *I will not be afraid*. For a year, those words had meant the difference between breaking and bending; they had kept her from shattering in the darkness of the mines. Not that she'd let the captain know any of that.

Celaena examined the gloved hand holding her arm. The dark leather almost matched the dirt on her skin.

She adjusted her torn and filthy tunic with her free hand and held in her sigh. Entering the mines before sunrise and departing after dusk, she rarely glimpsed the sun. She was frightfully pale beneath the dirt. It was true that she had been attractive once, beautiful even, but—well, it didn't matter now, did it?

They turned down another hallway, and she studied the stranger's finely crafted sword. Its shimmering pommel was shaped like an eagle midflight. Noticing her stare, his gloved hand descended to rest upon its golden head. Another smile tugged at the corners of her lips.

“You’re a long way from Rifthold, Captain,” she said, clearing her throat. “Did you come with the army I heard thumping around earlier?” She peered into the darkness beneath his hood but saw nothing. Still, she felt his eyes upon her face, judging, weighing, testing. She stared right back. The Captain of the Royal Guard would be an interesting opponent. Maybe even worthy of some effort on her part.

Finally, the man raised his sword hand, and the folds of his cloak fell to conceal the blade. As his cloak shifted, she spied the gold wyvern embroidered on his tunic. The royal seal.

“What do you care for the armies of Adarlan?” he replied. How lovely it was to hear a voice like her own—cool and articulate—even if he was a nasty brute!

“Nothing,” she said, shrugging. He let out a low growl of annoyance.

Oh, it’d be nice to see his blood spill across the marble. She’d lost her temper once before—once, when her first overseer chose the wrong day to push her too hard. She still remembered the feeling of embedding the pickax into his gut, and the stickiness of his blood on her hands and face. She could disarm two of these guards in a heartbeat. Would the captain fare better than her late overseer? Contemplating the potential outcomes, she grinned at him again.

“Don’t you look at me like that,” he warned, and his hand drifted back toward his sword. Celaena hid her smirk this time. They passed a series of wooden doors that she’d seen a few minutes ago. If she wanted to escape, she simply had to turn left at the next hallway and take the stairs down three flights. The only thing all the intended disorientation had accomplished was to familiarize her with the building. Idiots.

“Where are we going again?” she said sweetly, brushing a strand of her matted hair from her face. When he didn’t reply, she clenched her jaw.

The halls echoed too loudly for her to attack him without alerting the whole building. She hadn’t seen where he’d put the key to her

irons, and the six guards who trailed them would be nuisances. Not to mention the shackles.

They entered a hallway hung with iron chandeliers. Outside the windows lining the wall, night had fallen; lanterns kindled so bright they offered few shadows to hide in.

From the courtyard, she could hear the other slaves shuffling toward the wooden building where they slept. The moans of agony amongst the clank of chains made a chorus as familiar as the dreary work songs they sang all day. The occasional solo of the whip added to the symphony of brutality Adarlan had created for its greatest criminals, poorest citizens, and latest conquests.

While some of the prisoners were people accused of attempting to practice magic—not that they *could*, given that magic had vanished from the kingdom—these days, more and more rebels arrived at Endovier. Most were from Eyllwe, one of the last countries still fighting Adarlan’s rule. But when she pestered them for news, many just stared at her with empty eyes. Already broken. She shuddered to consider what they’d endured at the hands of Adarlan’s forces. Some days, she wondered if they would have been better off dying on the butchering blocks instead. And if she might have been better off dying that night she’d been betrayed and captured, too.

But she had other things to think about as they continued their walk. Was she finally to be hanged? Sickness coiled in her stomach. She *was* important enough to warrant an execution from the Captain of the Royal Guard himself. But why bring her inside this building first?

At last, they stopped before a set of red-and-gold glass doors so thick that she couldn’t see through them. Captain Westfall jerked his chin at the two guards standing on either side of the doors, and they stomped their spears in greeting.

The captain’s grip tightened until it hurt. He yanked Celaena closer,

but her feet seemed made of lead and she pulled against him. “You’d rather stay in the mines?” he asked, sounding faintly amused.

“Perhaps if I were told what this was all about, I wouldn’t feel so inclined to resist.”

“You’ll find out soon enough.” Her palms became sweaty. Yes, she was going to die. It had come at last.

The doors groaned open to reveal a throne room. A glass chandelier shaped like a grapevine occupied most of the ceiling, spitting seeds of diamond fire onto the windows along the far side of the room. Compared to the bleakness outside those windows, the opulence felt like a slap to the face. A reminder of how much they profited from her labor.

“In here,” the Captain of the Guard growled, and shoved her with his free hand, finally releasing her. Celaena stumbled, her calloused feet slipping on the smooth floor as she straightened herself. She looked back to see another six guards appear.

Fourteen guards, plus the captain. The gold royal emblem embroidered on the breast of black uniforms. These were members of the Royal Family’s personal guard: ruthless, lightning-swift soldiers trained from birth to protect and kill. She swallowed tightly.

Lightheaded and immensely heavy all at once, Celaena faced the room. On an ornate redwood throne sat a handsome young man. Her heart stopped as everyone bowed.

She was standing in front of the Crown Prince of Adarlan.

“Your Highness,” said the Captain of the Guard. He straightened from a low bow and removed his hood, revealing close-cropped chestnut hair. The hood had definitely been meant to intimidate her into submission during their walk. As if that sort of trick could work on *her*. Despite her irritation, she blinked at the sight of his face. He was so young!

Captain Westfall was not excessively handsome, but she couldn’t help finding the ruggedness of his face and the clarity of his golden-brown eyes rather appealing. She cocked her head, now keenly aware of her wretched dirtiness.

“This is she?” the Crown Prince of Adarlan asked, and Celaena’s head whipped around as the captain nodded. Both of them stared at her, waiting for her to bow. When she remained upright, Chaol shifted on his feet, and the prince glanced at his captain before lifting his chin a bit higher.

Bow to him indeed! If she were bound for the gallows, she would

most certainly *not* spend the last moments of her life in groveling submission.

Thundering steps issued from behind her, and someone grabbed her by the neck. Celaena only glimpsed crimson cheeks and a sandy mustache before being thrown to the icy marble floor. Pain slammed through her face, light splintering her vision. Her arms ached as her bound hands kept her joints from properly aligning. Though she tried to stop them, tears of pain welled.

“*That* is the proper way to greet your future king,” a red-faced man snapped at Celaena.

The assassin hissed, baring her teeth as she twisted her head to look at the kneeling bastard. He was almost as large as her overseer, clothed in reds and oranges that matched his thinning hair. His obsidian eyes glittered as his grip tightened on her neck. If she could move her right arm just a few inches, she could throw him off balance and grab his sword . . . The shackles dug into her stomach, and fizzing, boiling rage turned her face scarlet.

After a too-long moment, the Crown Prince spoke. “I don’t quite comprehend why you’d force someone to bow when the purpose of the gesture is to display allegiance and respect.” His words were coated with glorious boredom.

Celaena tried to pivot a free eye to the prince, but could only see a pair of black leather boots against the white floor.

“It’s clear that *you* respect me, Duke Perrington, but it’s a bit unnecessary to put such effort into forcing *Celaena Sardothien* to have the same opinion. You and I know very well she has no love for my family. So perhaps your intent is to humiliate her.” He paused, and she could have sworn his eyes fell on her face. “But I think she’s had enough of that.” He stopped for another moment, then asked: “Don’t you have a meeting with Endovier’s treasurer? I wouldn’t want you to be late, especially when you came all this way to meet with him.”

Understanding the dismissal, her tormentor grunted and released her. Celaena peeled her cheek from the marble but lay on the floor until he stood and left. If she managed to escape, perhaps she'd hunt down this Duke Perrington fellow and return the warmth of his greeting.

As she rose, she frowned at the imprint of grit she left behind on the otherwise spotless floor, and at the clank of her shackles echoing through the silent room. But she'd been trained to be an assassin since the age of eight, since the day the King of the Assassins found her half-dead on the banks of a frozen river and brought her to his keep. She wouldn't be humiliated by anything, least of all being dirty. Gathering her pride, she tossed her long braid behind a shoulder and lifted her head. Her eyes met those of the prince.

Dorian Havilliard smiled at her. It was a polished smile, and reeked of court-trained charm. Sprawled across the throne, he had his chin propped by a hand, his golden crown glinting in the soft light. On his black doublet, an emblazoned gold rendering of the royal wyvern occupied the entirety of the chest. His red cloak fell gracefully around him and his throne.

Yet there was something in his eyes, strikingly blue—the color of the waters of the southern countries—and the way they contrasted with his raven-black hair that made her pause. He was achingly handsome, and couldn't have been older than twenty.

Princes are not supposed to be handsome! They're sniveling, stupid, repulsive creatures! This one . . . this . . . How unfair of him to be royal and beautiful.

She shifted on her feet as he frowned, surveying her in turn. “I thought I asked you to clean her,” he said to Captain Westfall, who stepped forward. She'd forgotten there was anyone else in the room. She looked at her rags and stained skin, and she couldn't suppress the twinge of shame. What a miserable state for a girl of former beauty!

At a passing glance, one might think her eyes blue or gray, perhaps even green, depending on the color of her clothing. Up close, though,

these warring hues were offset by the brilliant ring of gold around her pupils. But it was her golden hair that caught the attention of most, hair that still maintained a glimmer of its glory. In short, Celaena Sardothien was blessed with a handful of attractive features that compensated for the majority of average ones; and, by early adolescence, she'd discovered that with the help of cosmetics, these average features could easily match the extraordinary assets.

But now, standing before Dorian Havilliard as little more than a gutter rat! Her face warmed as Captain Westfall spoke. "I didn't want to keep you waiting."

The Crown Prince shook his head when Chaol reached for her. "Don't bother with the bath just yet. I can see her potential." The prince straightened, keeping his attention on Celaena. "I don't believe that we've ever had the pleasure of an introduction. But, as you probably know, I'm Dorian Havilliard, Crown Prince of Adarlan, perhaps now Crown Prince of most of Erilea."

She ignored the surge and crash of bitter emotions that awoke with the name.

"And *you're* Celaena Sardothien, Adarlan's greatest assassin. Perhaps the greatest assassin in all of Erilea." He studied her tensed body before he raised his dark, well-groomed brows. "You seem a little young." He rested his elbows on his thighs. "I've heard some rather fascinating stories about you. How do you find Endovier after living in such excess in Rifthold?"

Arrogant ass.

"I couldn't be happier," she crooned as her jagged nails cut into her palms.

"After a year, you seem to be more or less alive. I wonder how that's possible when the average life expectancy in these mines is a month."

"Quite a mystery, I'm sure." She batted her eyelashes and readjusted her shackles as if they were lace gloves.

The Crown Prince turned to his captain. "She has somewhat of a

tongue, doesn't she? And she doesn't sound like a member of the rabble."

"I should hope not!" Celaena interjected.

"Your Highness," Chaol Westfall snapped at her.

"What?" Celaena asked.

"You will address him as 'Your Highness.'"

Celaena gave him a mocking smile, and then returned her attention to the prince.

Dorian Havilliard, to her surprise, laughed. "You do *know* that you're now a slave, don't you? Has your sentence taught you nothing?"

Had her arms been unshackled, she would have crossed them. "I don't see how working in a mine can teach anything beyond how to use a pickax."

"And you never tried to escape?"

A slow, wicked smile spread across her lips. "Once."

The prince's brows rose, and he turned to Captain Westfall. "I wasn't told that."

Celaena glanced over her shoulder at Chaol, who gave his prince an apologetic look. "The Chief Overseer informed me this afternoon that there was *one* incident. Three months—"

"Four months," she interrupted.

"Four months," Chaol said, "after Sardothien arrived, she attempted to flee."

She waited for the rest of the story, but he was clearly finished. "That's not even the best part!"

"There's a 'best part'?" the Crown Prince said, face caught between a wince and a smile.

Chaol glared at her before speaking. "There's no hope of escaping from Endovier. Your father made sure that each of Endovier's sentries could shoot a squirrel from two hundred paces away. To attempt to flee is suicide."

“But you’re alive,” the prince said to her.

Celaena’s smile faded as the memory struck her. “Yes.”

“What happened?” Dorian asked.

Her eyes turned cold and hard. “I snapped.”

“That’s all you have to offer as an explanation for what you did?” Captain Westfall demanded. “She killed her overseer and twenty-three sentries before they caught her. She was a *finger’s tip* from the wall before the guards knocked her unconscious.”

“So?” Dorian said.

Celaena seethed. “So? Do you know how far the wall is from the mines?” He gave her a blank look. She closed her eyes and sighed dramatically. “From my shaft, it was three hundred sixty-three feet. I had someone measure.”

“So?” Dorian repeated.

“Captain Westfall, how far do slaves make it from the mines when they try to escape?”

“Three feet,” he muttered. “Endovier sentries usually shoot a man down before he’s moved three feet.”

The Crown Prince’s silence was not her desired effect. “You knew it was suicide,” he said at last, the amusement gone.

Perhaps it had been a bad idea for her to bring up the wall. “Yes,” she said.

“But they didn’t kill you.”

“Your father ordered that I was to be kept alive for as long as possible—to endure the misery that Endovier gives in abundance.” A chill that had nothing to do with the temperature went through her. “I never intended to escape.” The pity in his eyes made her want to hit him.

“Do you bear many scars?” asked the prince. She shrugged and he smiled, forcing the mood to lift as he stepped from the dais. “Turn around, and let me view your back.” Celaena frowned, but obeyed as he walked to her, Chaol stepping closer. “I can’t make them out

clearly through all this dirt,” the prince said, inspecting what skin showed through the scraps of her shirt. She scowled, and scowled even more when he said, “And what a terrible stench, too!”

“When one doesn’t have access to a bath and perfume, I suppose one cannot smell as finely as you, *Your Highness*.”

The Crown Prince clicked his tongue and circled her slowly. Chaol—and all the guards—watched them with hands on their swords. As they should. In less than a second, she could get her arms over the prince’s head and have her shackles crushing his windpipe. It might be worth it just to see the expression on Chaol’s face. But the prince went on, oblivious to how dangerously close he stood to her. Perhaps she should be insulted. “From what I can see,” he said, “there are three large scars—and perhaps some smaller ones. Not as awful as I expected, but . . . well, the dresses can cover it, I suppose.”

“Dresses?” He was standing so near that she could see the fine thread detail on his jacket, and smelled not perfume, but horses and iron.

Dorian grinned. “What remarkable eyes you have! And how angry you are!”

Coming within strangling distance of the Crown Prince of Adarlan, son of the man who sentenced her to a slow, miserable death, her self-control balanced on a fragile edge—dancing along a cliff.

“I demand to know,” she began, but the Captain of the Guard pulled her back from the prince with spine-snapping force. “I wasn’t going to kill him, you buffoon.”

“Watch your mouth before I throw you back in the mines,” the brown-eyed captain said.

“Oh, I don’t think you’d do that.”

“And why is that?” Chaol replied.

Dorian strode to his throne and sat down, his sapphire eyes bright.

She looked from one man to another and squared her shoulders. “Because there’s something you want from me, something you want

badly enough to come here yourselves. I'm not an idiot, though I was foolish enough to be captured, and I can see that this is some sort of secret business. Why else would you leave the capital and venture this far? You've been testing me all this time to see if I am physically and mentally sound. Well, I know that I'm still sane, and that I'm not broken, despite what the incident at the wall might suggest. So I demand to be told why you're here, and what services you wish of me, if I'm not destined for the gallows."

The men exchanged glances. Dorian steepled his fingers. "I have a proposition for you."

Her chest tightened. Never, not in her most fanciful dreams, had she imagined that the opportunity to speak with Dorian Havilliard would arise. She could kill him so easily, tear that grin from his face . . . She could destroy the king as he had destroyed her . . .

But perhaps his proposition could lead to escape. If she got beyond the wall, she could make it. Run and run and disappear into the mountains and live in solitude in the dark green of the wild, with a pine-needle carpet and a blanket of stars overhead. She could do it. She just needed to clear the wall. She had come so close before . . .

"I'm listening," was all she said.

The prince's eyes shone with amusement at her brashness but lingered a bit too long on her body. Celaena could have raked her nails down his face for staring at her like that, yet the fact that he'd even bother to *look* when she was in such a filthy state . . . A slow smile spread across her face.

The prince crossed his long legs. "Leave us," he ordered the guards. "Chaol, stay where you are."

Celaena stepped closer as the guards shuffled out, shutting the door. Foolish, foolish move. But Chaol's face remained unreadable. He couldn't honestly believe he'd contain her if she tried to escape! She straightened her spine. What were they planning that would make them so irresponsible?

The prince chuckled. "Don't you think it's risky to be so bold with me when your freedom is on the line?"

Of all the things he could have said, *that* was what she had least

expected. “My freedom?” At the sound of the word, she saw a land of pine and snow, of sun-bleached cliffs and white-capped seas, a land where light was swallowed in the velvety green of bumps and hollows—a land that she had forgotten.

“Yes, your freedom. So, I highly suggest, *Miss Sardothien*, that you get your arrogance in check before you end up back in the mines.” The prince uncrossed his legs. “Though perhaps your attitude will be useful. I’m not going to pretend that my father’s empire was built on trust and understanding. But you already know that.” Her fingers curled as she waited for him to continue. His eyes met hers, probing, intent. “My father has gotten it into his head that he needs a Champion.”

It took a delicious moment for her to understand.

Celaena tipped back her head and laughed. “Your father wants *me* to be his Champion? What—don’t tell me that he’s managed to eliminate every noble soul out there! Surely there’s *one* chivalrous knight, one lord of steadfast heart and courage.”

“Mind your mouth,” Chaol warned from beside her.

“What about you, hmm?” she said, raising her brows at the captain. Oh, it was too funny! *Her*—the King’s Champion! “Our beloved king finds you lacking?”

The captain put a hand on his sword. “If you’d be quiet, you’d hear the rest of what His Highness has to tell you.”

She faced the prince. “Well?”

Dorian leaned back in his throne. “My father needs someone to aid the empire—someone to help him maneuver around difficult people.”

“You mean he needs a lackey for his dirty work.”

“If you want to put it that bluntly, then, yes,” the prince said. “His *Champion* would keep his opponents quiet.”

“As quiet as the grave,” she said sweetly.

A smile tugged on Dorian’s lips, but he kept his face straight. “Yes.”

To work for the King of Adarlan as his loyal servant. She raised her

chin. To kill *for* him—to be a fang in the mouth of the beast that had already consumed half of Erilea . . . “And if I accept?”

“Then, after six years, he’ll grant you your freedom.”

“Six years!” But the word “freedom” echoed through her once more.

“If you decline,” Dorian said, anticipating her next question, “you’ll remain in Endovier.” His sapphire eyes became hard, and she swallowed. *And die here* was what he didn’t need to add.

Six years as the king’s crooked dagger . . . or a lifetime in Endovier.

“However,” the prince said, “there’s a catch.” She kept her face neutral as he toyed with a ring on his finger. “The position isn’t being offered to you. Yet. My father thought to have a bit of fun. He’s hosting a competition. He invited twenty-three members of his council to each sponsor a would-be Champion to train in the glass castle and ultimately compete in a duel. Were you to win,” he said with a half smile, “you’d *officially* be Adarlan’s Assassin.”

She didn’t return his smile. “Who, exactly, are my competitors?”

Seeing her expression, the prince’s grin faded. “Thieves and assassins and warriors from across Erilea.” She opened her mouth, but he cut her off. “If you win, and prove yourself both skilled and trustworthy, my father has *sworn* to grant you your freedom. *And*, while you’re his Champion, you’ll receive a considerable salary.”

She barely heard his last few words. A competition! Against some nobody men from the-gods-knew-where! And assassins! “What other assassins?” she demanded.

“None that I’ve heard of. None as famous as *you*. And that reminds me—you won’t be competing as Celaena Sardothien.”

“What?”

“You’ll compete under an alias. I don’t suppose you heard about what happened after your trial.”

“News is rather hard to come by when you’re slaving in a mine.”

Dorian chuckled, shaking his head. “No one knows that Celaena

Sardothien is just a young woman—they all thought you were far older.”

“What?” she asked again, her face flushing. “How is that possible?” She should be proud that she’d kept it hidden from most of the world, but . . .

“You kept your identity a secret all the years you were running around killing everyone. After your trial, my father thought it would be . . . wise not to inform Erilea who you are. He wants to keep it that way. What would our enemies say if they knew we’d all been petrified of a girl?”

“So I’m slaving in this miserable place for a name and title that don’t even belong to me? Who does everyone *think* Adarlan’s Assassin really is?”

“I don’t know, nor do I entirely care. But I *do* know that you were the best, and that people still whisper when they mention your name.” He fixed her with a stare. “If you’re willing to fight for me, to be *my* Champion during the months the competition will go on, I’ll see to it that my father frees you after *five* years.”

Though he tried to conceal it, she could see the tension in his body. He wanted her to say yes. Needed her to say yes so badly he was willing to bargain with her. Her eyes began glittering. “What do you mean, ‘*were* the best?’”

“You’ve been in Endovier for a year. Who knows what you’re still capable of?”

“I’m capable of quite a lot, thank you,” she said, picking at her jagged nails. She tried not to cringe at all the dirt beneath them. When was the last time her hands had been clean?

“That remains to be seen,” Dorian said. “You’ll be told the details of the competition when we arrive in Rifthold.”

“Despite the amount of *fun* you nobles will have betting on us, this competition seems unnecessary. Why not just hire me already?”

“As I just said, you must prove yourself worthy.”

She put a hand on her hip, and her chains rattled loudly through the room. “Well, I think being Adarlan’s Assassin exceeds any sort of proof you might need.”

“Yes,” Chaol said, his bronze eyes flashing. “It proves that you’re a criminal, and that we shouldn’t immediately trust you with the king’s private business.”

“I give my solemn oa—”

“I doubt that the king would take the word of *Adarlan’s Assassin* as bond.”

“Yes, but I don’t see why I have to go through the training and the competition. I mean, I’m bound to be a bit . . . out of shape, but . . . what else do you expect when I have to make do with rocks and pick-axes in this place?” She gave Chaol a spiteful glance.

Dorian frowned. “So, you won’t take the offer?”

“Of course I’m going to take the offer,” she snapped. Her wrists chafed against her shackles badly enough that her eyes watered. “I’ll be your absurd Champion if you agree to free me in three years, not five.”

“Four.”

“Fine,” she said. “It’s a bargain. I might be trading one form of slavery for another, but I’m not a fool.”

She could win back her freedom. *Freedom*. She felt the cold air of the wide-open world, the breeze that swept from the mountains and carried her away. She could live far from Rifthold, the capital that had once been her realm.

“Hopefully you’re right,” Dorian replied. “And hopefully, you’ll live up to your reputation. I anticipate winning, and I won’t be pleased if you make me look foolish.”

“And what if I lose?”

The gleam vanished from his eyes as he said: “You’ll be sent back here, to serve out the remainder of your sentence.”

Celaena's lovely visions exploded like dust from a slammed book. "Then I might as well leap from the window. A year in this place has worn me through—imagine what will happen if I return. I'd be dead by my second year." She tossed her head. "Your offer seems fair enough."

"Fair enough indeed," Dorian said, and waved a hand at Chaol. "Take her to her rooms and clean her up." He fixed her with a stare. "We depart for Rifthold in the morning. Don't disappoint me, Sardothien."

It was nonsense, of course. How difficult could it be to outshine, outsmart, and then obliterate her competitors? She didn't smile, for she knew that if she did, it would open her to a realm of hope that had long been closed. But still, she felt like seizing the prince and dancing. She tried to think of music, tried to think of a celebratory tune, but could only recall a solitary line from the mournful bellowing of the Eyllwe work songs, deep and slow like honey poured from a jar: "*And go home at last . . .*"

She didn't notice when Captain Westfall led her away, nor did she notice when they walked down hall after hall.

Yes, she would go—to Rifthold, to anywhere, even through the Gates of the Wyrd and into Hell itself, if it meant freedom.

After all, you aren't Adarlan's Assassin for nothing.

QUEEN OR TRAITOR? ONLY SHE CAN DECIDE.



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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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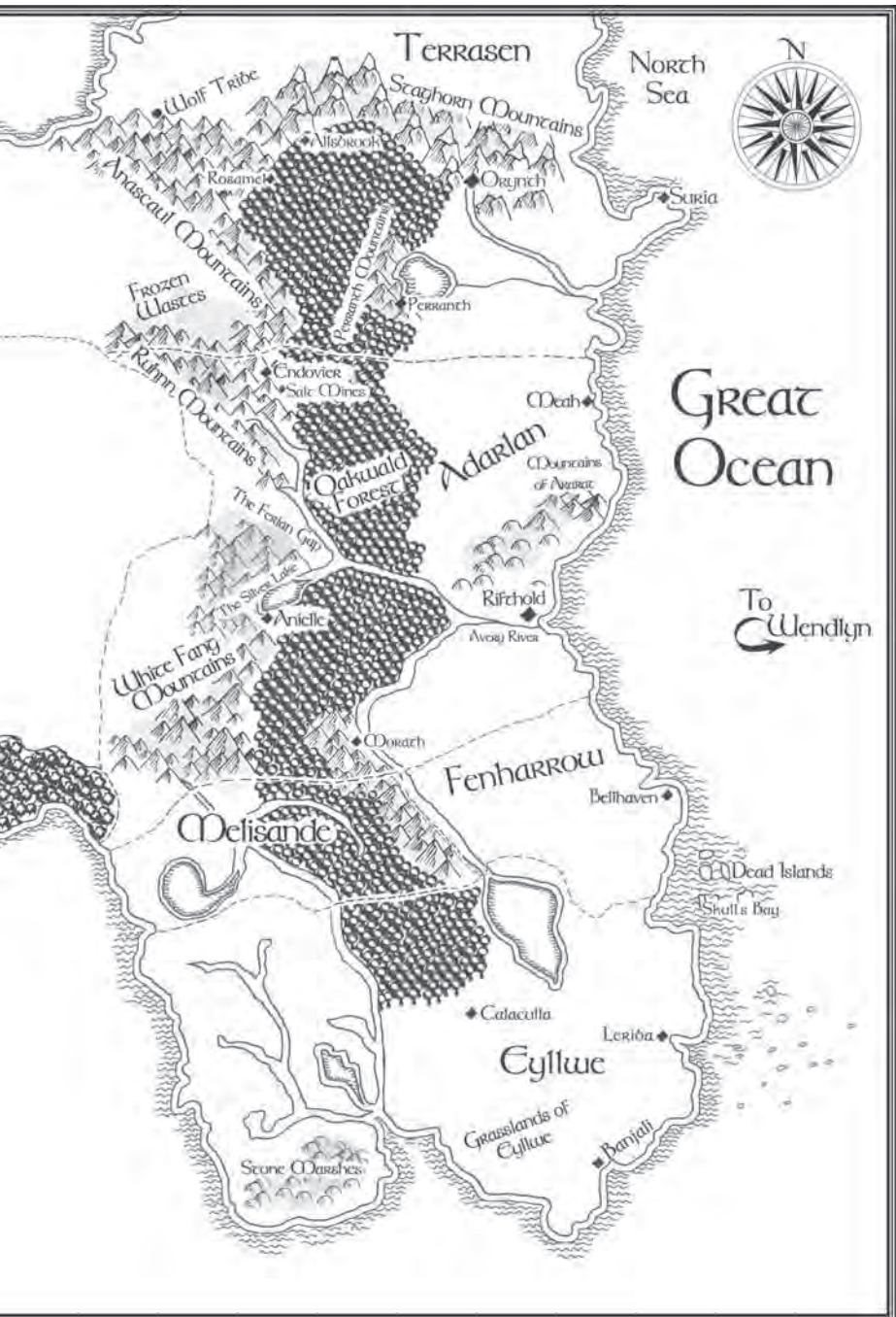
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*Again, for Susan—
whose friendship changed my life for the better
and gave this book its heart.*

Erilea







PART ONE

HEIR OF ASH

❧ 1 ❧

Gods, it was boiling in this useless excuse for a kingdom.

Or maybe it felt that way because Celaena Sardothien had been lounging on the lip of the terra-cotta roof since midmorning, an arm flung over her eyes, slowly baking in the sun like the loaves of flatbread the city's poorest citizens left on their windowsills because they couldn't afford brick ovens.

And gods, she was sick of flatbread—*teggya*, they called it. Sick of the crunchy, oniony taste of it that even mouthfuls of water couldn't wash away. If she never ate another bite of *teggya* again, it would be too soon.

Mostly because it was all she'd been able to afford when she landed in Wendlyn two weeks ago and made her way to the capital city, Varese, just as she'd been ordered by his Grand Imperial Majesty and Master of the Earth, the King of Adarlan.

She'd resorted to swiping *teggya* and wine off vendors' carts since

her money ran out, not long after she'd taken one look at the heavily fortified limestone castle, at the elite guards, at the cobalt banners flapping so proudly in the dry, hot wind and decided *not* to kill her assigned targets.

So it had been stolen teggya . . . and wine. The sour red wine from the vineyards lining the rolling hills around the walled capital—a taste she'd initially spat out but now very, very much enjoyed. Especially since the day when she decided that she didn't particularly care about anything at all.

She reached for the terra-cotta tiles sloping behind her, groping for the clay jug of wine she'd hauled onto the roof that morning. Patting, feeling for it, and then—

She swore. Where in hell was the wine?

The world tilted and went blindingly bright as she hoisted herself onto her elbows. Birds circled above, keeping well away from the white-tailed hawk that had been perched atop a nearby chimney all morning, waiting to snatch up its next meal. Below, the market street was a brilliant loom of color and sound, full of braying donkeys, merchants waving their wares, clothes both foreign and familiar, and the clacking of wheels against pale cobblestones. But where in hell was the—

Ah. There. Tucked beneath one of the heavy red tiles to keep cool. Just where she'd stashed it hours before, when she'd climbed onto the roof of the massive indoor market to survey the perimeter of the castle walls two blocks away. Or whatever she'd thought sounded official and useful before she'd realized that she'd rather sprawl in the shadows. Shadows that had long since been burned away by that relentless Wendlyn sun.

Celaena swigged from the jug of wine—or tried to. It was empty, which she supposed was a blessing, because *gods* her head was spinning. She needed water, and more teggya. And perhaps something for the gloriously painful split lip and scraped cheekbone she'd earned last night in one of the city's *tabernas*.

Groaning, Celaena rolled onto her belly and surveyed the street forty feet below. She knew the guards patrolling it by now—had marked their faces and weapons, just as she had with the guards atop the high castle walls. She'd memorized their rotations, and how they opened the three massive gates that led into the castle. It seemed that the Ashryvers and their ancestors took safety very, very seriously.

It had been ten days since she'd arrived in Varese itself, after hauling ass from the coast. Not because she was particularly eager to kill her targets, but because the city was so damn large that it seemed her best chance of dodging the immigration officials, whom she'd given the slip instead of registering with their oh-so-benevolent work program. Hurrying to the capital had also provided welcome activity after weeks at sea, where she hadn't really felt like doing anything other than lying on the narrow bed in her cramped cabin or sharpening her weapons with a near-religious zeal.

You're nothing but a coward, Nehemia had said to her.

Every slice of the whetting stone had echoed it. *Coward, coward, coward*. The word had trailed her each league across the ocean.

She had made a vow—a vow to free Eyllwe. So in between moments of despair and rage and grief, in between thoughts of Chaol and the Wyrdkeys and all she'd left behind and lost, Celaena had decided on one plan to follow when she reached these shores. One plan, however insane and unlikely, to free the enslaved kingdom: find and obliterate the Wyrdkeys the King of Adarlan had used to build his terrible empire. She'd gladly destroy herself to carry it out.

Just her, just him. Just as it should be; no loss of life beyond their own, no soul stained but hers. It would take a monster to destroy a monster.

If she had to be here thanks to Chaol's misplaced good intentions, then at least she'd receive the answers she needed. There was one person in Erilea who had been present when the Wyrdkeys were wielded by a conquering demon race that had warped them into three tools of

such mighty power that they'd been hidden for thousands of years and nearly wiped from memory. Queen Maeve of the Fae. Maeve knew everything—as was expected when you were older than dirt.

So the first step of her stupid, foolish plan had been simple: seek out Maeve, get answers about how to destroy the Wyrdkeys, and then return to Adarlan.

It was the least she could do. For Nehemia—for . . . a lot of other people. There was nothing left in her, not really. Only ash and an abyss and the unbreakable vow she'd carved into her flesh, to the friend who had seen her for what she truly was.

When they had docked at the largest port city in Wendlyn, she couldn't help but admire the caution the ship took while coming to shore—waiting until a moonless night, then stuffing Celaena and the other refugee women from Adarlan in the galley while navigating the secret channels through the barrier reef. It was understandable: the reef was the main defense keeping Adarlan's legions from these shores. It was also part of her mission here as the King's Champion.

That was the other task lingering in the back of her mind: to find a way to keep the king from executing Chaol or Nehemia's family. He'd promised to do it should she fail in her mission to retrieve Wendlyn's naval defense plans and assassinate its king and prince at their annual midsummer ball. But she'd shoved all those thoughts aside when they'd docked and the refugee women had been herded ashore for processing by the port's officials.

Many of the women were scarred inside and out, their eyes gleaming with echoes of whatever horrors had befallen them in Adarlan. So even after she'd vanished from the ship during the chaos of docking, she'd lingered on a nearby rooftop while the women were escorted into a building—to find homes and employment. Yet Wendlyn's officials could later bring them to a quiet part of the city and do whatever they wanted. Sell them. Hurt them. They were refugees: unwanted and without any rights. Without any voice.

But she hadn't lingered merely from paranoia. No—Nehemia would have remained to ensure they were safe. Realizing that, Celaena had wound up on the road to the capital as soon as she was certain the women were all right. Learning how to infiltrate the castle was merely something to occupy her time while she decided how to execute the first steps of her plan. While she tried to stop thinking about Nehemia.

It had all been fine—fine and easy. Hiding in the little woods and barns along the way, she passed like a shadow through the countryside.

Wendlyn. A land of myths and monsters—of legends and nightmares made flesh.

The kingdom itself was a spread of warm, rocky sand and thick forest, growing ever greener as hills rolled inland and sharpened into towering peaks. The coast and the land around the capital were dry, as if the sun had baked all but the hardiest vegetation. Vastly different from the soggy, frozen empire she'd left behind.

A land of plenty, of opportunity, where men didn't just take what they wanted, where no doors were locked and people smiled at you in the streets. But she didn't particularly care if someone did or didn't smile at her—no, as the days wore on, she found it suddenly very difficult to bring herself to care about anything at all. Whatever determination, whatever rage, whatever *anything* she'd felt upon leaving Adarlan had ebbed away, devoured by the nothingness that now gnawed at her.

It was four days before Celaena spotted the massive capital city built across the foothills. Varese, the city where her mother had been born; the vibrant heart of the kingdom.

While Varese was cleaner than Rifthold and had plenty of wealth spread between the upper and lower classes, it was a capital city all the same, with slums and back alleys, whores and gamblers—and it hadn't taken too long to find its underbelly.

On the street below, three of the market guards paused to chat, and Celaena rested her chin on her hands. Like every guard in this kingdom, each was clad in light armor and bore a good number of weapons.

Rumor claimed the Wendlynite soldiers were trained by the Fae to be ruthless and cunning and swift. And she didn't want to know if that was true, for about a dozen different reasons. They certainly seemed a good deal more observant than the average Rifthold sentry—even if they hadn't yet noticed the assassin in their midst. But these days, Celaena knew the only threat she posed was to herself.

Even baking in the sun each day, even washing up whenever she could in one of the city's many fountain-squares, she could still feel Archer Finn's blood soaking her skin, into her hair. Even with the constant noise and rhythm of Varese, she could still hear Archer's groan as she gutted him in that tunnel beneath the castle. And even with the wine and heat, she could still see Chaol, horror contorting his face at what he'd learned about her Fae heritage and the monstrous power that could easily destroy her, about how hollow and dark she was inside.

She often wondered whether he'd figured out the riddle she'd told him on the docks of Rifthold. And if he had discovered the truth . . . Celaena never let herself get that far. Now wasn't the time for thinking about Chaol, or the truth, or any of the things that had left her soul so limp and weary.

Celaena tenderly prodded her split lip and frowned at the market guards, the movement making her mouth hurt even more. She'd deserved that particular blow in the brawl she'd provoked in last night's taberna—she'd kicked a man's balls into his throat, and when he'd caught his breath, he'd been enraged, to say the least. Lowering her hand from her mouth, she observed the guards for a few moments. They didn't take bribes from the merchants, or bully or threaten with fines like the guards and officials in Rifthold. Every official and soldier she'd seen so far had been similarly . . . good.

The same way Galan Ashryver, Crown Prince of Wendlyn, was good.

Dredging up some semblance of annoyance, Celaena stuck out her

tongue. At the guards, at the market, at the hawk on the nearby chimney, at the castle and the prince who lived inside it. She wished that she had not run out of wine so early in the day.

It had been a week since she'd figured out how to infiltrate the castle, three days after arriving in Varese itself. A week since that horrible day when all her plans crumbled around her.

A cooling breeze pushed past, bringing with it the spices from the vendors lining the nearby street—nutmeg, thyme, cumin, lemon verbena. She inhaled deeply, letting the scents clear her sun-and-wine-addled head. The pealing of bells floated down from one of the neighboring mountain towns, and in some square of the city, a minstrel band struck up a merry midday tune. Nehemia would have loved this place.

That fast, the world slipped, swallowed up by the abyss that now lived within her. Nehemia would never see Wendlyn. Never wander through the spice market or hear the mountain bells. A dead weight pressed on Celaena's chest.

It had seemed like such a perfect plan when she'd arrived in Varese. In the hours she'd spent figuring out the royal castle's defenses, she'd debated how she'd find Maeve to learn about the keys. It had all been going smoothly, flawlessly, until . . .

Until that gods-damned day when she'd noted how the guards left a hole in their defense in the southern wall every afternoon at two o'clock, and grasped how the gate mechanism operated. Until Galan Ashryver had come riding out through those gates, in full view of where she'd been perched on the roof of a nobleman's house.

It hadn't been the sight of him, with his olive skin and dark hair, that had stopped her dead. It hadn't been the fact that, even from a distance, she could see his turquoise eyes—*her* eyes, the reason she usually wore a hood in the streets.

No. It had been the way people cheered.

Cheered for him, their prince. Adored him, with his dashing smile and his light armor gleaming in the endless sun, as he and the soldiers behind him rode toward the north coast to continue blockade running. *Blockade running*. The prince—her target—was a gods-damned blockade runner against Adarlan, and his people *loved* him for it.

She'd trailed the prince and his men through the city, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, and all it would have taken was one arrow through those turquoise eyes and he would have been dead. But she followed him all the way to the city walls, the cheers growing louder, people tossing flowers, everyone beaming with pride for their perfect, perfect prince.

She'd reached the city gates just as they opened to let him through. And when Galan Ashryver rode off into the sunset, off to war and glory and to fight for good and freedom, she lingered on that roof until he was a speck in the distance.

Then she had walked into the nearest taberna and gotten into the bloodiest, most brutal brawl she'd ever provoked, until the city guard was called in and she vanished moments before everyone was tossed into the stocks. And then she had decided, as her nose bled down the front of her shirt and she spat blood onto the cobblestones, that she wasn't going to do *anything*.

There was no point to her plans. Nehemia and Galan would have led the world to freedom, and Nehemia should have been breathing. Together the prince and princess could have defeated the King of Adarlan. But Nehemia was dead, and Celaena's vow—her stupid, pitiful vow—was worth as much as mud when there were beloved heirs like Galan who could do so much more. She'd been a fool to make that vow.

Even Galan—Galan was barely making a dent against Adarlan, and he had an entire armada at his disposal. She was one person, one complete waste of life. If Nehemia hadn't been able to stop the king . . . then that plan, to find a way to contact Maeve . . . that plan was absolutely useless.

Mercifully, she still hadn't seen one of the Fae—not a single damn one—or the faeries, or even a lick of magic. She'd done her best to avoid it. Even before she'd spotted Galan, she'd kept away from the market stalls that offered everything from healing to trinkets to potions, areas that were usually also full of street performers or mercenaries trading their gifts to earn a living. She'd learned which tabernas the magic-wielders liked to frequent and never went near them. Because sometimes she felt a trickling, writhing *thing* awaken in her gut if she caught a crackle of its energy.

It had been a week since she'd given up her plan and abandoned any attempt to care at all. And she suspected it'd be many weeks more before she decided she was truly sick of teggya, or brawling every night just to feel something, or guzzling sour wine as she lay on rooftops all day.

But her throat was parched and her stomach was grumbling, so Celaena slowly peeled herself off the edge of the roof. Slowly, not because of those vigilant guards, but rather because her head was well and truly spinning. She didn't trust herself to care enough to prevent a tumble.

She glared at the thin scar stretching across her palm as she shimied down the drainpipe and into the alley off the market street. It was now nothing more than a reminder of the pathetic promise she'd made at Nehemia's half-frozen grave over a month ago, and of everything and everyone else she'd failed. Just like her amethyst ring, which she gambled away every night and won back before sunrise.

Despite all that had happened, and Chaol's role in Nehemia's death, even after she'd destroyed what was between them, she hadn't been able to forfeit his ring. She'd lost it thrice now in card games, only to get it back—by whatever means necessary. A dagger poised to slip between the ribs usually did a good deal more convincing than actual words.

Celaena supposed it was a miracle she made it down to the alley, where the shadows momentarily blinded her. She braced a hand on the cool stone wall, letting her eyes adjust, willing her head to stop

spinning. A mess—she was a gods-damned mess. She wondered when she'd bother to stop being one.

The tang and reek of the woman hit Celaena before she saw her. Then wide, yellowed eyes were in her face, and a pair of withered, cracked lips parted to hiss, "Slattern! Don't let me catch you in front of my door again!"

Celaena pulled back, blinking at the vagrant woman—and at her door, which . . . was just an alcove in the wall, crammed with rubbish and what had to be sacks of the woman's belongings. The woman herself was hunched, her hair unwashed and teeth a ruin of stumps. Celaena blinked again, the woman's face coming into focus. Furious, half-mad, and filthy.

Celaena held up her hands, backing away a step, then another. "Sorry."

The woman spat a wad of phlegm onto the cobblestones an inch from Celaena's dusty boots. Failing to muster the energy to be disgusted or furious, Celaena would have walked away had she not glimpsed herself as she raised her dull gaze from the glob.

Dirty clothes—stained and dusty and torn. Not to mention, she smelled *atrocious*, and this vagrant woman had mistaken her for . . . for a fellow vagrant, competing for space on the streets.

Well. Wasn't that just *wonderful*. An all-time low, even for her. Perhaps it'd be funny one day, if she bothered to remember it. She couldn't recall the last time she'd laughed.

At least she could take some comfort in knowing that it couldn't get worse.

But then a deep male voice chuckled from the shadows behind her.

↔ 2 ↔

The man—male—down the alley was Fae.

After ten years, after all the executions and burnings, a Fae male was prowling toward her. Pure, solid Fae. There was no escaping him as he emerged from the shadows yards away. The vagrant in the alcove and the others along the alley fell so quiet Celaena could again hear those bells ringing in the distant mountains.

Tall, broad-shouldered, every inch of him seemingly corded with muscle, he was a male blooded with power. He paused in a dusty shaft of sunlight, his silver hair gleaming.

As if his delicately pointed ears and slightly elongated canines weren't enough to scare the living shit out of everyone in that alley, including the now-whimpering madwoman behind Celaena, a wicked-looking tattoo was etched down the left side of his harsh face, the whorls of black ink stark against his sun-kissed skin.

The markings could easily have been decorative, but she still

remembered enough of the Fae language to recognize them as words, even in such an artistic rendering. Starting at his temple, the tattoo flowed over his jaw and down his neck, where it disappeared beneath the pale surcoat and cloak he wore. She had a feeling the markings continued down the rest of him, too, concealed along with at least half a dozen weapons. As she reached into her cloak for her own hidden dagger, she realized he might have been handsome were it not for the promise of violence in his pine-green eyes.

It would have been a mistake to call him young—just as it would have been a mistake to call him anything but a warrior, even without the sword strapped across his back and the vicious knives at his sides. He moved with lethal grace and surety, scanning the alley as if he were walking onto a killing field.

The hilt of the dagger was warm in her hand, and Celaena adjusted her stance, surprised to be feeling—fear. And enough of it that it cleared the heavy fog that had been clouding her senses these past few weeks.

The Fae warrior stalked down the alley, his knee-high leather boots silent on the cobblestones. Some of the loiterers shrank back; some bolted for the sunny street, to random doorways, anywhere to escape his challenging stare.

Celaena knew before his sharp eyes met hers that he was here for her, and who had sent him.

She reached for her Eye amulet, startled to find it was no longer around her neck. She'd given it to Chaol—the only bit of protection she could grant him upon leaving. He'd probably thrown it away as soon as he figured out the truth. Then he could go back to the haven of being her enemy. Maybe he'd tell Dorian, too, and the pair of them would both be safe.

Before she could give in to the instinct to scuttle back up the drain-pipe and onto the roof, she considered the plan she'd abandoned. Had some god remembered she existed and decided to throw her a bone? She'd needed to see Maeve.

Well, here was one of Maeve's elite warriors. Ready. Waiting.

And from the vicious temper emanating from him, not entirely happy about it.

The alley remained as still as a graveyard while the Fae warrior surveyed her. His nostrils flared delicately, as if he were—

He was getting a whiff of her scent.

She took some small satisfaction in knowing she smelled horrific, but it wasn't that smell he was reading. No, it was the scent that marked her as *her*—the smell of her lineage and blood and what and who she was. And if he said her name in front of these people . . . then she knew that Galan Ashryver would come running home. The guards would be on high alert, and *that* was not part of her plan at all.

The bastard looked likely to do such a thing, just to prove who was in charge. So she summoned her energy as best she could and sauntered over to him, trying to remember what she might have done months ago, before the world had gone to hell. "Well met, my friend," she purred. "Well met, indeed."

She ignored the shocked faces around them, focusing solely on sizing him up. He stood with a stillness that only an immortal could achieve. She willed her heartbeat and breathing to calm. He could probably hear them, could probably smell every emotion raging through her. There'd be no fooling him with bravado, not in a thousand years. He'd probably lived that long already. Perhaps there'd be no beating him, either. She was Celaena Sardothien, but he was a Fae warrior and had likely been one for a great while.

She stopped a few feet away. Gods, he was huge. "What a lovely surprise," she said loudly enough for everyone to hear. When was the last time she'd sounded that pleasant? She couldn't even remember the last time she'd spoken in full sentences. "I thought we were to meet at the city walls."

He didn't bow, thank the gods. His harsh face didn't even shift. Let him think what he wanted. She was sure she looked nothing like what

he'd been told to expect—and he'd certainly laughed when that woman mistook her for a fellow vagrant.

“Let's go,” was all he said, his deep, somewhat bored voice seeming to echo off the stones as he turned to leave the alley. She'd bet good money that the leather vambraces on his forearms concealed blades.

She might have given him a rather obnoxious reply, just to feel him out a bit more, but people were still watching. He prowled along, not deigning to look at any of the gawkers. She couldn't tell if she was impressed or revolted.

She followed the Fae warrior into the bright street and through the bustling city. He was heedless of the humans who paused their working and walking and milling about to stare. He certainly didn't wait for her to catch up as he strode up to a pair of ordinary mares tied by a trough in a nondescript square. If memory served her correctly, the Fae usually possessed far finer horses. He had probably arrived in another form and purchased these here.

All Fae possessed a secondary animal form. Celaena was currently in hers, her mortal human body as animal as the birds wheeling above. But what was his? He could have been a wolf, she thought, with that layered surcoat that flowed to midthigh like a pelt, his footfalls so silent. Or a mountain cat, with that predatory grace.

He mounted the larger of the mares, leaving her to the piebald beast that looked more interested in seeking out a quick meal than trekking across the land. That made two of them. But they'd gone far enough without any explanation.

She stuffed her satchel into a saddlebag, angling her hands so that her sleeves hid the narrow bands of scars on her wrists, reminders of where the manacles had been. Where *she* had been. It was none of his business. None of Maeve's business, either. The less they knew about her, the less they could use against her. “I've known a few brooding warrior-types in my day, but I think you might be the broodiest of them

all.” He whipped his head to her, and she drawled, “Oh, hello. I think you know who I am, so I won’t bother introducing myself. But before I’m carted off to gods-know-where, I’d like to know who *you* are.”

His lips thinned. He surveyed the square—where people were now watching. And everyone instantly found somewhere else to be.

When they’d scattered, he said, “You’ve gathered enough about me at this point to have learned what you need to know.” He spoke the common tongue, and his accent was subtle—lovely, if she was feeling generous enough to admit it. A soft, rolling purr.

“Fair enough. But what am I to call you?” She gripped the saddle but didn’t mount it.

“Rowan.” His tattoo seemed to soak up the sun, so dark it looked freshly inked.

“Well, Rowan—” Oh, he did *not* like her tone one bit. His eyes narrowed slightly in warning, but she went on, “Dare I ask where we’re going?” She had to be drunk—still drunk or descending to a new level of apathy—if she was talking to him like this. But she couldn’t stop, even as the gods or the Wyrd or the threads of fate readied to shove her back toward her original plan of action.

“I’m taking you where you’ve been summoned.”

As long as she got to see Maeve and ask her questions, she didn’t particularly care how she got to Doranelle—or whom she traveled with.

Do what has to be done, Elena had told her. In her usual fashion, Elena had omitted to specify *what* had to be done once she arrived in Wendlyn. At least this was better than eating flatbread and drinking wine and being mistaken for a vagrant. Perhaps she could be on a boat back to Adarlan within three weeks, possessing the answers that would solve everything.

It should have energized her. But instead she found herself silently mounting her mare, out of words and the will to use them. Just the past few minutes of interaction had drained her completely.

It was better that Rowan didn't seem inclined to speak as she followed him out of the city. The guards merely waved them through the walls, some even backing away.

As they rode on, Rowan didn't ask why she was here and what she'd been doing for the past ten years while the world had gone to hell. He pulled his pale hood over his silver hair and moved ahead, though it was still easy enough to mark him as different, as a warrior and law unto himself.

If he was truly as old as she suspected, she was likely little more than a speck of dust to him, a fizzle of life in the long-burning fire of his immortality. He could probably kill her without a second thought—and then move on to his next task, utterly untroubled by ending her existence.

It didn't unnerve her as much as it should have.

HER DESTINY AWAITS. BUT FIRST, VENGEANCE . . .



QUEEN
of
SHADOWS

SARAH J. MAAS

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

BLOOMSBURY

QUEEN
OF
SHADOWS

— A *Throne of Glass* NOVEL —

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For Alex Bracken—

*For the six years of e-mails,
For the thousands of pages critiqued,
For your tiger heart and your Jedi wisdom,
And for just being you.*

*I'm so glad I e-mailed you that day.
And so grateful you wrote back.*

Erilea



PART ONE

Lady of Shadows



CHAPTER 1

There was a thing waiting in the darkness.

It was ancient, and cruel, and paced in the shadows leashing his mind. It was not of his world, and had been brought here to fill him with its primordial cold. Some invisible barrier still separated them, but the wall crumbled a little more every time the thing stalked along its length, testing its strength.

He could not remember his name.

That was the first thing he'd forgotten when the darkness enveloped him weeks or months or eons ago. Then he'd forgotten the names of the others who had meant so much to him. He could recall horror and despair—only because of the solitary moment that kept interrupting the blackness like the steady beat of a drum: a few minutes of screaming and blood and frozen wind. There had been people he loved in that room of red marble and glass; the woman had lost her head—

Lost, as if the beheading were her fault.

A lovely woman with delicate hands like golden doves. It was not her

fault, even if he could not remember her name. It was the fault of the man on the glass throne, who had ordered that guard's sword to sever flesh and bone.

There was nothing in the darkness beyond the moment when that woman's head thudded to the ground. There was nothing *but* that moment, again and again and again—and that thing pacing nearby, waiting for him to break, to yield, to let it in. A prince.

He could not remember if the thing was the prince, or if he himself had once been a prince. Not likely. A prince would not have allowed that woman's head to be cut off. A prince would have stopped the blade. A prince would have saved her.

Yet he had not saved her, and he knew there was no one coming to save him.

There was still a real world beyond the shadows. He was forced to participate in it by the man who had ordered the slaughter of that lovely woman. And when he did, no one noticed that he had become hardly more than a marionette, struggling to speak, to act past the shackles on his mind. He hated them for not noticing. That was one of the emotions he still knew.

I was not supposed to love you. The woman had said that—and then she died. She should not have loved him, and he should not have dared to love her. He deserved this darkness, and once the invisible boundary shattered and the waiting thing pounced, infiltrating and filling him . . . he'd have earned it.

So he remained bound in night, witnessing the scream and the blood and the impact of flesh on stone. He knew he should struggle, knew he *had* struggled in those final seconds before the collar of black stone had clamped around his neck.

But there was a thing waiting in the darkness, and he could not bring himself to fight it for much longer.

CHAPTER 2

Aelin Ashryver Galathynius, heir of fire, beloved of Mala Light-Bringer, and rightful Queen of Terrasen, leaned against the worn oak bar and listened carefully to the sounds of the pleasure hall, sorting through the cheers and moans and bawdy singing. Though it had chewed up and spat out several owners over the past few years, the subterranean warren of sin known as the Vaults remained the same: uncomfortably hot, reeking of stale ale and unwashed bodies, and packed to the rafters with lowlives and career criminals.

More than a few young lords and merchants' sons had swaggered down the steps into the Vaults and never seen daylight again. Sometimes it was because they flashed their gold and silver in front of the wrong person; sometimes it was because they were vain or drunk enough to think that they could jump into the fighting pits and walk out alive. Sometimes they mishandled one of the women for hire in the alcoves flanking the cavernous space and learned the hard way about which people the owners of the Vaults really valued.

Aelin sipped from the mug of ale the sweating barkeep had slid her moments before. Watery and cheap, but at least it was cold. Above the tang of filthy bodies, the scent of roasting meat and garlic floated to her. Her stomach grumbled, but she wasn't stupid enough to order food. One, the meat was usually courtesy of rats in the alley a level above; two, wealthier patrons usually found it laced with something that left them awakening in the aforementioned alley, purse empty. If they woke up at all.

Her clothes were dirty, but fine enough to mark her as a thief's target. So she'd carefully examined her ale, sniffing and then sipping it before deeming it safe. She'd still have to find food at some point soon, but not until she learned what she needed to from the Vaults: what the hell had happened in Rifthold in the months she'd been gone.

And what client Arobynn Hamel wanted to see so badly that he was risking a meeting here—especially when brutal, black-uniformed guards were roaming the city like packs of wolves.

She'd managed to slip past one such patrol during the chaos of docking, but not before noting the onyx wyvern embroidered on their uniforms. Black on black—perhaps the King of Adarlan had grown tired of pretending he was anything but a menace and had issued a royal decree to abandon the traditional crimson and gold of his empire. Black for death; black for his two Wyrkeys; black for the Valg demons he was now using to build himself an unstoppable army.

A shudder crawled along her spine, and she drained the rest of her ale. As she set down the mug, her auburn hair shifted and caught the light of the wrought-iron chandeliers.

She'd hurried from the docks to the riverside Shadow Market—where anyone could find anything they wanted, rare or contraband or commonplace—and purchased a brick of dye. She'd paid the merchant an extra piece of silver to use the small room in the back of the shop to dye her hair, still short enough to brush just below her collarbones. If those guards had been monitoring the docks and had somehow seen her, they would be looking for

a golden-haired young woman. *Everyone* would be looking for a golden-haired young woman, once word arrived in a few weeks that the King's Champion had failed in her task to assassinate Wendlyn's royal family and steal its naval defense plans.

She'd sent a warning to the King and Queen of Eyllwe months ago, and knew they'd take the proper precautions. But that still left one person at risk before she could fulfill the first steps of her plan—the same person who might be able to explain the new guards by the docks. And why the city was noticeably quieter, tenser. Hushed.

If she were to overhear anything regarding the Captain of the Guard and whether he was safe, it would be here. It was only a matter of listening to the right conversation or sitting with the right card partners. What a fortunate coincidence, then, that she'd spotted Tern—one of Arobynn's favored assassins—buying the latest dose of his preferred poison at the Shadow Market.

She'd followed him here in time to spy several more of Arobynn's assassins converging on the pleasure hall. They never did that—not unless their master was present. Usually only when Arobynn was taking a meeting with someone very, very important. Or dangerous.

After Tern and the others had slipped inside the Vaults, she'd waited on the street for a few minutes, lingering in the shadows to see whether Arobynn arrived, but no such luck. He must have already been within.

So she'd come in on the heels of a group of drunken merchants' sons, spotted where Arobynn was holding court, and done her best to remain unnoticed and unremarkable while she lurked at the bar—and observed.

With her hood and dark clothes, she blended in well enough not to garner much attention. She supposed that if anyone was foolish enough to attempt to rob her, it made them fair game to be robbed right back. She *was* running low on money.

She sighed through her nose. If her people could only see her: Aelin of the Wildfire, assassin and pickpocket. Her parents and uncle were probably thrashing in their graves.

Still. Some things were worth it. Aelin crooked a gloved finger at the bald barkeep, signaling for another ale.

“I’d mind how much you drink, girl,” sneered a voice beside her.

She glanced sidelong at the average-sized man who had slipped up beside her at the bar. She would have known him for his ancient cutlass if she hadn’t recognized the disarmingly common face. The ruddy skin, the beady eyes and thick brows—all a bland mask to hide the hungry killer beneath.

Aelin braced her forearms on the bar, crossing one ankle over the other. “Hello, Tern.” Arobynn’s second in command—or he had been two years ago. A vicious, calculating little prick who had always been more than eager to do Arobynn’s dirty work. “I figured it was only a matter of time before one of Arobynn’s dogs sniffed me out.”

Tern leaned against the bar, flashing her a too-bright smile. “If memory serves, you were always his favorite bitch.”

She chuckled, facing him fully. They were nearly equal in height—and with his slim build, Tern had been unnervingly good at getting into even the most well-guarded places. The barkeep, spotting Tern, kept well away.

Tern inclined his head over a shoulder, gesturing to the shadowy back of the cavernous space. “Last banquette against the wall. He’s finishing up with a client.”

She flicked her gaze in the direction Tern indicated. Both sides of the Vaults were lined with alcoves teeming with whores, barely curtained off from the crowds. She skipped over the writhing bodies, over the gaunt-faced, hollow-eyed women waiting to earn their keep in this festering shit-hole, over the people who monitored the proceedings from the nearest tables—guards and voyeurs and fleshmongers. But there, tucked into the wall adjacent to the alcoves, were several wooden booths.

Exactly the ones she’d been discreetly monitoring since her arrival.

And in the one farthest from the lights . . . a gleam of polished leather boots stretched out beneath the table. A second pair of boots, worn and

muddy, were braced on the floor across from the first, as if the client were ready to bolt. Or, if he were truly stupid, to fight.

He was certainly stupid enough to have let his personal guard stay visible, a beacon alerting anyone who cared to notice that something rather important was happening in that last booth.

The client's guard—a slender, hooded young woman armed to the teeth—was leaning against a wooden pillar nearby, her silky, shoulder-length dark hair shining in the light as she carefully monitored the pleasure hall. Too stiff to be a casual patron. No uniform, no house colors or sigils. Not surprising, given the client's need for secrecy.

The client probably thought it was safer to meet here, when these sorts of meetings were usually held at the Assassins' Keep or one of the shadowy inns owned by Arobynn himself. He had no idea that Arobynn was also a major investor in the Vaults, and it would take only a nod from Aelin's former master for the metal doors to lock—and the client and his guard to never walk out again.

It still left the question of why Arobynn had agreed to meet here.

And still left Aelin looking across the hall toward the man who had shattered her life in so many ways.

Her stomach tightened, but she smiled at Tern. "I knew the leash wouldn't stretch far."

Aelin pushed off the bar, slipping through the crowd before the assassin could say anything else. She could feel Tern's stare fixed right between her shoulder blades, and knew he was aching to plunge his cutlass there.

Without bothering to glance back, she gave him an obscene gesture over her shoulder.

His barked string of curses was far better than the bawdy music being played across the room.

She noted each face she passed, each table of revelers and criminals and workers. The client's personal guard now watched her, a gloved hand slipping to the ordinary sword at her side.

Not your concern, but nice try.

Aelin was half tempted to smirk at the woman. Might have done so, actually, if she wasn't focused on the King of the Assassins. On what waited for her in that booth.

But she was ready—or as ready as she could ever be. She'd spent long enough planning.

Aelin had given herself a day at sea to rest and to miss Rowan. With the blood oath now eternally binding her to the Fae Prince—and him to her—his absence was like a phantom limb. She still felt that way, even when she had so much to do, even though missing her *carranam* was useless and he'd no doubt kick her ass for it.

The second day they'd been apart, she'd offered the ship's captain a silver coin for a pen and a stack of paper. And after locking herself in her cramped stateroom, she'd begun writing.

There were two men in this city responsible for destroying her life and the people she'd loved. She would not leave Rifthold until she'd buried them both.

So she'd written page after page of notes and ideas, until she had a list of names and places and targets. She'd memorized every step and calculation, and then she'd burned the pages with the power smoldering in her veins, making sure every last scrap was nothing more than ash floating out the porthole window and across the vast, night-darkened ocean.

Though she had braced herself, it had still been a shock weeks later when the ship had passed some unseen marker just off the coast and her magic vanished. All that fire she'd spent so many months carefully mastering . . . gone as if it had never existed, not even an ember left flickering in her veins. A new sort of emptiness—different from the hole Rowan's absence left in her.

Stranded in her human skin, she'd curled up on her cot and recalled how to breathe, how to think, how to move her damn body without the immortal grace she'd become so dependent on. She was a useless fool for letting those gifts become a crutch, for being caught unguarded when they were again ripped from her. Rowan definitely would have kicked her

ass for *that*—once he'd recovered himself. It was enough to make her glad she'd asked him to stay behind.

So she had breathed in the brine and the wood, and reminded herself that she'd been trained to kill with her bare hands long before she'd ever learned to melt bones with her fire. She did not need the extra strength, speed, and agility of her Fae form to bring down her enemies.

The man responsible for that initial brutal training—the man who had been savior and tormentor, but never declared himself father or brother or lover—was now steps away, still speaking with his oh-so-important client.

Aelin pushed against the tension threatening to lock up her limbs and kept her movements feline-smooth as she closed the final twenty feet between them.

Until Arobynn's client rose to his feet, snapping something at the King of the Assassins, and stormed toward his guard.

Even with the hood, she knew the way he moved. She knew the shape of the chin poking from the shadows of the cowl, the way his left hand tended to brush against his scabbard.

But the sword with the eagle-shaped pommel was not hanging at his side.

And there was no black uniform—only brown, nondescript clothes, spotted with dirt and blood.

She grabbed an empty chair and pulled it up to a table of card players before the client had taken two steps. She slid into the seat and focused on breathing, on listening, even as the three people at the table frowned at her.

She didn't care.

From the corner of her eye, she saw the guard jerk her chin toward her.

"Deal me in," Aelin muttered to the man beside her. "Right now."

"We're in the middle of a game."

"Next round, then," she said, relaxing her posture and slumping her shoulders as Chaol Westfall cast his gaze in her direction.

"This novel really does sparkle." Roddy Doyle

FLYING
TIPS
FOR
FLIGHTLESS
BIRDS

An illustration of two people skydiving. On the left, a person with long blonde hair, wearing a blue top and purple shorts, is in a horizontal position. On the right, a person with short blonde hair, wearing a yellow top and white pants, is in a more vertical, head-down position. Both are connected to a thin line representing a parachute cord.

KELLY M'CAUGHRAN

FLYING
TIPS
FOR
FLIGHTLESS
BIRDS

KELLY M'CAUGHRAN

WALKER
BOOKS

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MONDAY 12 JANUARY

Flying tips for flightless birds

Posted by Birdie

There's a moment during every trick. Circus people call it the crowd-pleaser. Or the ticket-seller. Or sometimes, among ourselves, the widow-maker. It's the drum-roll moment, the spotlight moment, the moment that makes an audience hold its breath. It's different for every act, but on the flying trapeze it always involves a lycra-clad lunatic leaping into space while dangling from a bar high above the ground, and then letting go.

But we'll get to flying later. The first thing you need to learn is how to introduce your act.

My name – drum roll, please – is Birdie Franconi and I am one half (the pretty half) of the famous Flying Franconis!

Well, so far we're only famous in our street. And it's not a very long street. In fact, it's more of a country lane in a minuscule village close to a tiny town on the outskirts

of the outskirts of the outskirts of Belfast. But Franconis' Circus School is the biggest circus in Little Murragh and we're starting this blog because we want you to be part of it.

The other half of the Flying Franconis is throwing juggling balls at my head and telling me to hurry up and introduce him. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, allow me to present the boy who puts the "double" into "double act", my partner, brother and *practically* identical (apart from the gender thing) twin, Finch Franconi! (Crowd goes wild as Finch bows from his perch on my bedroom windowsill.)

Flying Tips for Flightless Birds is our brand-new blog of all things Franconi, written by the newest generation of the Franconi circus family! Here you'll learn to juggle, ride a unicycle, tame a lion, walk a high wire and turn somersaults on horseback. Stick around, we'll even teach you how to fly.

"Finch, it's finished. Come take a look." Birdie waves me over and nods at her computer screen. "What do you think?"

I lean on the back of her chair, resting my chin on her shoulder as I read the blog post. In the screen reflection our two heads emerge from her neck like something from a cheap sci-fi movie.

"It's great, but you didn't mention the show; I thought that was the whole point."

“Yes, but there isn’t going to *be* a show unless we drum up some interest in the circus school. I can only dangle from my ankles for so long; we need more performers.” She grabs her school bag, which today is a vintage leather camera case, and says, “It’ll do. Come on, we’re late.”

We’re always late. You would be stunned at how long it takes Birdie to get dressed in the morning. Almost as long as me, in fact.

As we run down the lane, skidding on ice puddles and leaping over potholes, I adjust the length of the orange braces holding up my waistband, straighten my skinny tie and hold on to my pork-pie hat. My school bag, which today is a 1930s doctor’s bag, bashes against my blue checked shorts. The doctor’s bag makes my books smell a bit chemically, but I reckon anything that stops teachers scrutinizing my homework too closely can only be a good thing.

We make it to first period with thirty seconds to spare. Which is thirty seconds too long.

The secret to surviving high school is this: minimize corridor time.

Every boy in our class (except me) is already there, playing football on the two-metre-wide “pitch” of the maths corridor. As we pick our way through, I manage to get kicked in the ankle twice and then score an own goal.

“Out of the way, Freak Show!”

And with that, the week has officially begun.

Birdie kicks the ball down the corridor and they go chasing after it, allowing us to make it to the classroom door, where Kitty Bond takes a break from cackling at something on her phone to glance pointedly at me and say, “Look, girls, it’s the gorgeous *Miss Franconi* and her sister, Birdie.”

The Bond Girls laugh, one of the footballers wolf-whistles, and Kitty’s boyfriend, James, “accidentally” boots the ball at the backs of my knees.

I’m not bothered. *Miss. Her.* This is standard Monday-morning stuff. Miss Allen is on her way down the corridor already; it’s *so* not worth starting anything. But suddenly Birdie, who is usually pretty good at not rising to this crap, is stepping between me and Kitty, tiny fists on her hips, going, “Oh, look, it’s the hideous Miss Bond and her soon-to-be *black eye.*”

“Ooooooh, is that a threat, Birdbrain? Any day – you *and* your pretty sister. Unless she’s worried she’ll break a nail?” She arches an eyebrow at my fingernails, which are actually the same colour as hers today – bright green. Birdie was right about this town being small. It’s everyone-knows-everyone-else’s-business small. It’s every-little-thing-you-do-becomes-gossip small. And it’s *especially* boys-in-nail-polish-really-stand-out small.

I roll my eyes and take a step forward. I wouldn’t

usually bother but Kitty knows getting Birdie involved is a sure-fire way to draw me in; we're kind of a package deal. I put a hand on Birdie's trembling shoulder, which in twin-speak means *I've got this*, and say, "The colour looks better on you, Kitty. What shade is that, 'Wicked Witch of the West' or 'Hulk'?"

"I don't care what's going on here, it stops right now," Miss Allen says in her sternest teacher voice, which isn't very stern at all, but it's Monday morning and no one has the energy anyway. She unlocks the door and waves the class in. Kitty barges past us, leading the Bond Girls and making sure Birdie and I are last. On our way through the door, Miss Allen mutters, "Ignore her, Finch. Anyone who uses their own gender as an insult has issues." I grin at her and hope her sympathy lasts until she's seen my half-finished homework.



THURSDAY 15 JANUARY

Two buckets and a barrel (or one way to start your own circus family)

Posted by Birdie

The famous Franconis began with our great-great-granny, Alouette Franconi, and our great-great-grandfather, Ennis Mullins.

Alouette was half French, half Italian, orphaned young, and given away by her remaining relatives to a passing circus, where she grew up sewing costumes for the horse acrobats (that's acrobats on horses, not horses doing headstands).

She soon got bored with washing sweaty tights and began learning the tightrope instead, and by the time she was sixteen she was so good she was the star of the show. She travelled all over Europe and America with the Rossetti Brothers travelling circus, making her act more and more daring all the time. She didn't just *walk* the tightrope, she

danced on it, rode a bike across it, stopped to fry eggs in the middle of it, carried children across it, did acrobatics on it – and she did it all without a safety net.

In 1899, aged seventeen, she walked across Niagara Falls; a thousand metres from one cliff edge to the other, in high winds, sixty metres above the raging river below.

And then she did it again with buckets strapped to her feet, just to make things interesting.

There's a photo of her, about to step off the wire onto Canadian soil, hanging in an American museum dedicated to the Heroes of Niagara (Headcases of Niagara, Dad calls them, but he's always been a feet-firmly-on-solid-ground type).

Back in 1902, this photo was hanging on the wall of a restaurant at the Falls, and that's where Ennis Mullins first saw Alouette.

Ennis was born right here in Little Murragh but, being a sensible lad, he ran away at the first opportunity, determined to have some fun. I guess he knew that someday he'd have to come back and run his dad's farm, so he decided that first he'd go and find the maddest thing he could possibly do and get it out of his system. He ended up at Niagara, which seemed to attract nutters thrill-seekers, and there he heard about barrel riding.

Barrel riding involves sealing yourself inside a wooden barrel and being hurled into the river to be swept along and over the Falls. Probably to your death. Success rates were not encouraging.

Ennis decided to go for it, but on the morning of the stunt, maybe he was feeling nervous; maybe he wanted some sort of insurance policy. That's when he spotted the photograph of Alouette – it was on the wall of the restaurant where he was having breakfast. I have to admit, she looks incredible in that photograph; calm and triumphant, knowing she's beaten Niagara.

Ennis swore on a Bible that if he survived the Falls, he would find the girl in the picture and marry her.

This idea was madder than the barrel riding, if you ask me. But if Ennis thought that making that promise would ensure his survival, maybe he was right, because when they hauled his bashed and waterlogged barrel out of the river, he was only half-drowned. And as soon as the majority of his shattered bones had healed, he set out to find this complete stranger and ask her to marry him.

I guess I'm telling you this story because it's always helped me to be brave on the trapeze. It reminds me that the best way to tackle something scary is to have something even scarier lined up for tomorrow.

[< < Previous Post](#)

“You’re such a romantic, Birdie.” I’m reading today’s blog post on my phone as we cross the empty school playground, which everyone just calls “the yard”. Birdie’s wearing a blue polka-dot Lindy Hop dress, black-and-white brogues, and a Muppets backpack that

strictly doesn't go with the outfit at all, but I forgive her because she's ingeniously added a pair of scarlet trapeze tights to the look. Which is awesome, but doesn't make it easy for us to slip unnoticed into class twenty minutes late.

"How are our stats?" I whisper as Ms Hatch glares at us.

Birdie winces. "One page view."

"I'm not sure a blog was the best idea."

"Don't worry. I'll keep posting – someone has to see it, and then maybe they'll want to join."

"We should put up more posters."

"Everyone here already knows about the circus school. They could hardly miss us, could they?" she says.

This is true, since several of Franconis' performers (i.e. me, Birdie, our big sister, Wren, and little brother, Jay) can be seen juggling, doing somersaults or riding unicycles in the yard every day. Birdie and I juggle without realizing we're doing it; we just start tossing the contents of our pencil cases to each other while we talk.

Besides us, Franconis' also has the Juggulars (our Friday-night juggling club), a class of little kids called the Tots Acrobats, the Tuesday Night Acrobats (who meet on Thursdays) and a couple of solo performers. Two of the Juggulars are in Jay's class and one of the

Tuesday Night Acrobats is in Wren's, but all the other circus kids go to different schools.

The whole point of the blog is to recruit new members since we don't have enough performers to put on a big show at the end of the school year. And if it doesn't work, it won't just be the end of the year, it'll be the End of Everything. Mum and Dad can't afford to keep the place open with so few students.

The thing is, Franconis' is the *only* thing in my life besides high school. And my high school resembles a post-apocalyptic wasteland where only the morons have survived, so Franconis' is pretty important. The blog *has* to work. Because I can't even think about the circus school closing.

So I think about the show instead, which is what I do in most of my classes. My schoolbooks are full of scribbled notes like *Tots Acrobats + vertical trampoline = human catapult?*, diagrams of trapeze routines and sketches of show-posters. Miss Allen gives me extra marks if I make her laugh, but the other teachers complain about the waste of paper.

If we can pull it off, the show will go down in Little Murragh history. We'll have a circus ring and spotlights and everything choreographed to really cool music, and Birdie and I will be the headline act – performing our craziest trapeze stunts with no safety net (“No chance,” Mum said) – and the posters will read:

**FRANCONIS' CIRCUS PROUDLY
PRESENTS:
THE FABULOUS ...
FANTASTIC ...
FAMOUS ...
FLYING FRANCONIS!**

“Finchley Sullivan, are you paying attention?”

My real name brings me down to earth quicker than sweaty palms on a greased trapeze bar.

“Yeah, I definitely was, Ms Hatch.” I nod reassuringly. She gives me a warning look and goes back to whatever it is she’s doing on the whiteboard.

Well, you couldn’t name a circus school “Sullivans”, could you? Even Ennis Mullins reinvented himself as Ennesto Franconi after he married Alouette. Eventually he became a flyer, but he started out as a freak show act because, since his Niagara barrel-riding adventure, he could pop his left shoulder in and out of its socket like a Lego man.

GERALDINE McCAUGHREAN

"Extraordinary"
KIRAN MILLWOOD
HARGRAVE
author of *The Girl of Ink and Stars*



WHERE ^{the}
WORLD
ENDS

BASED ON A TRUE STORY
SET IN SKILDA



FOR AILSA AND ANDY,
WHO INTRODUCED ME TO KILDA.

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USBORNE





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AFTERWORD

BIRDS OF ST KILDA

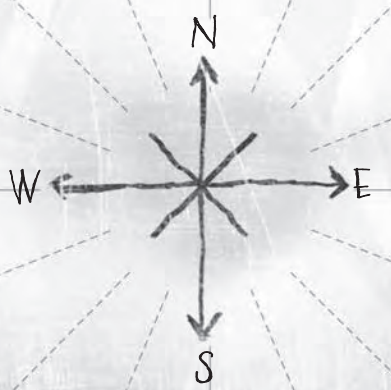
GLOSSARY

ST KILDA, 1727





ST KILDA ARCHIPELAGO



ATLANTIC OCEAN



CROSSING OVER

His mother gave him a new pair of socks, a puffin to eat on the voyage and a kiss on the cheek. “God will keep you safe, Quilliam, but he’ll not keep you clean. You must do that for yourself.” Happily, she did not try to hug him close.

He shook hands with his father, who remarked, quite amicably, “The floor needs digging out. You can give me a hand when you get back.” Then Quill walked down to the boat. His parents followed on behind, of course, but the goodbyes were done and out of the way. Besides, he would

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be back in a week or three. They were only going out to one of the stacs to harvest the summer plenty: bird-meat, eggs, feathers, oil...

It was a blade-sharp August day, the sea burned black by the sun's brightness. And no, there were no omens hinting at trouble ahead. Hirta people notice such things. The clouds did not split open and let fall drops of blood: someone would have remembered that. No sinister bird settled on anyone's roof. A gull flew over and dropped its mess on Mr Cane – but that was nothing out of the ordinary. (Who wouldn't, if they could?) But no signs, no dread omens.

All the men and women of Hirta helped carry the boat down the beach. Three men and nine boys climbed aboard it, and a few people on shore raised their hands: not to wave, exactly, but to check that the wind had not swerved unkindly off course. Quill did not know if the maiden from the mainland was there, among the crowd – didn't look to see. To be seen looking would have had every other boy on the boat mocking him. So he didn't look. Well, maybe out of the corner of his eye. Once or twice.

The fathers and uncles, wives and aunts shoved them off. And no, the pebbles did not claw at the boat's keel. No lugworms squirmed out of their holes to lug it back ashore.

CROSSING OVER

Nothing out-of-the-ordinary shouted in their faces, *Don't go! Stay home!* It was a good launch.

Or maybe, if there were bad omens, Quilliam missed them, trying to glimpse Murdina one last time.

A journey out to the big stacs can take an age, even with a sail. Warrior Stac is so big that it looks close to, but there are four miles of open water to cross before you get there – water that folds itself into hills and valleys and doubles the distance. It was little Davie's first time out, and Quill could see the seasickness rising in him, as well as the fear. One day, if the years made him cruel, Quill might feel inclined to make fun of a first-timer and elbow him in the chest, as the bully Kenneth was doing now. But Quill remembered all too well his own first voyage – how he had expected every upward lurch of the bow to tumble the boat over, every trough between the waves to take them to the bottom. He remembered waves higher than a boat's gunwales; the spray soaking him to the skin. He remembered fretting about getting ashore without making a fool of himself, and then having to prove, day after day, that he could catch fowl as well as the rest; and having no

WHERE THE WORLD ENDS

bed to sleep on, and never a mother about for comfort at night... Poor little Davie: not the biggest birdie in the nest. And bless him, look, thought Quill, he has on his socks already, in place of his boots. All ready to climb.

Davie looked too green – in every sense of the word – to stand up to Kenneth and his bullying. But when he puked, he chose to do it in Kenneth’s lap – an inspired revenge, thought Quill appreciatively.

They passed Stac Lee and got their first unhindered view of the place where they would be living for the next few weeks. John began to drum on the boards with his feet and the rest joined in, until Mr Cane (a reliable killjoy) told them to stop their noise or they would “wake every dead sailor from his resting place”. The clatter died away, and Quill saw the youngest boys cast little superstitious glances over the side, in case dead sailors were a serious possibility.

Warrior Stac grows bigger the closer you get. You would swear it was pushing its way upwards – a rock whale pitching its whole bulk into the sky, covered in barnacles, aiming to swallow the moon. Nearby Boreray has big patches of green grass on it, but Warrior Stac is so big and so dark that all the fowl of the air since Creation haven’t

CROSSING OVER

been able to stain it. It looms there, as black and fearful as one horn of the Devil himself. And it teems with birds.

To reach the landing place, the skipper had to round the base of the sea stac, passing right underneath the bulging shelf called “the Overhang” where a never-ending sleet of bird droppings pours down. The boat fell silent as each man and boy (except Kenneth) shut his mouth tight. “Look, look up there, Davie!” said Kenneth, pointing urgently upwards, but Davie had the wit not to fall for that one. No one looks up while he is under the Overhang. So only Kenneth caught a faceful.

For Quilliam, though, the Overhang was not the worst part of the voyage. That was the landing stage. The sea-swell slops up and over a bumpy jut of tilting rock. Getting ashore is a game you don’t even try unless the wind is square-on from the north-east.

The old men back home talked about the stacs as if they were just larders, crammed with fowl put there by God expressly to feed the people on Hirta. But had *they* not been afraid? In their young days? When they went fowling on the Warrior? Had they never feared the jump from boat to cliff? The bow rises and falls so fast that the rock face seems to rush up and down in front of your eyes,

WHERE THE WORLD ENDS

the spray flies fit to blind you, and there's maybe a piece of kelp you'll land on, slippery as soap, and you'll lose your footing and go down between the boat and the rocks. There again, maybe Quill, like Davie, was just a scaredy-mouse.

Mr Don, barefoot and with a rope tied round his body (to fetch him back aboard if he fell) and the boat's mooring rope wrapped around his wrist, balanced precariously on the bow, and steeled himself for the jump. The Stac rose sheer in front of them, looking like the impregnable wall of a castle keep. And yet Domhnall Don made stepping ashore look easy. The fowling party formed a line in the boat: Mr Farriss and Mr Cane at the front, then Murdo, then Quilliam, then Kenneth, and so on in order of height: Calum, Lachlan, John, Euan, Niall and Davie. They had not only themselves to get ashore, but sacks, nets, coils of rope and wicks, baskets, clubs and a battered saddle...

A small, cold hand took a grip on Quill's wrist.

"Get back in line," he hissed, but Davie clung on, saying nothing, just looking from Quill to the cliff, Quill to the heaving waves, shaking his head. Quill threw his half-eaten puffin over the side, looped a coil of rope across his body, and when it came his turn, took a hold on the little lad's arm

CROSSING OVER

– so tight that Davie squealed – and jumped ashore with him. A great shining wave washed over the landing place a moment later, but Quill had hopped out of its reach by then. “Easy, see? ...Only *pick your feet up quicker next time!*” he called, as Davie scrambled away up the rock face, new socks all wet and flapping like a duck’s flippers. It made Quill laugh to see them.

Looking back down at the boat, he could see the row of boys still aboard, left hands clenched white round their bundles, right hands just clenched, jaws set, all hoping to get ashore with their pride intact and without breaking any bones. (So maybe there was a touch of the scaredy-mouse in them all.)

Lachlan came past Quill, clambering ashore, nimble despite an armful of sacks and a bulky rope round his body. He was shabby as a moulting sheep, and twice as cheerful as he ever looked back home on Hirta. You would have thought he preferred the Stac to home. Why, thought Quill, when one wrong step, and the place will kill you?

But having thought it, he felt a sudden superstitious need *not* to think ill of the Stac. It did not mean anyone any harm. It was not a living thing, only a slab of rock in a big, cold ocean at the edge of the world.

WHERE THE WORLD ENDS



Once the fowling party reached Lower Bothy, they stood about, drying in the wind, like cormorants, and watched the boat tacking away into the wind: homeward. Calum waved: the boatman was his father. Lachlan uttered a yelp of joy. Davie bit his lip. No going back now, till Calum's father returned to get them.

“Back soon,” Quill told Davie, remembering that first time the sea had separated him from his mother.

No one wanted to be first inside the cave. Who knew what might be dead in there or – worse still – living? This close to the water, crabs and dying birds found their way in. Calling it “Bothy” made the place sound homely, like a hut or a cottage, when it was only really a dark, dank chink in the great wall of rock. Just twelve people, a heap of fowling nets, a cooking pot, six long ropes, an old saddle, egg baskets, bundles and boots. Cosy. In a few days they would move higher up the Stac, but in the meantime it was somewhere to dump the gear, and a good base for plundering the Overhang of its numberless gannets. So what if this was a stinky wet cave? Most of the time they would be outside, plucking riches from the kingdom of birds.

CROSSING OVER

And every time a lad came fowling on the stacs, he went home less of a boy and more of a man.

(If he went home at all, that is.)

JENNY
MCLACHLAN

TRULY
WILDLY
DEEPLY

*Sometimes love makes you
do wild things...*

BLOOMSBURY

TRULY WILDLY DEEPLY

JENNY
MCLACHLAN



BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW DELHI NEW YORK SYDNEY



ONE

I am sitting on a train waiting for my adult life to begin. If my mum wasn't standing on the platform watching me this would be a really kick-ass moment.

'Go away,' I mouth through the glass, but she just smiles, sips at her frappuccino and stays exactly where she is. So I stick my tongue out at her and she sticks her middle finger back at me. For an infant-school teacher, she can be very rude.

'Annie!'

I look up to see Jackson Wood, a boy from my old school, walking towards me. He's got a skateboard tucked under his arm and everything about him is relaxed and floppy: his walk, his hair and definitely his jeans.

He drops into the seat opposite me, spreads his arms wide and grins, as though his presence is the greatest gift I could ever receive.

‘What are you doing here?’ I say, laughing.

‘Same as you. Starting Cliffe College.’

‘But I thought you were staying on at school?’

He shrugs. ‘I was, until yesterday, when I finally looked through that stuff they sent us and found out we had to wear *business dress*.’ He says these last two words with a tone of utter disgust. ‘So I rang Cliffe and they said I could enrol today.’

‘Jackson, let me get this straight: you’ve decided to go to a college that’s twenty miles away from where you live just so you can wear denim?’

He nods earnestly. ‘And trainers.’

‘Wow ...’ I say.

He smiles and relaxes back in his seat. ‘Guess what I did this summer, Annie.’

‘Read all of Dickens’s novels?’

‘Not quite. I learnt to put my fist in my mouth. Do you want to see?’

I glance around the carriage. It’s packed full of commuters and teenagers – teenagers who might also be starting at Cliffe College and so could become my future friends.

‘Yes,’ I tell Jackson. ‘I do want to see that.’ If any of these teenagers are going to Cliffe, they might as well know what I’m like right from the start.

I watch in fascinated horror as Jackson pulls at his lips and slowly, slowly crams his fist into his mouth. Jackson has this beautiful, sophisticated girlfriend called Amelia and it's at moments like this that the whole Amelia-Jackson thing baffles me. Amelia plays the electric harp and got into the semi-finals of the Junior Fencing Championships; Jackson puts his fist in his mouth ... *What* do they talk about? Perhaps their souls meet on some amazing cosmic level that I'm too cynical to understand ... Looking at Jackson, the majority of his fingers now squished into his mouth, I find that hard to believe.

'Ta-da!' Jackson mumbles, and I give him a round of applause for effort. He wipes his slimy fist on his jeans then leans towards me and lowers his voice. 'Annie, don't freak out, but there's a woman standing on the platform staring right at you.'

'I know. It's my mum. Ignore her.'

'It's hard. She's standing so close to the window.' Jackson turns and gives Mum a wave and she waves back. Mum was supposed to just drop me outside the station, but then she insisted on coming right on to the platform. Amazingly, even though I'm sixteen this is the first time I've ever been on a train on my own.

I'm lucky my dad lives in Greece, or he'd be standing on the platform next to her. Dad can be a little

overprotective and he doesn't really want me to go to Cliffe College. This morning, he put all his anxiety into one text: Annie, I hope today brings you many riches! I also hope you have a coat as there is a 50% chance of precipitation. DO NOT leave your drinks unattended, even for a moment. Boys are wicked. And wear appropriate clothes. Daddy xxx

I replied: Clothes?! I didn't realise I had to wear clothes ...

Jackson sits back in his seat, leans forward again, then wriggles around, like he can't get comfy.

'Stop it,' I say. 'You look like you need a wee.'

He runs his hands through his hair, messing it up. 'Well, I don't. I'm just nervous. New college, new friends. I've only had a day to get used to the idea and it's making me feel sick.'

I know what he means. I've had all summer to get used to the idea of going to Cliffe, but I still couldn't eat any breakfast this morning. 'Listen, Jackson,' I say. 'All the best, *coolest* things in life begin with nausea: bungee jumping, freediving, kayaking down rapids –'

His eyes light up. 'You're right! Wrestling crocodiles, going over waterfalls in a barrel –'

'No, Jackson, those things aren't cool. They're ways of dying.'

But he's not listening. Instead, he's running through some bucket list of death he's got. 'Riding an angry bull, jumping off a cliff in a wingsuit, zorbing a wave, cuddling a tiger ...' He breaks off. 'This isn't helping, Annie. It's making me feel worse.'

'What you need, Jackson, is a Tic Tac.' I find the little box in my bag and shake a couple of mints into his hand.

'Why do I need these?'

'Because these are *magic* Tic Tacs.' I pop one in my mouth. 'They make you invincible so you don't need to worry about anything.' That's almost word for word what Mum told me this morning when she dropped them in my rucksack. She's been telling me that foodstuffs are magical for years – super-strength Snickers, mega maths Maltesers. She should have stopped doing it a long time ago, but it makes her happy so I don't complain.

Jackson sits back and sucks. 'We're definitely doing the right thing,' he says, mainly to reassure himself. 'I mean, look at us: we're going on an adventure.'

An adventure ... A ripple of excitement runs through me. 'You're right.' I say. 'The journey's only half an hour, but this definitely feels good. It feels ...' I pause as I try to find the right words, 'like the *start* of something.'

'Put it here, partner,' he says, raising one hand in the air for a high five.

'No way,' I say. 'Not doing that.'

Suddenly, the train lurches forward and my eyes shoot to the window. Mum starts trotting alongside the train, blowing kisses with both hands. Jackson pretends to catch the kisses then stuffs them in his mouth.

'Stop eating my mum's kisses!' I say, thumping his arm.

Then the train picks up speed and when I turn to look out of the window again, Mum has gone. I didn't even get to wave goodbye.

My stomach lurches. I'm all on my own. Jackson doesn't count.

The train snakes out of town, past rows of houses with net curtains and rectangular gardens. I stare through the window and see washing drooping on lines, a broken goalpost, a man smoking in his T-shirt and pants. The man raises a mug to his lips, but before he's taken a sip, we've left him behind and the train is crossing the marsh. Then we're sliding past green fields, rolling hills and munching cows. One of the cows lifts up her heavy head and looks right at me.

Just then, the sun breaks through a cloud and shines on my face, and the train sways from side to side. *That's right, cow. Check me out. I'm on a train, on my own, going on an adventure!*

Then happiness washes over me, pushing away any worries I have and filling me up from the top of my curly hair to the tips of my Nikes.

I see this little kid peering between the seats at us. He's not staring at my wheelchair – although it is an eye-catching lime green – he's staring at Jackson, who is now trying to fit a whole apple in his mouth.

'Go on then,' I say, lifting up my hand. 'Put it here.' Jackson gives up on the apple and we slap hands. 'But we're *not* doing this on a daily basis.'



TWO

For me, it was an obvious choice, leaving my old school and going to Cliffe.

My teachers and the students were nice enough – some were amazing – but I wanted a fresh start. At school you get assigned a role on day one – the brainy one, the pretty one, the one who turned up with his leg in a plaster cast because he fell down a badger hole (Jackson) – and that’s it, you’re stuck with it.

For fair enough reasons, I was assigned the role of Mouthy Girl With Cerebral Palsy and I enthusiastically fulfilled this role for five years. But when my Learning Support Assistant, Jan, told me that she was going to carry on being my LSA in the Sixth Form, I realised I needed a change. Jan’s lovely – she used to give me a home-made flapjack every Friday – but I knew it was

time for me to go out into the world alone. No Mum, no Jan. No support. No assistance. Just Annie.

Jan got it. In fact, she suggested Cliffe. Mum put up a bit of a fight, pointing out how much she'd have to pay on train fares, but I reminded her that Dad would contribute. He only sees me a few times a year so experiences a lot of guilt. Guilt that can be eased by sending cash my way. I try not to exploit this vulnerability of Dad's ... but I do own thirteen pairs of trainers.

And that's why, right now, I'm flying through the countryside, wearing cut-off dungarees instead of sitting in assembly wearing business dress.

'There it is,' says Jackson, pointing out of the window.

Cliffe College is spread out on the edge of the town, all modern buildings with lots of glass. As the train slows, people start to get their stuff together, and then, with a final hiss of the brakes, the train comes to a stop.

Jackson jumps to his feet and follows me as I swing my wheelchair round. The doors slide open and as arranged there's the porter, slamming the ramp into place and checking it's secure. Behind me, I feel the prickly impatience of the other passengers waiting to get off. I don't care. They can shuffle and check their phones all they like: this is a rare occasion where I get to go first.

‘The funny thing is,’ Jackson says in a loud voice, ‘she can walk. I’ve seen her!’

I make a grab for him, but he dodges round me and jumps off the train.

Outside the station, Jackson darts towards Tesco Express. ‘Back in a minute,’ he says. ‘Do you want anything?’

‘Yeah, a Twix would be good.’ Now I’ve survived the train journey, I’m regretting skipping breakfast.

‘I’ll catch you up,’ he says, leaving me to go up the hill towards Cliffe.

This hill is one of the reasons I’m using my wheelchair today. Jackson’s right – I can walk – and I was fine on the train, but the five-minute walk from the station to college would have been hard work. I don’t want to turn up exhausted on my first day.

Soon I’m in the middle of a stream of people all moving in the same direction. I could go faster, but I hang back so I can take everything in, or, more precisely, so I can indulge in one of my favourite hobbies: people watching.

I notice how much thought everyone’s put into their appearance, especially the people who want to make it look like they’ve put in no thought at all. Take the girl walking in front of me. Her hair is plaited, but just the

right amount of strands have been pulled loose and I can see that the price label is still stuck to the bottom of her undone trainers. A random collection of charity bracelets, leather thongs and beads rise up her left wrist, but they've been arranged by colour. There's nothing random about them, or her, at all.

I've put a lot of thought into what I'm wearing today because: a) I love fashion; and b) if people are going to stare at me, then I might as well give them something awesome to stare at. I've made my hair big and curly – kind of a Greek Afro – and I'm wearing a varsity cardigan, buttoned shirt, cut-off dungarees and my gold letter 'I' necklace. I'd describe my look as Sporty Vintage High School Greek Geek ... With A Touch Of Bling. Mum described it as 'a bit odd', but what does she know?

Jackson catches up with me just as I'm going into college.

'Here you are,' he says, handing me my Twix.

I tear it open, then Jackson and I watch as people swirl round us – the older students shouting out to each other; the new students eyeing each other cautiously. Suddenly, a salty smell hits me and I notice that Jackson's holding a greasy bag.

'Jackson, what *is* that?'

'A roast chicken.'

I shake my head and put down my Twix. The meaty smell is hard for a vegetarian to take first thing in the morning. 'You are so very surprising, Jackson.'

'Thanks,' he says, with a nod and a smile. 'Right, I'm going to find my form room. Wish me luck.'

'You don't need it. You've had two magic Tic Tacs.'

'Oh yeah!' he says, then he disappears up a flight of stairs, giving me a final wave.

I turn and head towards my own form room. I know the way because I had an orientation day during the holidays. I stop outside S12, pouf up my hair, check the corners of my mouth for caramel, then pop another Tic Tac – I need a lot of invincibility to see me through the next few minutes.

I take a deep breath and push open the door.

A group of teenagers turn to look at me and I look back at them. I know it's wrong to judge people on first impressions, but I'm fairly certain it's what they're doing with me so I allow myself to indulge, just for a moment.

I see three big sporty boys looking uncomfortable in their plastic chairs; one boy sitting on his own with his hands clutching a briefcase; four girls with perfect everything – hair, make-up and clothes; a girl with cornrows and massive yellow specs; two clever-looking

boys; and a couple of smiley girls, the kind that get asked to babysit.

An awkward silence fills the room. I'm fairly certain it was like this before I came in, but I still feel a certain responsibility to break it.

'Hi. I'm Annie,' I say.

I get thirteen smiles and nods back, but the specs girl gives me a big grin.

With all their eyes on me, I move my wheelchair over to the wall and put on the brakes. Then I tighten the straps on my rucksack, put my feet on the floor and grip the push rings. You know when you go swimming, and you can either jump straight in or inch slowly deeper and deeper into the water? Well, I'm a jump-right-in kind of person. I push myself up and out of the wheelchair, then I walk across the room.

Well, I say I *walk* ...

My knees and toes point inwards, towards each other, and with each step I take my hips jerk from side to side. So I don't lose my balance, my arms swing about too ... oh, and my butt sticks out. It's my walk, but it's not most people's walk, which is why thirteen pairs of eyes are watching every step I take. I look up and meet their gaze. Thirteen pairs of eyes flick away.

'I've got mild cerebral palsy,' I say, 'spastic diplegia.'

Cautiously, the thirteen pairs of eyes rise again as I take a seat next to the specs girl.

I take a sip of water and another Tic Tac – projecting immense confidence is tiring – then, when I’m ready, I look up.

‘Hi,’ I say, smiling.

She grins back at me. She has big eyes and beautifully round cheeks that for some reason remind me of apples.

‘I like your dungarees,’ she says in a rush. She’s got this throaty voice that doesn’t match how sweet she looks. ‘I’ve got a pair like them, but in blue.’

‘Thanks,’ I say. ‘I love them, but they’re annoying when you go to the toilet.’

‘Totally! I keep dropping the straps in wee.’

I like this girl. She says whatever pops into her head.

She pushes up her specs. ‘My name’s Hilary.’

‘Hi,’ I say. ‘I like your glasses.’

‘I know, yellow frames – how cool? I got them in a charity shop in Devon.’

While Hilary and I discuss the pros and cons of dungarees, yellow and charity shops, everyone around us starts chatting too. I love moments like this. The start of things. The smiley girls swap numbers, the clever boys have an earnest chat and the perfect-looking girls talk to

the sporty boys. I glance across the room and notice that the only person not joining in on this high-speed bonding exercise is briefcase boy. My heart goes out to him, but I don't go over because Hilary has just claimed that I once tied her to a chair and this I need to follow up.

'I did *what*?'

She does her gravelly chuckle. 'It was at playgroup. You tied me to a chair in the Wendy house and I missed the apple and toast.'

'Apple and toast ... that rings a bell.' I have no memory of Hilary, but Mum's told me I did some crazy stuff at playgroup so she could be telling the truth. 'Sorry about that,' I say.

'That's OK. I enjoyed it.'

Interesting ...

Hilary's eyes light up. 'I thought you were amazing because you wore boys' clothes and had all these T-shirts with dinosaurs on them.'

Yep. She definitely knows me.

'Was there anything else I did? Only, we should probably get it all out in the open right now.'

'Well, you taught me the words "willy" and "guff" and you told me that one of the helpers would be pleased if I painted her handbag with Tippex.'

'I'm guessing the helper wasn't pleased?'

'No. Oh, and once you made me do a wee in the sandpit.'

Oh, God. 'How did I *make* you do that?'

'You said you'd make me eat it if I didn't.'

'The wee or the sand?'

'The sand.'

'Wow,' I say. 'I was a psychopath ... Can I just apologise all in one go for everything my four-year-old self did?'

'You don't need to.' She hits me with her massive smile. 'You were so funny!'

I'm saved from hearing any more revelations by our new form tutor walking in. Mr Cobb apologises for being late, sloshes coffee over his desk and then hands round soggy timetables. I see that my first lesson today is English literature.

Hilary leans towards me and whispers, 'Do you remember when you told me we were only allowed to use the trampoline if we took off *all* our clothes?'



THREE

One of the perfect girls, Romilly, has the same first lesson as me so I leave my wheelchair in S12 and we walk there together. I've got a pair of crutches stored in Mr Cobb's cupboard – Mum dropped them off last week – but I decide to see how I'll get on without them. With difficulty, it turns out. The corridors are packed and I have to concentrate hard on keeping a conversation going, getting up a flight of stairs and not falling over. Falling over is one of the more out-there side effects of my cerebral palsy.

By the time we reach the classroom, I'm hot and my heart is racing. Thank God for Mitchum Ultimate. Seriously, the stuff's amazing.

While Romilly goes to sit with a couple of friends, I go to an empty desk by an open window. I take another sip of water and let the cool air from the window wash over

me. I could have sat with Romilly, but I prefer sitting on my own – I like to spread out – plus I don't want to get sucked into a gang of girls on my first day and then have to hang out with them for the next two years.

Our teacher, Miss Caudle, is a young, slim woman with flame-red hair. She takes the register then hands round copies of the book we're studying, *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Brontë. I pick up my copy, hold it close to my nose, then flip through the pages and breathe in deeply.

'Ah, a fellow book sniffer,' says Miss Caudle.

I nod and take another sniff. 'New book is my favourite smell in the world.'

'Well, that's your new book now so write anything you want in it.' She turns to the rest of the class. 'That goes for all of you: record your thoughts inside your books. *Wuthering Heights* is arguably the most powerful love story ever written and I want to hear your opinions about it.'

I take in the mist-shrouded couple on the front cover and have to stop myself from rolling my eyes – I'm not into romances – but then Miss Caudle starts describing the 'terrible violence and cruelty in the novel' and I perk up.

We're just going through the characters when the classroom door swings open and an exceptionally tall boy with short blond hair strolls in. He's wearing jeans, a tight

zipped-up tracksuit top and black trainers. Curiously, draped round his neck is a fringed scarf. He looks like a gymnast who's had a rummage through his mum's accessory drawer. He walks straight up to our teacher and clasps her hand.

'Miss Caudle,' he says, although he has a strong accent and it actually comes out as 'Miss Cuddle'. 'I'm sorry I am late, but an error on my timetable sent me to the wrong room.'

'Ah ...' Miss Caudle stares wide-eyed at her hand that's being pumped up and down. 'Are you Fabian Kaczka?'

'Yes, that's me. Fabian Kaczka.' He says his surname much more smoothly than Miss Caudle, with a long 'sh' sound in the middle. "'Kaczka" means "duck",' he adds, then he quacks. Loudly. In Miss Caudle's face.

Across the classroom, people gasp and stifle giggles.

Fabian Kaczka turns to face us, points at us and says, 'But you guys call me Fab.'

A boy at the front bursts out laughing, then says, 'All right, *Fab*.'

Fab, either not caring or oblivious to the fact that this boy is laughing at him, sticks out his hand and says, 'You've got it, my friend. Put it here.'

The boy watches in horror as Fab involves him in a blokey hand grab.

Quickly, as if she fears Fab might shake hands with everyone in the class, Miss Caudle tells Fab, 'Take a seat. Anywhere you like.'

His eyes sweep across the classroom, studying everyone in turn, before finally falling on me.

Ah, come on. Move on, eyes, I think. I'm enjoying sitting all on my own at the back, watching everything that's going on. But Fab's clearly made up his mind because he gives a determined nod then walks straight towards me, past several empty seats.

He stops in front of my desk, does this little bow and says, 'Please may I sit with you?'

Well, this is awkward.

As everyone watches to see what I will do, I feel my cheeks go red. I've just done my special walk across college, totally blush free, then Fab Kaczka bows at me and I go red!

'Sure,' I say, with a nonchalant shrug, then I take another drink of water to suggest my redness is solely down to dehydration and I move my stuff across.

Fab unwinds his scarf, places it carefully over the back of his chair, then sits down. He's so tall that I have to shift towards the window to stop our shoulders from touching. Next, he takes a fountain pen, a yellow notebook and a pad of paper out of his bag, then turns to look at me.

Woah. Those are *blue* eyes. They are the *exact* shade of Mum's Bombay Sapphire gin.

'Hello,' he says.

'Hi.' I pointedly keep my hands on my book. There will be *no* handshaking going on here. This boy clearly doesn't understand boundaries and I don't want to encourage him.

After looking at me for a moment longer, Fab turns to the front of the class, rests his chin in his hand and shifts his intense attention back to Miss Caudle – or, should I say, Miss *Cuddle*.

Finally, the lesson can begin.



FOUR

I love reading. I mean, I'm obsessed with it. I'm a book
pervert, and I do it everywhere and at every opportunity,
even when I probably shouldn't be doing it at all: during
assembly, when I'm talking to my Greek nan on the phone
(or rather when she's talking to me), when I get bored
during films. Some people think that when you read you're
shutting yourself off from the world. But they're wrong.
When I read, my world just gets bigger and better.

Occasionally, back at secondary school, I'd get a
sympathetic look from a girl in my year – *Bless, Annie's
READING again, like someone from the olden days!* But I
didn't care because generally I was reading a high-octane,
violent thriller that I knew had to be better than whatever
she was doing (usually her hair). Plus, the difference
between what you can get away with reading about in
public and *looking at* in public is mind-boggling.

So, I'm pretty much in heaven as Miss Caudle, eyes glittering, carries on describing the various characters in *Wuthering Heights*. She shows us pictures of the Yorkshire moors where Emily Brontë lived, and of the waterfalls and crags that appear in the book. As she talks, I type.

Next to me, Fab writes an endless stream of notes in large, flowing handwriting. I don't recognise the language he's writing in, but I see that it's bouncy, with lots of curly 'K's and 'J's.

Soon Miss Caudle tells us to read the opening chapter and make notes of our first impressions.

With a tingly sense of anticipation, I open the book and start to read. On the surface, nothing particularly dramatic happens – a man called Lockwood goes to this isolated, sinister house to pay a visit to his grumpy landlord, Heathcliff – but every word is loaded with menace and I get the feeling something very bad is about to happen.

It's a good feeling, which is why it's annoying when Fab leans towards me and says, 'Excuse me.'

I put my finger on the book, then look up. 'Yes?'

'What is your name?'

'Annie.'

He nods. 'So, *Annie*, I have a quick question: what is a "misanthropist"?'

'A person who dislikes human beings.' *Like me right now*, I think.

'Thank you.' Fab writes something in his yellow notebook.

I turn back to a description of Heathcliff as a 'dark-skinned gypsy' and 'gentleman'. I draw a line under the words and write *race and class?* in the margin.

Two minutes later, I get another 'Excuse me', followed by: 'Annie, what is "peevish"?"

'When you feel irritable.' *Like me. Right now.*

Ten seconds later: 'Annie, what is "penetralium"?"

'I don't know.' I hold up *Wuthering Heights*. 'This was written over a hundred and fifty years ago – it's full of archaic words.'

His eyes widen. '*Archaic?* What is "archaic"?"

'Words that aren't used much any more, but –'

Fab shushes me as he jots something down. 'Annie, it is very important that I learn the meaning of every word.'

'OK, but I don't know the meaning of all the words.'

A cough from the front of the room makes us look up. 'If you two could keep it down,' says Miss Caudle, 'just so everyone can concentrate on the task.'

Great. Now Fab's got me into trouble. Me getting into

trouble was another thing I wanted to leave behind when I came to Cliffe. I wasn't out of control at school, but I did get *a lot* of detentions. I blame this on my fiery Mediterranean temperament, but Mum's less generous and says that sometimes I can be a right pain in the ass. Whatever the reason, I don't want to draw attention to myself on my first day.

'Sorry,' I say to Miss Caudle. Then I whisper to Fab, 'You need a dictionary.'

'Like this?' He pulls a red book out of his massive rucksack. It says *POLSKO-ANGIELSKI* on the front. So he's Polish.

'Wouldn't it be easier to use your phone?'

He dismisses my words with a shake of his head. 'No. I prefer this.'

'But wouldn't your phone be more practical?'

'More practical, yes, but less reliable.'

'Well, OK,' I say with a smile, then I turn back to *Wuthering Heights*, leaving Fabian Kaczka tutting, drumming his fingers and flicking through his massive dictionary.

For the rest of the lesson, he keeps relatively quiet, but when Miss Caudle tells us to pack up, he unleashes a torrent of questions. 'Annie, why were you using different coloured highlighters in your book?'

‘I’m using a different colour for each theme. It’s something my teacher in my old school taught me to do.’

He nods then says, ‘Why do you have the letter “I” on your necklace when your name is Annie?’

I’m a bit taken aback by this – my necklace is tiny, a gold ‘I’ on a thin chain, too small for anyone to notice. ‘My mum got it for me for Christmas.’ Automatically my fingers touch it. ‘She ordered it online, but they sent the wrong letter. We only found out when I opened it on Christmas Day. I told her I liked the “I” and wanted to keep it.’

All the time I’ve been talking, Fab has been putting things in his bag and listening intently. He starts to wind his scarf back round his neck. ‘And *Wuthering Heights*? Do you like that too?’

‘Yes, so far I love it. It’s very dark.’ I shut my laptop and start gathering up my things. Break’s going to be over if I don’t hurry up.

‘Dark? In what way?’

I turn to look at him. He’s standing there, patiently waiting for my answer.

‘I like the way everything feels claustrophobic and also the words that have been used: *devil, fiend, possessed swine*.’

He nods. ‘Yes, words are very powerful.’

I'm not used to boys saying this kind of thing. Or girls. I'm used to them saying things like 'Shakespeare's boring' and 'God, I hate poetry'.

I nod. 'Yes, they are.'

The classroom's almost empty, but Fab is still hovering by our desk. 'It's breaktime,' he says. 'Let's go to the canteen and talk about books. I will buy you a coffee. Or tea. Do you prefer tea?'

I laugh and shake my head. 'You go ahead. I want to get organised.'

'No. It's fine. I can wait.'

I shrug, then I deliberately take my time checking my phone, slipping it in my pocket, pushing my chair back. I guess I'm hoping Fab will give up and go, but he just stands there, arms folded, like he's got all the time in the world. Having him hovering next to me makes me feel like I've got my old teaching assistant, Jan, back.

Fab's eyes follow me as I tighten my rucksack straps and a familiar flutter of irritation rises inside me, just like it used to at school when I'd have to convince Jan that, no, I really didn't want her to wait outside the toilets for me, and, yes, I really would be fine in DT without her.

I must be frowning, because Fab says in a concerned voice, making him seem even more Jan-like, 'What is the matter, Annie?'

‘Nothing,’ I say, standing up.

He steps aside and I walk past him towards the door, and, just as I expected, he watches me closely. I mean, he was curious about my laptop so my walk must be absolutely fascinating for him. Suddenly, he rushes ahead, pushes the door and holds it wide open for me.

I look from the door to Fab, then say, ‘Why are you doing that?’

He shrugs. ‘To help. You’re an invalid.’

I blink and stare at him. My heart instantly speeds up. All morning I’ve felt so strong, almost invincible, but with one word, Fab Kaczka has whisked my confidence away from me.

And this bothers me more than what he actually said. I thought I was stronger than that. I thought I was over being hurt by words.

Suddenly I feel mad – with Fab, and with myself.

I take a step towards him. ‘A piece of advice, Fab: probably best to avoid that word. It’s a bit offensive.’ I see Miss Caudle look up from her desk. My voice is raised, but I don’t care. ‘It suggests worthlessness. *In*-valid. Like you said, words are powerful.’ I take the door from him and step through it. I wiggle it backwards and forwards. ‘And look: I can open doors all by myself!’

I’m halfway down the corridor when I wonder if I was

too hard on Fab. It's hardly his fault if he hasn't fully grasped the complex nature of the English language yet. And all that door wiggling I did ... For a moment, I consider waiting for him to catch up so that I can explain that personally I think 'disabled' is a better word to use than 'invalid' and take him through the numerous ways that language can cause offence.

No. I've already missed five minutes of break because of Fab and I'm hungry.

I push him to the back of my mind and head for the coffee shop, taking the stairs instead of the lift and saying a cheery 'Hi there!' to a girl whose eyes are glued to my bare, wobbling legs.

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*This book is for Denise Johnstone-Burt,
who made me a real writer*

Prologue

Nicolas de Mercadier

Fontevrault Abbey, Duchy of Anjou, 1152

I run for the tower, tearing through a tangle of lavender bushes. I need cover. I need to hide. Dried blood and tears dry on my face, on my neck, bitter salt on my lips. It hurts to move. My right-hand eye is swollen shut and my back is on fire. I'm gasping for breath, sweat pouring down my face as I look up. There's a window. It's cut deep into the tower wall high above me, the ledge in shadow. If only I could reach it I could hide up there, blending into that small patch of darkness.

I scramble up the mimosa tree, shaking loose great clouds of yellow blossom like flakes of sunlight; I climb the wall like a frantic spider, digging my fingers and my bare toes into whatever cracks in the stone face of the tower that I can find; higher, higher.

Don't look down.

I haul myself onto the window ledge; I can't breathe. I'm spent. *Oh, God, what if Anjou finds me?* I glance down into the chamber below, chest heaving. It's empty except for one long table set out down the middle, a bench on either side. The table is already laid with silver vessels and jugs, but there

are no servants. The far wall is hung with tapestries. It's a long way down to the floor. I can't get down that way without breaking my neck.

And the nail-studded wooden door swings open.

It'll just be servants. Won't it?

It's not; it's Anjou himself, heir to the throne of England and my devil of a stepfather, still red and sweaty with the effort of blacking my eye and scourging the skin from my back – filthy, disgusting, sweating pig. My mother's at his side, her arm resting in the crook of his elbow. A surge of hatred boils through me when I see his face, him touching her. *Oh, God in heaven, don't look up.* Mama does: her eyes flicker towards the window ledge I'm sitting on, then away. She's seen me but this time she's chosen to preserve what's left of my hide. *Traitor.*

Still standing, Mama and Anjou wait in silence as a number of men step quietly into the room. The most corpse-like of them all is clad in the red habit of a cardinal. There is an abundance of golden chains, glossy bear hides, costly purple robes and ermine trimming – and yet not a single lackey. There's only one reason men cut of this cloth are prepared to pour their own wine and that's subterfuge.

Well done, Nicolas. You're hiding in a secret meeting crammed full of what looks very like the most rich and powerful collection of criminals in Christendom.

Anjou will definitely kill me now. It began when I looked at him the wrong way as I served my mother at fast-break, blew up like fire in the wind when my apology was “insolent”, and now with a bloodied back and a fat black

eye I have stumbled on his treachery. If I'm caught, he'll kill me this day – if I don't crack open my head like a hen's egg falling from this windowsill before he gets the chance.

“How long must we wait?” The cardinal speaks in Latin, his voice thin and tired. He sounds a little afraid, and sweat trickles down between my shoulder blades. “Have you summoned us here as some kind of game, my lord Anjou, or do we really expect the guests you promised us?”

“Believe me, I'm serious.” Anjou sounds as if he is on the edge of losing his temper – again. Mama is sitting very still and straight – this is no intimate gathering of friends.

And before anyone else can speak the air is full of white feathers, twisting and tumbling as if a goose-down bolster has burst open. The sweat chills on my back. Feathers: everywhere. All I can hear is the thin-voiced cardinal muttering a string of prayers and blood pounding in my ears. *Feathers*. They fly up past my face, whirling and soft, tickling my bare feet – so thick do they fall I can't see below me at all. What witchcraft is this? At last, the white cloud sinks to the floor, and now I see that this *is* no witchcraft. It's the Hidden, and I've never seen one of the Hidden in the flesh before. I've only ever heard the stories, the songs, and the breath freezes in my chest at the wonder of it.

There are four of them, tall and cloaked and more beautiful than any mortal, two girls and two boys, one much younger with wild red hair – a child, a Hidden child? I was always told the Hidden hatched full-grown from seething hot spawn spewed from the mouth of Hell. But here is a child who looks no older than me: thirteen. The other taller boy is wrapped

in a cloak of swan's feathers that tangle in his black curls and pool around his feet. One of the girls is red-headed like the child, and the other's hair is silver-white like a pewter jug – I can't help noticing their hair, great swathes of it, shining and wild, not mortal, seeming to move and shimmer as if it is alive. Not one of the Hidden looks any more than three or four years older than I am – seventeen, maybe, but they could be much older than that. I drank these stories with my wet-nurse's milk: the Hidden don't age. They don't die unless you strike them with iron – they're cursed never to enter the kingdom of heaven. And they're *here*.

“What do you want, mortals of Fontevrault?” He of the feathered cloak speaks directly to Anjou, but his eyes are lingering on Mama, and a faint smile crosses his lips. I can't take my eyes away from them. There's something so familiar about the way they hold themselves: I've seen that strange, cat-like poise before—

Anjou doesn't reply, and I swallow the urge to laugh. He's scared of them. *Coward*.

“We want to strike a covenant with you.” Mama stands, placing both hands palm-down on the table before her, and one of her rings glints in a shaft of light shining in through the window behind me. “Would any here dispute that our kind consorting with yours has its dangers?” Her voice is dry and calm, as if she is discussing the storage of winter linen.

The three full-grown Hidden share a swift glance but it's the cloaked one who speaks again, the swan-feathered boy, smiling as if these gathered noblemen and princes are nothing but foolish children. “Our longing for mortal

children, you mean?” he asks, very gently. “Or *your* longing for a drop of our immortal blood in your clans to make sure your rule is never shaken?” He sounds amused, as if on the verge of laughter.

“Both.” Mama’s voice rings out, and I know that tone. I wouldn’t argue. I half want to laugh because this chamber is full of men – rulers – and they are all too afraid to speak to the Hidden. Even Anjou. The task is left to my mother.

The dark-haired Hidden boy shrugs, and the white feathers billow around his shoulders. “Very well, my lady. If we cannot live together, we shall live apart. If you do not come near us, the Hidden will grant you the same favour.”

Just at that moment, the red-headed boy looks up. Right at me. For a thousand years, our eyes lock together, and I know that he’s been where I am now – just a boy in boiling water up to his neck. He understands: if he’s really the Devil’s spawn then I am too, for we’re the same. The Hidden boy looks away, back down at his white hands clasped together on the table, and my mouth is drier than the time Anjou stuffed it full of sand because I swore at him.

“Agreed,” Mama says, her voice hard. “We will expunge the Hidden from all that is written: it shall be as if you were nothing but a tale to frighten children. My lords?”

But before they have a chance to speak, the white-haired girl smiles, and as one, every man in the room turns to look at her, as if somebody has just lit an oil lamp in a dark room.

“Are you quite sure,” she says softly, “that there is not something you haven’t told us, mortals? A detail you may have neglected to mention?”

And as I watch, Mama freezes, holding her hands utterly still and flat down on the table as if she is fighting the urge to hurl the nearest wine vessel at the girl and smash her beautiful face.

“Rose?” The boy in the feathered cloak throws his white-haired companion a glance I can’t read the meaning of, and just as he does she makes a great show of looking up, right at the window where I am curled up into a ball, frozen with terror, on a narrow stone window ledge. The red-headed boy and girl glance at each other – she reaches out and places one hand over his, as if in protection. An older sister, perhaps?

All I can hear is the drumming of my heart.

One by one, the noblemen and the cardinal all follow the white-haired girl’s gaze, some turning in their places on the bench to fix their eyes on me. Mama remains seated. She doesn’t move. She doesn’t even flinch. My legs burn with cramp, but I daren’t move. If I fall from this ledge, I’ll die – a bloody mess on the flagstones far below.

And then, last of all, Anjou turns. He stands, leaning back against the table, squinting against the sunlight streaming in through the window behind me, and I see new heights of rage in his eyes as some kind of understanding dawns. The chamber is silent. No one knows what to say. They all just watch me, and I’m sure that time has frozen and I will be trapped in this moment for ever, and softly – so softly – I swing one leg over the window ledge, ready to climb down the wall and run for my life.

And my stepfather says, “*Nicolas*.” The hatred in his voice

hangs in the air like the stench of something rotting.

I'm not staying to finish this conversation.

And I slip. I can't hold on. Frantic, I scabble for a grip on the windowsill but the stone is like oiled silk beneath my sweating hands and I really, *really* can't hold on—

I fall, I fall, and the ground rushes up to meet me so fast, and I crash through the mimosa tree, the lavender bushes, and the tearing agony of it becomes everything, and all is black.

PART ONE
A GIRL LOST IN TIME



Connie

Hopesay Edge, present day

“So are you coming tomorrow night, Amy? You could bring Mika in the pram.” I knew it was a stupid thing to say the second I opened my mouth. Even wrapped in the enormous patchwork blanket I’d spent three months knitting, Mika was still smaller than the Creed family’s ancient and bad-tempered calico cat. There was no way Amy was going to bring her newborn to a party in the woods.

“Not this time, Connie.” Amy grinned at me, adjusting the blanket around Mika’s tiny body – she never seemed to mind my ignorance, even though I was three and a half years younger. She was in this total haze. Whacked out on baby hormones. “Mum used to take me and Blue everywhere when we were babies, though,” she went on. “We had these special earphones for festivals and we slept in a wheelbarrow. She says there’s no reason why my life has to grind to a halt just because of Mika.” For a second Amy looked worried. “She’s already on at me about when I’m going to start my course again. I just don’t know how I’m going to fit everything in.” Amy paused. She always knew just what I was thinking. “You look really tired, Con. Are you not

sleeping? It's that time of year again, isn't it?"

I shrugged. For me, early-summer would never be about a new season, a fresh beginning. When the nights grew longer, I always thought of Lissy, and how she wasn't there. But what could I say?

Amy reached out and took hold of my hand, twisting her fingers around mine. "I never really knew your sister. You must miss her so much. I mean, Blue's a total pain, but if he wasn't there it'd just be so weird and wrong. And your brother hardly ever comes home."

I was glad she hadn't said Lissy's name. Even now, six years later, I still couldn't bear the sound of her name.

I had to look away for a second or else I was going to cry. "Look, you should come on Friday!" I sounded too bright, too fake. "We can get Mika some teeny ear defenders. Your mum's right. Mika's gorgeous and amazing, but he's no excuse to sit around at home for the rest of your life."

Amy just raised both eyebrows at me, accepting without argument the fact that I didn't want to talk about my dead sister any more than she wanted to think about resuming normal life. "Don't you know the ancient legends, Connie Harker?" She spoke in an exaggerated stage whisper. "You must never, ever take a newborn baby within a mile of Hopesay Reach."

I rolled my eyes again. "Ri-ight. Or the fairies will come and take him away. I've heard all the stories, Ames. And anyway, Blue told me that Nye was going to set up his sound system over in the woods so we don't get the Hopesay zombies calling the police – you won't have to bring Mika

anywhere near the House of Horrors.”

Amy grinned. “I’m not worried about the scary fairies, Con, you know that. I love the Reach, and they’re only stories. I’m just tired, that’s all. You and Blue will have an amazing time.”

I glanced out of the window. It was getting dark. Right on cue Amy’s younger brother stuck his head around the door, white-blond hair flopping into his eyes as usual, the sleeves of his favourite faded old lumberjack shirt rolled up to the elbows. There were some things I could only talk about with Amy but at school me and Blue were always together, just like we’d been since I first came to live at Hopesay Edge. It had been such a dark, confusing time. All those weeks I’d spent in hospital, so weak, knowing that when I finally got out, Lissy just wasn’t going to be there.

“Con, Mum’s heading into town. Do you want a lift? She doesn’t want you walking home in the dark.” Blue rolled his eyes at the over-protectiveness, but despite his piss-taking I knew Mrs Creed was deadly serious. It really was getting dark, shadows lengthening down the lawn, and she never liked letting me walk home alone, superstitious just like everyone else in Hopesay Edge. Blue stepped in, bringing with him the faint, warm scent of the spices his mum had been making him grind in the kitchen – cumin seeds and turmeric.

He shut the door behind him. “So when are they going? Your mum and Nick? They’re definitely going, right?”

His excitement was infectious and I couldn’t help grinning back. “Yes, Blue – my great-aunt’s still dead and they’re off in

the morning. Which means that tomorrow night we're still having the most legendary party of all time."

Amy frowned. "They're away for nearly a week, aren't they? Are you going to be all right hanging around in the Reach by yourself, Con? Why don't you come and stay here?"

I half wanted to laugh, because the solution Mum and Nick had come up with to that little problem was all so unbelievably awful: *Joe, Joe, Joe*. "Don't worry, I've got a babysitter. My stepbrother's coming in the morning. I'll be fine without a lift, but tell your mum thanks anyway." *Joe. Oh, God.* I got up, slipping on a battered red sweatshirt that had once belonged to my brother – Rafe wasn't likely to demand it back. He hadn't been home in five years. I guess if I were teaching hot gap-year students how to dive in India, Hopesay Edge wouldn't be much of a draw to me, either. I blew kisses at Amy and Mika, then turned to Blue. "I'll see you in the morning, loser." I punched him in the ribs just hard enough and left by the back door before Mrs Creed got serious. The last thing I wanted was a ride home with Amy and Blue's mum firing questions at me the whole time about what I was going to do with myself while Mum and Nick were away.

Running down the long strip of garden, I left the black-and-white timbered cottage behind – lit-up windows warm and yellow against the gathering darkness – and I actually sprinted past the neat rows of tiny early-summer onions and carrots in case Mrs Creed decided it was too dark after all and called me back.

I climbed the stile at the end of the Creeds' garden and hopped down into long wet grass. This was the oldest part of the churchyard and all the graves here were pretty ancient, the stone dotted with pale green circles of lichen, names all worn away, with no one to remember them. It was so quiet. Lissy wasn't buried in Hopesay Edge. Mum, Dad and Rafe had scattered her ashes off the headland near Granny's house by the sea. Aged nine, I'd refused to go – that was back when I still didn't believe that Lissy was really dead. Before I'd accepted the truth: she was never coming back. She was just gone.

I ran through the churchyard, feathery fronds of grass sticking to my bare legs, unable to believe that it was really happening and Mum and Nick were actually leaving me with Joe. I mean, so at least this meant he'd never told them what I'd done at Christmas, but I really had no idea how I was going to face him again without actually dying of shame.

I had to stop running and just stand there among the gravestones and horse-chestnut trees, forcing myself to relive the night I'd sneaked out of the holiday cottage: anything to escape Mum and Nick's awful Christmas Eve drinks party, all those leering drunken middle-aged people breathing salmon-breath into my face. And then Joe following me down to the waterfront, jaunty coloured Christmas lights hanging between the street lights and even twinkling on the boats bobbing up and down in the harbour. I used to get so excited about going to the cottage every Christmas. Not any more.

Joe had sat down on the wall beside me. *You're pissed, aren't you? Bloody hell, Connie, you're only thirteen.*

Fourteen. I'm fourteen. I'd stared out at the black, glittering sea beyond the harbour wall, trying to ignore the way those bobbing fairy lights made me feel sick. *Don't tell me you never got drunk when you were my age.*

Yeah, but I used to do stuff like this with my mates. Drinking on your own isn't a good sign, Con. In fact, it's a really, really bad sign.

I'd turned to stare at him, at the chocolatey brown hair falling over his face, those high cheekbones. *If you weren't so gorgeous, I'd be angry with you, you know? Stop interfering, all right?*

Joe had shot me an incredulous look. *Shut up, Connie. You don't know what you're saying. Look, come on back to the cottage and we'll get you some water. If you're quick we can get back before anyone knows you've gone.*

Don't be stupid, Joe. I could stay out all night and they still wouldn't notice. Mum wouldn't, anyway. And I hadn't been able to stop myself. Hadn't really wanted to stop myself, to tell the truth. I just watched my hand reaching out as if it belonged to someone else and I could do nothing to prevent it landing on Joe's knee. The rough, warm feel of his jeans, the fabric of my skirt glittering silver and red under the street lights. It was me. I really was touching him.

You're just so lovely, Joe.

He'd jerked away like I'd slapped him, his face stiff with horror. *What are you doing, Connie? I'm six years older than you.*

You're the only one who gives a shit about me, you know. The only one.

Joe slid sideways along the wall, putting as much distance between us as he could, pity written all over his face. *Listen,*

Con. One day you're going to make a lucky bloke really happy, but you're fourteen and I'm your stepbrother, OK? This is wrong. Really, really wrong. Come on, let's get you back to the house.

His pity was the worst thing, and I think that's what made me angry enough to say it: *Don't give me that stepbrother bullshit. I'm fourteen and I'm not Lissy. That's the most important thing, isn't it? You were her stepbrother, too. I'm not Lissy. She's dead, Joe. Get over it.*

He'd walked away then, without another word, and I'd stayed out all night, and no one came to find me, because no one else gave enough of a crap, and I'd pushed Joe just about as far as it was possible to push him.

I sat down among the gravestones, covering my face with my hands as if I could somehow shove away the memory. I'd made a move on Joe – on my own stepbrother – and now I had to live with him for an entire week. Knowing that he had to be dreading it as much as I was really didn't help. I couldn't help shivering, suddenly unable to shake the feeling that someone was actually watching me, a witness to my melodramatic collapse.

You really just can't stop embarrassing yourself, can you, Connie Harker? It'll be a dog walker, I told myself sternly. *A dog walker who now probably thinks I'm crazy. Loads of people go this way.* There was a public footpath running across the southernmost corner of the orchard at home and now that Uncle Miles was gone people had started using it again, climbing over the stile in the churchyard right into the grounds of the Reach.

But that didn't explain why the temperature had dropped five degrees, cold air biting through my thin sweatshirt. The

skin on the back of my neck tingled like the time Blue quietly pushed a handful of sheep's wool he'd untangled from a barbed-wire fence down the back of my T-shirt and I'd nearly wet myself shrieking. *Run!* I screamed at myself. I couldn't move. My legs just wouldn't obey my brain and I couldn't get up. *Pull yourself together, Connie.* Swallowing my fear, I forced myself back up onto my feet and stood still among the tumbled and silent rows of headstones, goosebumps rising on my legs.

There it was again, that prickling, uneasy sensation of being *watched*. Bright pain spasmed behind my eyes, and I rubbed my temples. Another headache, just like I always got when I woke up after the Dream. I didn't want to think about the Dream now. Not here. Wind shifted the branches of the huge, spreading old horse-chestnut trees, releasing the heady scent of their blossom.

"Hello?" I shouted. "Is anyone there? Come on. Stop messing with me." I did my best to sound tough and unafraid, but my heartbeat wouldn't stop accelerating, and despite that chill in the air a cool trickle of sweat slid down my back.

No reply. All I could hear was birdsong and the rustle of wind in the trees shaking loose pale slivers of horse-chestnut blossom that drifted around me like snow, catching in my hair.

"Don't be an idiot," I said, aloud. "There's no one here but you. You're not getting enough sleep, that's all. Imagining stuff."

I ran, heart pounding in my chest, cutting through the churchyard until I pushed my way through the gap in the

hedge that led to the safety of our orchard – *home* – a glorious tangle of crabbed and twisted apple trees. The chickens had all been put away, which was usually my job, but it was still light – just – so Mum couldn't hold *that* against me, at least.

Winding my way through the apple trees, I stepped out onto the lawn, breathing in the gorgeous warm green scent of cut grass and the rich muddiness of the lake. The Reach sprawled beyond the carpet of lawn: a tumbling mass of warm stone, ancient timbers and a hundred mismatched windows. The sky was a swirling mass of fiery sunset, all reflected in the lake like it was the window to another world. I stood for a moment, my cold unease in the churchyard all forgotten, just drinking in the beauty of it all. It was funny to think how much I'd hated the Reach when we first came: it was here that Lissy had died. In time, though, I'd come to love every twisted chimney and every ancient door, which was proof, I suppose, of the Reach's power – a sure sign that I should have been more cautious.

THE NATION'S FAVOURITE STORY-MAKER

MICHAEL MORPURGO

A poignant tale of the physical and mental
scars of war, from the author of *War Horse*

Half a Man



illustrated by Gemma O'Callaghan

HALF A MAN

MICHAEL MORPURGO

ILLUSTRATED BY GEMMA O'CALLAGHAN



WALKER
BOOKS

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WHEN I WAS VERY LITTLE, MORE THAN HALF A CENTURY AGO NOW, I USED TO HAVE NIGHTMARES. You don't forget nightmares. This one was always the same. It began with a face, a twisted, tortured face that screamed silently, a face without hair or eyebrows, a skull more than a face, a skull which was covered in puckered, scarred skin stretched over the cheekbones. It was Grandpa's face and he was staring at me out of his scream. And always the face was on fire, flames licking out of his ears and mouth.

I remember I always tried to force myself to wake

up, so that I wouldn't have to endure the rest of it. But I knew every time that the rest would follow however hard I tried to escape – that my nightmare would not release me, would not allow me to wake until the whole horrible tale had played itself out.

I saw a great ship ablaze on the ocean. There were men on fire jumping overboard as she went down, then swimming in a sea where the water burned and boiled around them. I saw Grandpa swimming towards a lifeboat, but it was packed with sailors and there was no room for Grandpa. He begged them to let him on, but they wouldn't. Behind him, the ship's bow lifted out of the sea, and the whole ship groaned like a wounded beast in her death throes. Then she went down, slipping slowly under the waves, gasping great gouts of steam in the last of her agony. A silence came over the burning sea. Grandpa was clinging to the lifeboat now, his elbows



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hooked over the side. That was when I realized that I was in the lifeboat with the other sailors. He saw me looking down at him and reached out his hand for help. It was a hand with no fingers.

I would wake up then, shaking in my terror and knowing even now that my nightmare was not over. For my nightmare would always seem to happen just a day or two before Grandpa came to stay. It was a visit I always dreaded. He didn't come to see us in London very often, every couple of years at most, and usually at Christmas. Thinking about it now, I suppose this was part of the problem. There were perfectly good reasons why we



didn't and couldn't see more of him. He lived far away, on the Isles of Scilly, so it was a long way for him to come, and expensive too. Besides which,



he hated big cities like London. I'm sure if I'd seen him more often, I'd have got used to him – used to his face and his hands and his silent, uncommunicative ways.

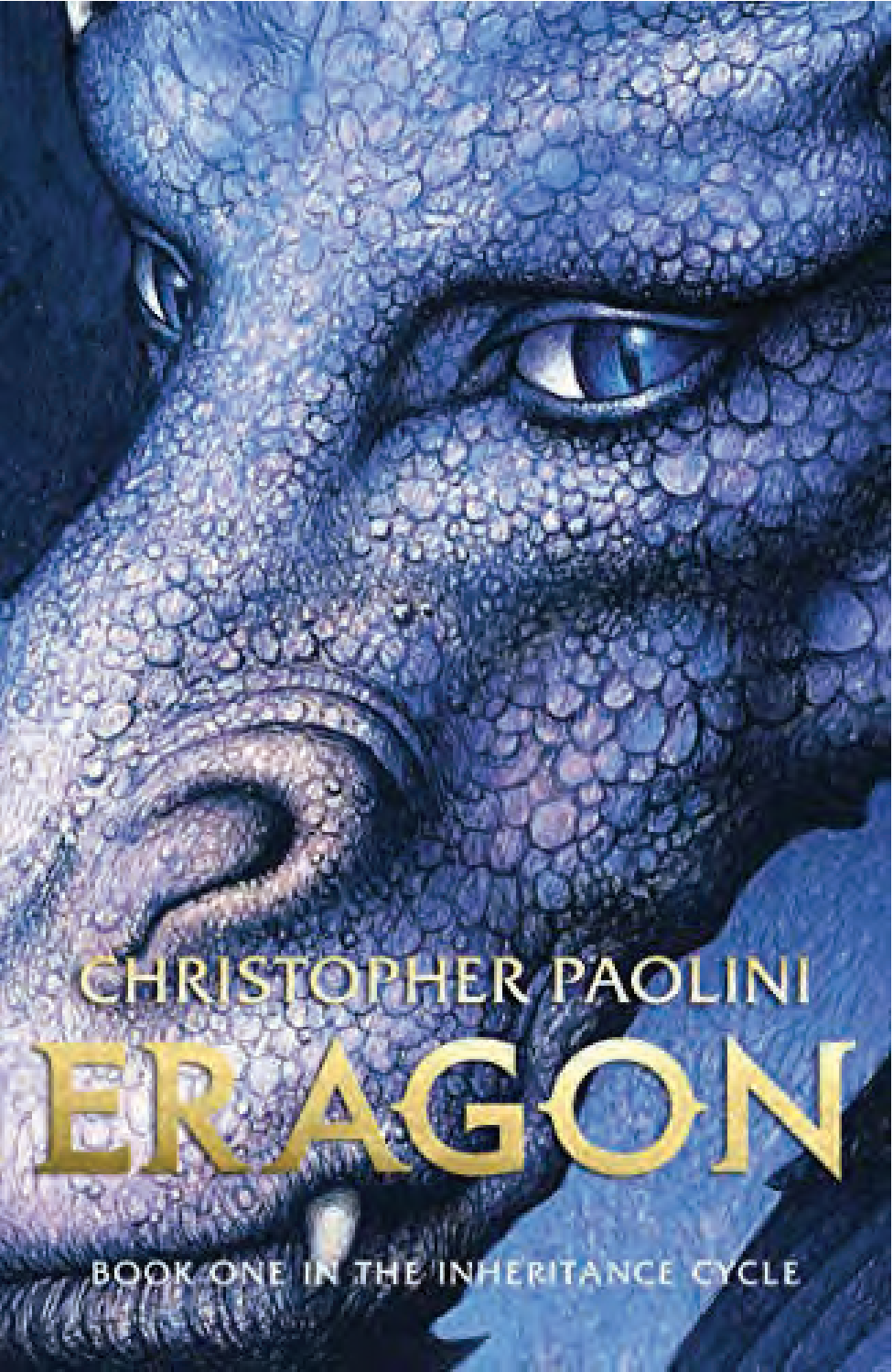
I don't blame my mother and father. I can see now why they were so tense before each visit. Being as taciturn and unsmiling as he was, Grandpa can't have been an easy guest. But, even so, they did make it a lot worse for me than they needed to. Just before Grandpa came there were always endless warnings, from Mother in particular (he was my grandpa on my mother's side), about how I mustn't upset him, how I mustn't leave my toys lying about on the sitting-room floor because



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he didn't see very well and might trip over them, how I mustn't have the television on too much because Grandpa didn't like noise. But most of all they drummed into me again and again that whatever I did, I must not under any circumstances stare at him – that it was rude, that he hated people staring at him, particularly children.

I tried not to; I tried very hard. When he first arrived I would always try to force myself to look at something else. Once I remember it was a Christmas decoration, a red paper bell hanging just above his head in the front hall. Sometimes I would make myself look very deliberately at his waistcoat perhaps, or the gold watch chain he always wore. I'd fix my gaze on anything just as long as it was nowhere near the forbidden places, because I knew that once I started looking at his forbidden face or his forbidden hands I wouldn't be able to stop myself.



CHRISTOPHER PAOLINI

ERAGON

BOOK ONE IN THE INHERITANCE CYCLE

ERAGON

INHERITANCE

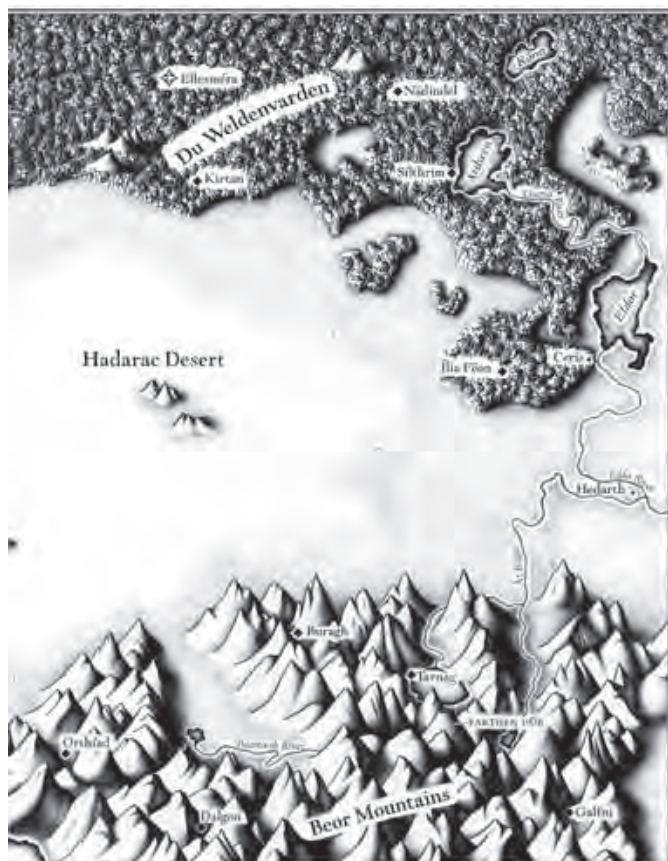
BOOK ONE

Christopher Paolini

ALFREDA.KNOPF

New York







This book is dedicated to my mom, for showing me the magic in the world; to my dad, for revealing the man behind the curtain. And also to my sister, Angela, for helping when I'm "blue."

PROLOGUE:
SHADE OF FEAR

Wind howled through the night, carrying a scent that would change the world. A tall Shade lifted his head and sniffed the air. He looked human except for his crimson hair and maroon eyes.

He blinked in surprise. The message had been correct: they were here. Or was it a trap? He weighed the odds, then said icily, "Spread out; hide behind trees and bushes. Stop whoever is coming . . . or die."

Around him shuffled twelve Urgals with short swords and round iron shields painted with black symbols. They resembled men with bowed legs and thick, brutish arms made for crushing. A pair of twisted horns grew above their small ears. The monsters hurried into the brush, grunting as they hid. Soon the rustling quieted and the forest was silent again.

The Shade peered around a thick tree and looked up the trail. It was too dark for any human to see, but for him the faint moonlight was like sunshine streaming between the trees; every detail was clear and sharp to his searching gaze. He remained unnaturally quiet, a long pale sword in his hand. A wire-thin scratch curved down the blade. The weapon was thin enough to slip between a pair of ribs, yet stout enough to hack through the hardest armor.

The Urgals could not see as well as the Shade; they groped like blind beggars, fumbling with their weapons. An owl screeched, cutting through the silence. No one relaxed until the bird flew past. Then the monsters shivered in the cold night; one snapped a twig with his heavy boot. The Shade hissed in anger, and the Urgals shrank back, motionless. He suppressed his distaste—they smelled like fetid meat—and turned away. They were tools, nothing more.

The Shade forced back his impatience as the minutes became hours. The scent must have wafted far ahead of its owners. He did not let the Urgals get up or warm themselves. He denied himself those luxuries, too, and stayed behind the tree, watching the trail. Another gust of wind rushed through the forest. The smell was stronger this time. Excited, he lifted a thin lip in a snarl.

“Get ready,” he whispered, his whole body vibrating. The tip of his sword moved in small circles. It had taken many plots and much pain to bring himself to this moment. It would not do to lose control now.

Eyes brightened under the Urgals’ thick brows, and the creatures gripped their weapons tighter. Ahead of them, the Shade heard a clink as something hard struck a loose stone. Faint smudges emerged from the darkness and advanced down the trail.

Three white horses with riders cantered toward the ambush, their heads held high and proud, their coats rippling in the moonlight like liquid silver.

On the first horse was an elf with pointed ears and elegantly slanted eyebrows. His build was slim but strong, like a rapier. A powerful bow was slung on his back. A sword pressed against his side opposite a quiver of arrows fletched with swan feathers.

The last rider had the same fair face and angled features as the other. He carried a long spear in his right hand and a white dagger at his belt. A helm of extraordinary craftsmanship, wrought with amber and gold, rested on his head.

Between these two rode a raven-haired elven lady, who surveyed her surroundings with poise. Framed by long black locks, her deep eyes shone with a driving force. Her clothes were unadorned, yet her beauty was undiminished. At her side was a sword, and on her back a long bow with a quiver. She carried in her lap a pouch that she frequently looked at, as if to reassure herself that it was still there.

One of the elves spoke quietly, but the Shade could not hear what was said. The lady answered with obvious authority, and her guards switched places. The one wearing the helm took the lead, shifting his spear to a readier grip. They passed the Shade’s hiding place and the first few Urgals without suspicion.

The Shade was already savoring his victory when the wind changed direction and swept toward the elves, heavy with the Urgals’ stench. The horses snorted with alarm and

tossed their heads. The riders stiffened, eyes flashing from side to side, then wheeled their mounts around and galloped away.

The lady's horse surged forward, leaving her guards far behind. Forsaking their hiding, the Urgals stood and released a stream of black arrows. The Shade jumped out from behind the tree, raised his right hand, and shouted, "Garjzla!"

A red bolt flashed from his palm toward the elven lady, illuminating the trees with a bloody light. It struck her steed, and the horse toppled with a high-pitched squeal, plowing into the ground chest-first. She leapt off the animal with inhuman speed, landed lightly, then glanced back for her guards.

The Urgals' deadly arrows quickly brought down the two elves. They fell from the noble horses, blood pooling in the dirt. As the Urgals rushed to the slain elves, the Shade screamed, "After her! She is the one I want!" The monsters grunted and rushed down the trail.

A cry tore from the elf's lips as she saw her dead companions. She took a step toward them, then cursed her enemies and bounded into the forest.

While the Urgals crashed through the trees, the Shade climbed a piece of granite that jutted above them. From his perch he could see all of the surrounding forest. He raised his hand and uttered, "Böetq istalri!" and a quarter-mile section of the forest exploded into flames. Grimly he burned one section after another until there was a ring of fire, a half-league across, around the ambush site. The flames looked like a molten crown resting on the forest. Satisfied, he watched the ring carefully, in case it should falter.

The band of fire thickened, contracting the area the Urgals had to search. Suddenly, the Shade heard shouts and a coarse scream. Through the trees he saw three of his charges fall in a pile, mortally wounded. He caught a glimpse of the elf running from the remaining Urgals.

She fled toward the craggy piece of granite at a tremendous speed. The Shade examined the ground twenty feet below, then jumped and landed nimbly in front of her. She skidded around and sped back to the trail. Black Urgal blood dripped from her sword, staining the pouch in her hand.

The horned monsters came out of the forest and hemmed her in, blocking the only escape routes. Her head whipped around as she tried to find a way out. Seeing none, she drew herself up with regal disdain. The Shade approached her with a raised hand, allowing himself to enjoy her helplessness.

"Get her."

As the Urgals surged forward, the elf pulled open the pouch, reached into it, and then let it drop to the ground. In her hands was a large sapphire stone that reflected the angry light

of the fires. She raised it over her head, lips forming frantic words. Desperate, the Shade barked, “Garjzla!”

A ball of red flame sprang from his hand and flew toward the elf, fast as an arrow. But he was too late. A flash of emerald light briefly illuminated the forest, and the stone vanished. Then the red fire smote her and she collapsed.

The Shade howled in rage and stalked forward, flinging his sword at a tree. It passed halfway through the trunk, where it stuck, quivering. He shot nine bolts of energy from his palm—which killed the Urgals instantly—then ripped his sword free and strode to the elf.

Prophecies of revenge, spoken in a wretched language only he knew, rolled from his tongue. He clenched his thin hands and glared at the sky. The cold stars stared back, unwinking, otherworldly watchers. Disgust curled his lip before he turned back to the unconscious elf.

Her beauty, which would have entranced any mortal man, held no charm for him. He confirmed that the stone was gone, then retrieved his horse from its hiding place among the trees. After tying the elf onto the saddle, he mounted the charger and made his way out of the woods.

He quenched the fires in his path but left the rest to burn.

DISCOVERY

Eragon knelt in a bed of trampled reed grass and scanned the tracks with a practiced eye. The prints told him that the deer had been in the meadow only a half-hour before. Soon they would bed down. His target, a small doe with a pronounced limp in her left forefoot, was still with the herd. He was amazed she had made it so far without a wolf or bear catching her.

The sky was clear and dark, and a slight breeze stirred the air. A silvery cloud drifted over the mountains that surrounded him, its edges glowing with ruddy light cast from the harvest moon cradled between two peaks. Streams flowed down the mountains from stolid glaciers and glistening snowpacks. A brooding mist crept along the valley’s floor, almost thick enough to obscure his feet.

Eragon was fifteen, less than a year from manhood. Dark eyebrows rested above his intense brown eyes. His clothes were worn from work. A hunting knife with a bone handle was sheathed at his belt, and a buckskin tube protected his yew bow from the mist. He carried a wood-frame pack.

The deer had led him deep into the Spine, a range of untamed mountains that extended up and down the land of Alagaësia. Strange tales and men often came from those mountains,

usually boding ill. Despite that, Eragon did not fear the Spine—he was the only hunter near Carvahall who dared track game deep into its craggy recesses.

It was the third night of the hunt, and his food was half gone. If he did not fell the doe, he would be forced to return home empty-handed. His family needed the meat for the rapidly approaching winter and could not afford to buy it in Carvahall.

Eragon stood with quiet assurance in the dusky moonlight, then strode into the forest toward a glen where he was sure the deer would rest. The trees blocked the sky from view and cast feathery shadows on the ground. He looked at the tracks only occasionally; he knew the way.

At the glen, he strung his bow with a sure touch, then drew three arrows and nocked one, holding the others in his left hand. The moonlight revealed twenty or so motionless lumps where the deer lay in the grass. The doe he wanted was at the edge of the herd, her left foreleg stretched out awkwardly.

Eragon slowly crept closer, keeping the bow ready. All his work of the past three days had led to this moment. He took a last steadying breath and—an explosion shattered the night.

The herd bolted. Eragon lunged forward, racing through the grass as a fiery wind surged past his cheek. He slid to a stop and loosed an arrow at the bounding doe. It missed by a finger's breadth and hissed into darkness. He cursed and spun around, instinctively nocking another arrow.

Behind him, where the deer had been, smoldered a large circle of grass and trees. Many of the pines stood bare of their needles. The grass outside the charring was flattened. A wisp of smoke curled in the air, carrying a burnt smell. In the center of the blast radius lay a polished blue stone. Mist snaked across the scorched area and swirled insubstantial tendrils over the stone.

Eragon watched for danger for several long minutes, but the only thing that moved was the mist. Cautiously, he released the tension from his bow and moved forward. Moonlight cast him in pale shadow as he stopped before the stone. He nudged it with an arrow, then jumped back. Nothing happened, so he warily picked it up.

Nature had never polished a stone as smooth as this one. Its flawless surface was dark blue, except for thin veins of white that spiderwebbed across it. The stone was cool and frictionless under his fingers, like hardened silk. Oval and about a foot long, it weighed several pounds, though it felt lighter than it should have.

Eragon found the stone both beautiful and frightening. *Where did it come from? Does it have a purpose?* Then a more disturbing thought came to him: *Was it sent here by accident, or am I meant to have it?* If he had learned anything from the old stories, it was to treat magic, and those who used it, with great caution.

But what should I do with the stone? It would be tiresome to carry, and there was a chance it was dangerous. It might be better to leave it behind. A flicker of indecision ran through him, and he almost dropped it, but something stayed his hand. *At the very least, it might pay for some food,* he decided with a shrug, tucking the stone into his pack.

The glen was too exposed to make a safe camp, so he slipped back into the forest and spread his bedroll beneath the upturned roots of a fallen tree. After a cold dinner of bread and cheese, he wrapped himself in blankets and fell asleep, pondering what had occurred.

PALANCAR VALLEY

The sun rose the next morning with a glorious conflagration of pink and yellow. The air was fresh, sweet, and very cold. Ice edged the streams, and small pools were completely frozen over. After a breakfast of porridge, Eragon returned to the glen and examined the charred area. The morning light revealed no new details, so he started for home.

The rough game trail was faintly worn and, in places, nonexistent. Because it had been forged by animals, it often backtracked and took long detours. Yet for all its flaws, it was still the fastest way out of the mountains.

The Spine was one of the only places that King Galbatorix could not call his own. Stories were still told about how half his army disappeared after marching into its ancient forest. A cloud of misfortune and bad luck seemed to hang over it. Though the trees grew tall and the sky shone brightly, few people could stay in the Spine for long without suffering an accident. Eragon was one of those few—not through any particular gift, it seemed to him, but because of persistent vigilance and sharp reflexes. He had hiked in the mountains for years, yet he was still wary of them. Every time he thought they had surrendered their secrets, something happened to upset his understanding of them—like the stone’s appearance.

He kept up a brisk pace, and the leagues steadily disappeared. In late evening he arrived at the edge of a precipitous ravine. The Anora River rushed by far below, heading to Palancar Valley. Gorged with hundreds of tiny streams, the river was a brute force, battling against the rocks and boulders that barred its way. A low rumble filled the air.

He camped in a thicket near the ravine and watched the moonrise before going to bed.

It grew colder over the next day and a half. Eragon traveled quickly and saw little of the wary wildlife. A bit past noon, he heard the Iqualda Falls blanketing everything with the dull sound of a thousand splashes. The trail led him onto a moist slate outcropping, which the river sped past, flinging itself into empty air and down mossy cliffs.

SISTERHOOD
IS SURVIVAL



NATALIE C. PARKER

ON THE BACK OF THE SEA, WHO DO WE TRUST?
OUR SISTERS.

WHEN OUR SHIP FALTERS, WHO DO WE TRUST?
OUR SISTERS.

IN A STORM OF BULLETS, WHO DO WE TRUST?
OUR SISTERS!

WE FIGHT TOGETHER!
OR NOT AT ALL!

SISTERHOOD IS SURVIVAL



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SEAFIRE

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E.K. Johnston, #1 *New York Times*
bestselling author

*Sisters fight with each other,
for each other,
and by each other's side.
I'm lucky to have one like you, Rosie.*

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SEAFIRE

NATALIE C. PARKER

USBORNE

BEFORE



Caledonia stretched along the prow of the *Ghost* as the ship sliced through black water. At night, the ocean offered only a dark reflection of the sky above, and the promise of a cold grave below.

Her mother, Rhona, crouched near, a rifle balanced on her knees, eyes surveying the sea road ahead. “Our way forward is marred. Do you see?” she said.

Caledonia studied the eddies in the water, searching for the signs that meant there were rocks ahead, or a sunken ship, unusual swirls, or a sudden chop of waves. Rhona was always the first to spot them, but Caledonia was getting better.

“Rocks,” Caledonia said, and without waiting for permission, she turned and called to her father where he stood on the bridge. “Three degrees port!”

The *Ghost* nosed south to avoid the sharp danger. On either side, familiar outlines of small islands rose around the ship. These were the waters of the Bone Mouth, a series of islands and rocky protrusions that offered flimsy sanctuary

to anyone brave enough to sail them. They were treacherous in daylight, and nearly impassable at night, except by Caledonia's mother, Rhona Styx, captain of the *Ghost*. Under her command, they sailed as smoothly as if on open blue waters.

Years ago, Rhona liked to remind her daughter, they wouldn't have needed such stealth. When Rhona was a girl, she sailed from the colder northern currents, past the towering Rock Isles, all the way down to the Bone Mouth without any more danger than the occasional storm. Then, so gradually few noticed until it was too late, a man named Aric Athair had grown a fleet of ships armed and armoured for taking and killing. His fleet of Bullet ships stretched in a violent chain across the only way in or out of these expansive waters. Anyone on the wrong side of his notorious Net found themselves bent under the pressure of his thumb.

Now, after years of dodging Aric Athair and his Bullets, and facing dwindling resources, Rhona had decided the time had come for their small band to punch through the Net. For months, they'd searched for the best way. They'd studied the Bullet ships from a distance and determined the weakest point was at the tip of the Bone Mouth, where even Aric's ships were loath to sail. The *Ghost* could make it, but first they needed food – fruit, nuts and meat if they could get it – to supplement their stores for the unknown waters beyond.

Tonight, they resupplied. But tomorrow night, they ran for the very last time.

“You and your brother prep for the shore run.” Rhona’s red hair rolled behind her, battling with the wind.

A small thrill straightened Caledonia’s spine. From the age of six, she’d campaigned for the responsibility of shore runs to be hers. Only in the last year had her mother finally conceded and assigned her the task. But as much as Caledonia cherished the trust her mother placed in her on those occasions, she knew her little brother hated those long dark rides to shore. He would spend the entire night terrified of being so far from the safety of their ship.

“Let me take Pisces.” Caledonia climbed to her feet and followed her mother. “We’re a good team. Besides, Donnally’s too young for shore runs. He’s only twelve turns, you know.”

Rhona laughed her grizzly laugh. “You know this from all your experience?”

Caledonia pictured Donnally’s eyes tight with fear, his mouth pressed into a stoic line as he struggled not to disappoint their mother. “I do,” she answered.

“Cala, the only way your brother will learn is by your side,” Rhona said with a sigh, but there was no fight in her words.

Mother and daughter skirted the bridge, then took turns sliding down the companionway ladder to the deck below. Even in the moonless dark, they knew their way easily around the *Ghost*. The ship had become a refuge for families looking to escape Aric’s rule. As their numbers grew, every inch of the ship was transformed to meet a variety of needs

– masts supported sails and laundry lines, the galley was transformed daily from a mess hall to a bunk room, even the deck was host to stacked garden beds and two goat pens. While more than a dozen men and women were still topside at this hour, most of the crew was asleep in the small cabins below. There were lookouts posted forward and stern and up in the nest, but here in the Bone Mouth, the *Ghost* had never come across one of Aric’s Bullet ships at night. Bullets were vicious and bold, but most lacked Rhona’s seafaring skill.

Caledonia spied her brother crouched behind one of the four mast blocks studding the centreline of the ship, an overlarge jacket hulking around him like a grey cloud. He had their father’s dark hair, their mother’s fair complexion, and a nose that curled up at the tip, giving him a look of perpetual surprise.

The lines of a blunted arrowhead tattoo half-filled with black ink peeked out from beneath his curls. A matching one was drawn on her own temple. It was custom on the *Ghost* for parents to mark their children with unique sigils in case of capture. The mark would give those children the chance to find their family again someday.

“I’ll take him next time.” Guilt nudged at Caledonia. Her mother was right. The only way to prepare Donnally for the world was to take him into it, but sometimes she feared for her little brother. The gentle pinch in her mother’s eyes said she did, too.

“Donnally!” Rhona called. “Hoist your eyes, son!”

Donnally started, rocketing awkwardly to his feet before he managed to spot his mother and sister. He trudged across the deck at a reluctant pace, dark hair flopping in his eyes. He schooled his features when he asked, “Shore run?” But the note of tension in his voice gave him away.

“Yes, but not for you. Cala’s taking Pi, which means I want you and Ares on watch. Clear?” Rhona pointed towards the nest.

Donnally nodded eagerly. “Clear,” he said, giving Caledonia a grateful smile.

Rhona pulled her daughter into her arms, planting a kiss on her head. “Get the job done.”

“And get back to the ship,” Caledonia finished.

By the time they dropped anchor near an island they called the Gem, Caledonia and Pisces were prepped and ready to go. They climbed into the bow boat harnessed against the hull of the *Ghost* and lowered it to the water as they’d done a dozen times before.

With quick strokes of the oars they covered the distance between their ship and the island. Recently, Pisces had grown several inches. She’d outgrown her little brother, Ares, and shot straight past Caledonia, and her height seemed to make her fearless. Pisces’s shoulders were broad and strong, her skin a warm, pale brown, and she wore her hair in four long braids. As they rowed, her eyes were full of excitement, focused on the island and its bounty, while

Caledonia kept one eye on the black ocean.

“It’s too quiet. I don’t like it,” Caledonia said.

Pisces pulled in a deep breath and tilted a ready smile towards her friend. “It’s peaceful, like being so far underwater you can’t see the surface.”

“That’s called drowning. Only you would find that peaceful.”

Pisces laughed quietly to avoid unsettling Caledonia further.

Together they moored their boat in a sheltered cove, securing it in a thicket of tall grass. The girls split up to make their work faster, agreeing to meet back at the cove when their sacks were full.

The path down the shore was narrow, the ocean as dark as the night sky and nearly as flat. Caledonia moved along the rocky tree line, stuffing fallen coconuts and bananas and jackfruit into the canvas sacks draped across her shoulders. There was enough that she could afford to be picky, though the more she gathered, the longer they’d be able to sail. No one knew what to expect when they broke through the Net. They might need to sail for days or months, and they needed to be prepared for both. People once said that beyond the Net were wide-open seas and towns where children weren’t forced into the service of a tyrant, but it was a world Caledonia could not quite imagine.

The tide was low and the waves sluggish, burbling and hissing as they surged and receded. In their wake, the sand

glittered with the pearlescent shells of burrowing crabs and the slick backs of beached jellyfish. From the dense forest came the looping songs of insects and tree frogs. Perhaps she would return with meat after all.

Footsteps, hurried and heavy, sounded behind her.

Caledonia's heart tripped, her hands stuttered on the strap of her canvas bag, and she instinctively slipped through a fall of vines. There had been no other ships in sight for miles. These footsteps must belong to Pisces. They had to.

Still, the cadence of the steps refused to conjure the image of Pisces running, long black braids flying behind her.

Even away from the *Ghost*, the rules of the ship still applied. Number one: *Never be seen*. Caledonia stilled her breathing, adjusted her feet, and disentangled herself from the bag full of fruit. She would be ready to run. She would be ready to fight.

The steps grew louder and slower. A dark figure appeared: tall, muscled, male. Instead of racing past as Caledonia hoped he would, the boy stopped a few feet from her hiding place. His skin was suntanned and slick with sweat, his vest and trousers lined with guns and clips of ammo. His bicep was marked by a single scarred line that even in the dark was bright orange, saturated with the Silt in his blood. He was a Bullet, a soldier from Aric Athair's army.

Aric conscripted children, dismantling families in order to build his empire. Rogue families like Caledonia's had taken to the water rather than see their children stolen and

transformed into soldiers. But because they'd run, if they were ever captured, none would be spared. Not even the children. People more readily offered their children up as payment when they knew the only alternative was death for all.

This Bullet couldn't be much older than Caledonia, seventeen at the most, but the mark on his bicep meant he'd already killed in service to Aric.

She smelled the salt of his sweat and the sharp pinch of gunpowder and something unrecognizable and sweet. Caledonia shivered.

The boy didn't look at her, didn't seem to be aware she crouched so near, her fingers inching her pistol from its holster. Instead, he began to do exactly what she'd been doing. He bent down and collected fruit.

She'd never seen a Bullet this close; her parents did their best to keep the *Ghost* as far from Aric's fleet as possible. Over the years they'd outrun dozens of Bullet ships and collected as many families from other ships and outlying settlements, all while staying out of sight.

Rule number two: *Shoot first.*

Her pistol was in her hand, finger curled around the trigger. When the boy turned his back and kneeled to inspect a coconut, Caledonia had the perfect advantage. She would only need one bullet.

She raised her pistol and stepped quietly out of her hiding place.

The boy froze, dropping the coconut as he raised his hands.

“Whoever you are, you have me,” he said.

Caledonia didn’t respond, her throat tight as she considered pulling the trigger.

“Would it make a difference if I asked you not to shoot?” the boy asked, face forward and eyes on the ocean. “If I begged for mercy?”

“Killing you would be a mercy,” she told the Bullet.

“Maybe so,” he said, voice at once piteous and resigned. “At least, if you’re going to kill me, let me see your face?”

Caledonia’s pulse quickened. There was no time for this. Where there was one Bullet, there were a dozen or more. She needed to find Pisces and get back to the boat, and she needed to do it now. *Shoot*, her mother’s voice urged, but this was one rule Caledonia had never had to follow.

Sensing her hesitation, the boy shifted on his knees, spinning to face her. His hands remained steady in the air, but now he watched her.

Alarmed, Caledonia took an involuntary step back. “Move again and I’ll shoot.” She raised her aim to his head.

He nodded, star-pale eyes fixed on the barrel of her pistol. He had a long face with a jaw that looked sharp enough to be a weapon on its own. Blond hair, thick with sea wind and salt, framed his forehead like a crown. One ear stuck out a little further than the other, but the effect was endearing. She counted two guns strapped to each of his thighs, which

likely meant there were at least two others she couldn't see. For the moment, she was the one in power, but she knew just how quickly that might change.

"At least if I'm to die, it'll be at the hands of someone lovely." His eyes charted a slow course across her face.

Warmth crept into Caledonia's cheeks. "Where's your crew? Your clip?"

"I – can I point?" When Caledonia nodded, he did, back in the direction he'd come from. "Ship's anchored off the northern tip of the island. Stopped for food."

"One ship?" Caledonia asked.

"One ship," he answered. "We were headed to the Net and moored here for the night. It's a bad moon for travelling."

He could be lying – he was probably lying – but this far from the Holster it could also be the truth. One ship on the opposite side of the island was survivable. As long as she and Pisces returned to the *Ghost* quickly.

But something had to be done about this Bullet.

"What's your name?" she asked.

The boy seemed to grow smaller under the weight of that question. "What does it matter if you're going to kill me?"

"It doesn't." Caledonia's finger found the trigger again, and again it stuck there.

A sad smile twisted his lips. "Lir. I'm called Lir. And I expect you'll be the last to know it."

He was so ready to die, and so young. Was he young enough to be saved? They said it didn't take long for the

children Aric took to succumb to the dreamy pull of Silt. Addiction made Bullets both loyal and mean. But they also said an encounter with a Bullet always, always ended in one of two ways: either you died, or he did.

Shoot, my brave girl, she heard her mother's voice whisper.

"I'm...I'm sorry," she said, preparing to fire. Her fingers trembled.

Now his eyes grew wide, his hands stiff and splayed in the air.

"Please," he said, "please, show me the mercy the Father never does. Take me with you. Whatever life you have, it's got to be better than the one he forces on us. Please, help me."

This was precisely why the rule was *shoot first* and not *shoot as soon as possible* or *shoot when you feel ready*. But she'd broken the rule and now this wasn't a Bullet, it was Lir.

Lir, who desperately wanted a way out.

Lir, who hadn't hurt her.

Lir, who might be someone's brother.

If it were Donnally on some other beach with some other girl's gun to his head, wouldn't Caledonia want that girl to help him?

"Stand up," she said, lowering her aim to his chest.

Lir complied, and his expression softened when Caledonia moved in and pulled six guns and two knives from holsters on his thighs, calves and back. Up close, he smelled even more like the ammunition he carried, but with a pinch of

something too sweet. He kept his hands up as she worked, eyes marking every place she touched him.

“Please,” he repeated. “I’ll never have a chance like this again. Please, help me.”

The ocean rushed towards them and away, the waves quickening as the tide began to roll in. It was the same tide that would carry all the families aboard the *Ghost* far away from this terrible life that turned children into warriors, that made Lir plead for his life on an empty beach in the middle of a moonless night. She *could* help him. And she wanted to, but it went against everything her mother had taught her.

Shaking her head, she pressed the muzzle of her gun into Lir’s chest.

Desperation surfaced in the tremulous bend of his mouth. “What’s your name?”

It wasn’t a secret, yet she frowned, refusing to give it up.

His smile turned mournful. “How about I call you Bale Blossom, then? It seems fitting.” His eyes raised to trace the frame of her hair. The smile on her own lips surprised her. It wasn’t the first time her hair had been likened to the deep orange of the baleflower, but it was the first time the comparison felt like a compliment.

“Call me whatever you like,” she answered. “I still won’t give you my name.”

“You don’t trust me. There’s no reason you should, but I’m going to show you why you can.”

Caledonia’s finger tightened on the trigger as he slipped

one hand into his vest and produced a push dagger she'd missed. The handle was small enough to fit inside his grip completely while the black blade protruded between his first and middle fingers. He held it out hilt-first in the narrow space between them.

She snatched it, noting how his body had warmed the metal, and tucked it into her belt.

"How's that for trust, Bale Blossom?"

Caledonia wished desperately for her mother's wisdom. Rhona would know what to do in this situation. She would know how to do the right thing even if it was a dangerous thing.

But Caledonia had only herself.

"No one trusts a Bullet," she answered. "But maybe I can help."

"Are you going to take me to your crew?" Lir smiled sadly, seeming to know the answer before Caledonia had given it.

Rule number three: *Never reveal the ship.*

"No," she said, resolute. "But I'm not going to shoot you."

Lir nodded, the bravery on his face haunted by disappointment. Even in the dark of the night she could see his jaw was carved with dirt and old scars. His eyes glittered dimly, and his mouth settled into a hard line. The flash of hope Caledonia had seen a moment before had been swept away by resignation.

When he spoke next, his voice was hollow. "You should leave. Go back to your ship. Get out of here. I'll hide or I'll die, but I'll do it under my own sail."

She glanced in the direction of the *Ghost*, wishing it was as simple as taking Lir with her.

Lir followed her gaze, and before her eyes, he became as steady and as cool as the gun in her hand. He asked, "Do you know what we call this moon?"

"There is no moon tonight," Caledonia answered.

"It's the Nascent Moon," he said after a quiet moment, all trace of that sad resignation gone. "It's a time of potential and growth. A promise for things to come."

He touched her cheek, and Caledonia gasped, her arm lowering. She felt his hand slide into her hair, felt a spike of delicious heat follow his grazing fingers.

"It's the moon of beginnings and endings." His voice found a malicious edge.

Too late, she realized if she'd missed one dagger she might have missed another.

His fingers tightened in her hair. A slaked smile surfaced on his lips.

And the blade sank into her gut.

Lir gripped the back of her head. As hot blood spread across her stomach, he held her close. Her knees buckled and her gun hit the ground with a thud.

"Thank you for your mercy, Bale Blossom," he whispered, lowering her almost gently to the sand. Nauseating pain burned through her body. "And thank you for your ship."

Caledonia screamed, fighting to stay conscious. If they heard her, they might escape. She clutched at her wound

and felt sand against her face, rough against her lips. She knew there was pain, but all she felt was panic. She had to get up, find Pisces, warn the ship. She screamed again.

Footsteps. This time, she knew them to be Lir's as he raced away, towards the Bullet clip that would soon find her family. She fumbled in the sand for her gun and fired three shots. It was still deadly dark, but she thought she saw him falter.

Even if those three bullets had missed their mark, everyone near the island would have heard the shots. Her family would have warning. They could escape, and as long as they followed the rules, they would.

Her nausea eased into a strange numbness. The blade, she realized, was still in her gut. A parting gift, and one that might just save her. Holding the knife in place to stanch the bleeding, she got slowly to her feet and began to stagger towards her cove and the bow boat, the only thought in her mind to see the *Ghost* safely on its way.

"Cala!" Pisces burst from the trees, her long braids swinging around her like ropes. "Oh, spirits, Cala!"

"Bullets." Caledonia barely managed the word before falling again to her knees. "We have to hurry."

Pisces nodded grimly and ripped a long strip of material from her shirt. The blade hurt even more coming out. Pisces worked quickly, binding the wound tightly before tucking her head beneath Caledonia's arm and lifting her friend to her feet.

Together, the girls stumbled through the woods, taking the shortest possible path to where their little boat waited. Caledonia tried to run. With each step her legs felt weaker, her lungs more shallow. Her gut burned as she moved. Thorny plants clawed at their legs and arms, leaving small trails of blood on their skin. Thick vines slowed their progress even more. Before the ocean was visible again through the trees, the sound of gunfire ripped through the air.

Neither girl spoke until they'd returned to the cove. The boat they'd used to come ashore was still there, bobbing as the tide came in. But now, out where their family's ship lay at anchor, a Bullet ship approached, flared with light.

It was an assault ship with a sharp nose and grooves along the hull where Bullets waited with magnetized bombs. The *Ghost* fought to weigh its anchor and gain speed, but the assault ship was already upon it. Bombs soared across the narrowing channel of water. A *boom* rent the air as the missiles exploded against the *Ghost*, ripping open the ship and knocking the breath from Caledonia's lungs.

Flames spilled from a hole in the side of the hull. It was everything the girls had been taught to fear, to avoid, everything their parents had spent a lifetime protecting them from. And Caledonia had brought it right to their feet.

Screams replaced the sound of gunfire. Caledonia lurched, pushing past the pain and into the shallow water. She surged forward once, determined to swim, but her body faltered and she cried out in defeat. Her feet sank into sand,

salt burned in her gut, and Pisces gripped her shoulders to pull her back to shore. “Caledonia, no!” she cried.

The two girls could do nothing but witness. No one would be spared.

It lasted less than fifteen minutes.

The sun rose higher. Screams and gunfire waned.

Then the Bullets began their gruesome work of dragging the dead to their ship and hoisting the bodies of the slain on the metal pikes studding their rail.

One body, placed at the very front of the Bullet ship, wore an overly large coat that puffed in the air like a grey cloud. The feet dangled in the wind, and Caledonia choked on the memory of leaving Donnally behind just a few short hours ago.

Caledonia shivered in the warm dawn. Blood seeped down her body, but the pain in her gut was nothing compared to the pain in her chest.

“How?” Pisces whispered.

Caledonia slumped to her knees. She shook her head, unable to confess the truth to her friend. She’d failed her entire family; she couldn’t fail Pisces, too. So she pushed the truth deep down, beneath her grief and her guilt and her anger.

“What do we do?” Pisces asked, her brown face bright with tears. “Cala, what do we do?”

Caledonia fixed her gaze on the Bullet ship, her ears on the final screams of her family. Fire reflected angrily across

the black surface of the ocean. For all its darkness, it had failed to keep her family a secret. But so had she. Her heart hardened over the memory of Lir. He had taken her mercy and turned it red. Now she and Pisces were all that remained.

Taking her friend's cold hand in her bloody one, she gave the only answer she could find. "I don't know."

CHAPTER ONE



FOUR YEARS LATER

Just before dawn, Caledonia climbed into the aft rigging of her ship. The ropes were rough against her calloused palms as she scaled fifty feet of the mizzenmast, confident and sure, her hands and feet flying faster and faster, daring the sun to beat her to the top.

The sky filled with the hazy blue glow of dawn, and Caledonia pushed harder, relishing the first kiss of sweat against her skin. She'd scarcely reached her chosen perch when she yelled to the team of girls on deck below, "Haul!"

Eager voices repeated the command, and four sets of strong hands took hold of the lines and heaved. Along the mast, pulleys squealed and churned; Caledonia kept her eyes on the gaff beam moving towards her.

"Break!" she shouted as the gaff rose level with her chest. From it hung their treasured sun sail; hundreds of shiny black scales made to absorb solar energy and feed their engines.

The girls below began to secure the ropes while Caledonia moved to balance atop the beam. The morning wind that

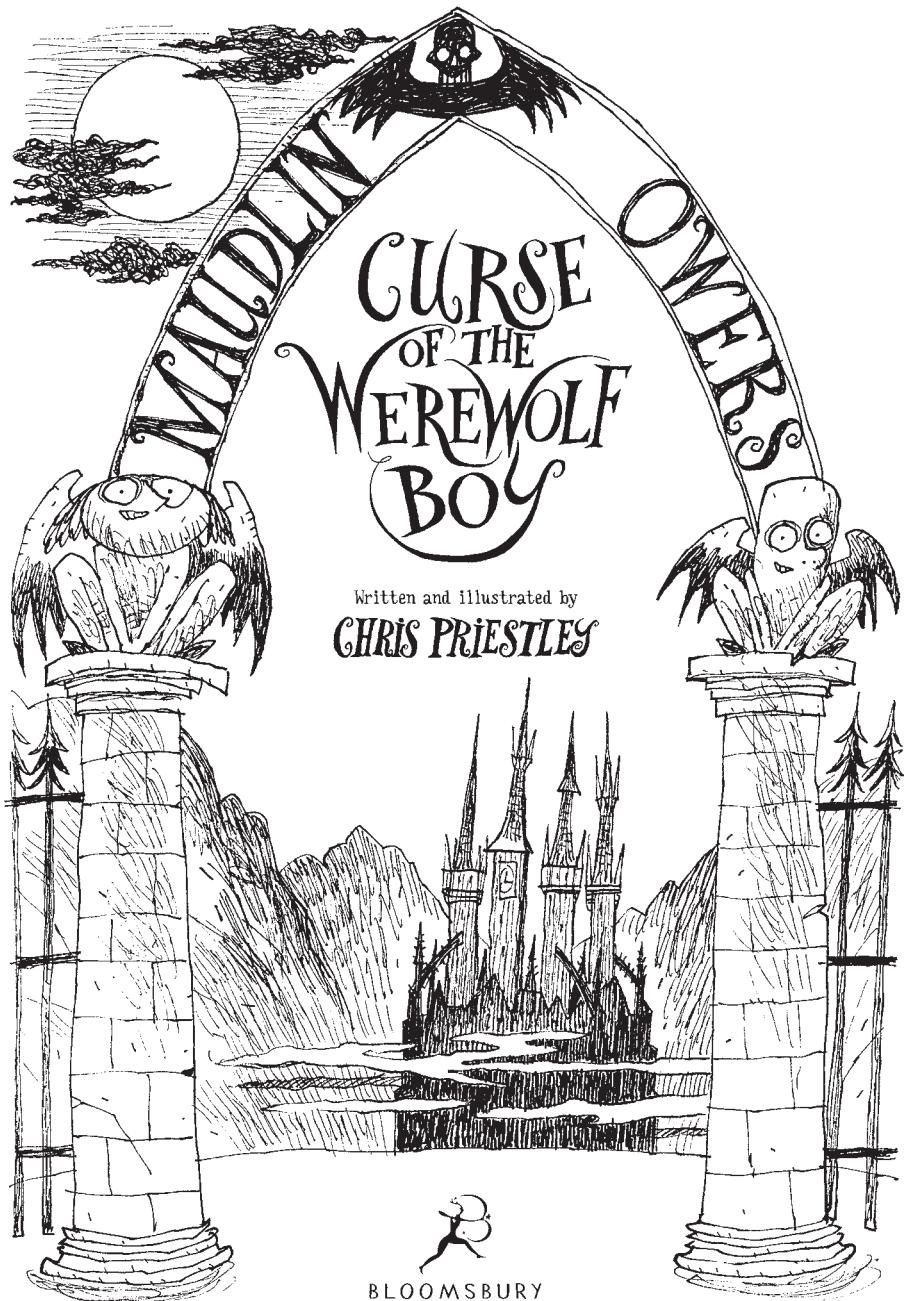


CURSE OF THE WEREWOLF BOY



CHRIS PRIESTLEY

BLOOMSBURY



Written and illustrated by
CHRIS PRIESTLEY



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MAUDLIN TOWERS & ENVIRONS



PUG'S
PEAK

PIG'S
PIKE

MAUDLIN
MINE
(disused)



MAUDLIN
TOWERS

MAUDLIN
MOOR

MAUDLIN
MERE

MAUDLIN
MARSHES

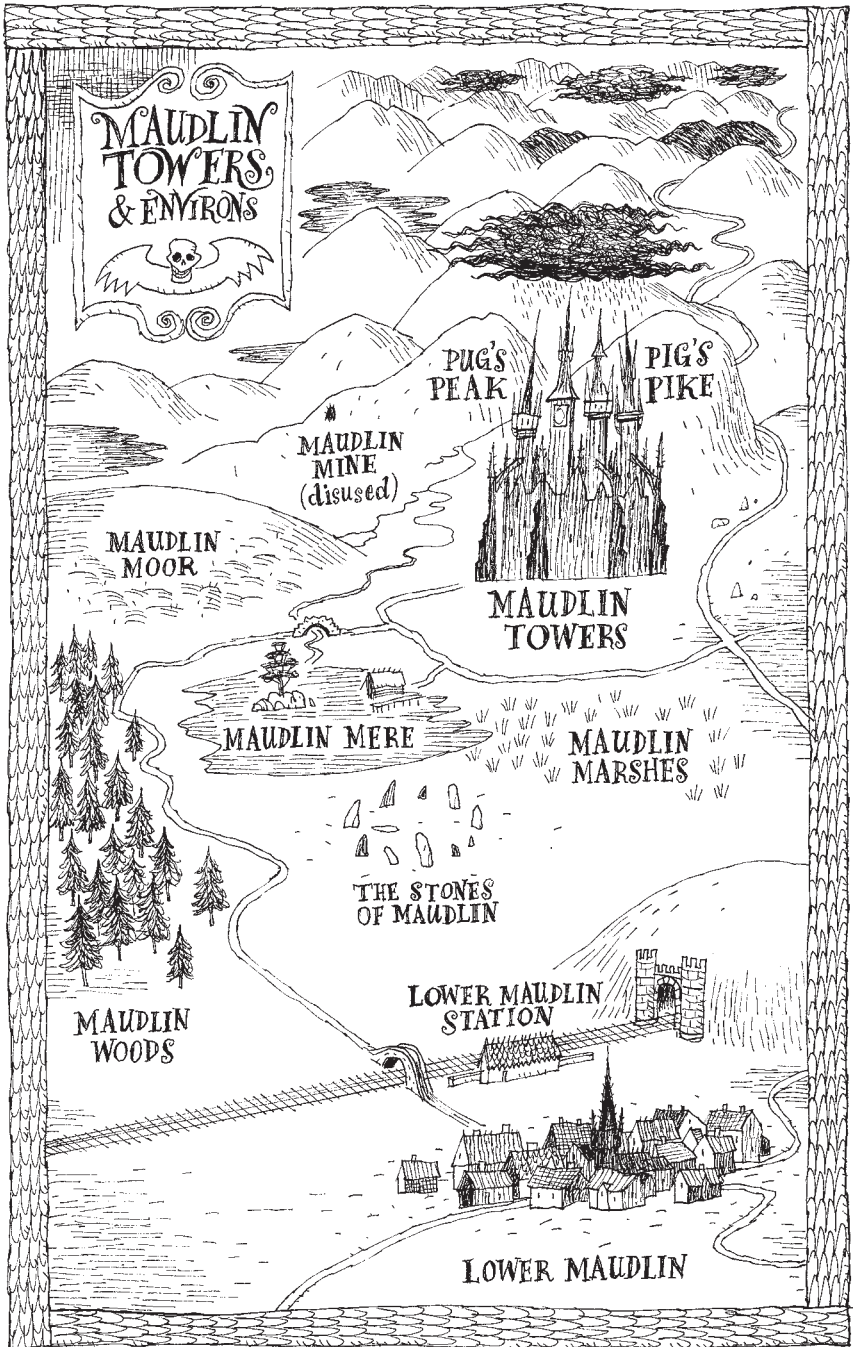
THE STONES
OF MAUDLIN

MAUDLIN
WOODS

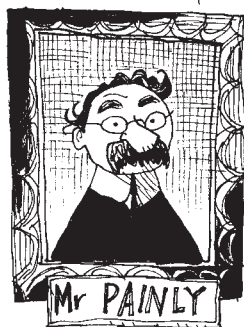
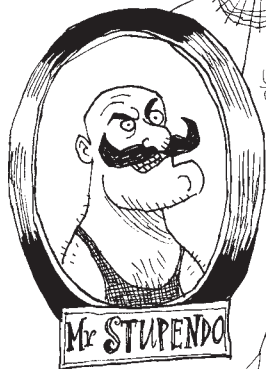
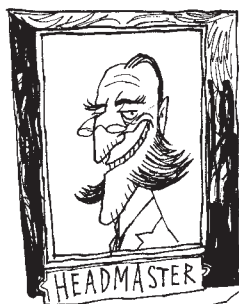
LOWER MAUDLIN
STATION



LOWER MAUDLIN



STAFF



PUPILS



MILDEW



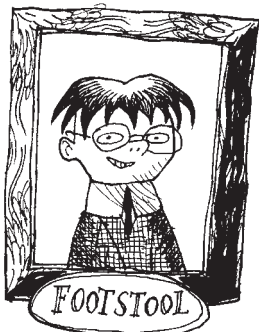
SPONGE



ENDERPENNY



KENNINGWORTH



FOOTSTOOL



FURTHERMORE

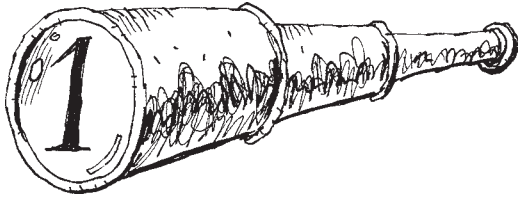


HIPFLASK



FILBERT

mildew is a ~~hero~~



A Viking in the Ha-ha

Mildew and his friend Sponge were taking a much needed breather on the twice-weekly jog up the side of Pig's Pike. They stood panting, gazing down at the blackened and gloom-laden, gargoyle-infested monstrosity that was their school.

Maudlin Towers School for the Not Particularly Bright Sons of the Not Especially Wealthy sat between the twin hills of Pug's Peak and Pig's Pike in the windswept north country of Cumberland, squatting like an obscenely ornate jet brooch pinned to the bosom of a sour-faced duchess.

Mildew's full name was Arthur Mildew, but no one in the school used first names. Sponge's full name was Algernon Spongely-Partwork, but everyone called him Sponge. They were not happy.



'I'm not happy, Sponge,' said Mildew.

'Me neither,' said Sponge with a sigh.

Mildew helped Sponge take off the backpack that their criminally insane sports teacher, Mr Stupendo, insisted the boys wore on these runs as an extra layer of torture. Mildew groaned with the effort, dropping the backpack to the ground.

'What on earth have you got in there?' he said. 'It weighs a ton.'

'Stupendo caught me filling it with socks again and forced me to load it up with the contents of my trunk.'

Mildew opened the pack and saw items of clothing, shoes, several books and a brass telescope.

‘Why on earth do you have a telescope?’ he asked.

‘I don’t really know,’ said Sponge. ‘My Uncle Tarquin bought it for me last Christmas. I’d forgotten I even had it to be honest. I wish I hadn’t.’

‘Bad luck,’ said Mildew. ‘It’s rather heavy.’

‘I know. By the way – why have you got a bandage on your arm, Mildew?’ asked Sponge. ‘Did you have an accident in the half-term hols?’

‘I’ve tried to tell you three times now, Sponge,’ said Mildew. ‘But every time I do, you start to hum to yourself and I get interrupt—’

‘Put some pep into it, Mildew!’ shouted Mr Stupendo, stroking his horribly large mustachios, his bald head glistening like a damp egg. ‘Why, at your age I could lift a dead sheep over my head with barely a bead of sweat!’

Mr Stupendo had been a circus strongman before the life of a sports teacher had tragically caught his eye.



‘But, sir,’ pleaded Mildew, ‘my knees.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Mr Stupendo, cuffing him round the ear and sending him sprawling headlong into the bracken. ‘You’re far too young to have knees, Mildew. Come on! The last one to the top is a Russian.’

Mr Stupendo bounded up the path. There were pitiful groans from the boys around him as Mildew got to his feet, and their wretched, downtrodden whining suddenly stirred something in him.

‘Look here,’ he cried, waving his fist in the air. ‘What say we show old Stupido what we’re made of and beat the old hippo to the top?’

‘Shut up, Mildew, you blister,’ said Kenningworth, cuffing him playfully round the ear and sending him sprawling into the bracken once again.

Mildew saw the boys disappearing up the track as he got to his feet. He spat out a piece of the indigenous flora and stared down at Maudlin Towers, a cloud-shadow darkening its already grim and grimy, gargoyle-encrusted walls. *Surely*, he thought, *this must be the very worst of schools.*

‘Are you all right?’ said Sponge.

‘I suppose so,’ said Mildew with a sigh that he hoped might hint at the enormity of his despond.

‘Someone needs to teach Kenningworth a lesson,’ said Sponge. ‘My mother says he –’

‘Shhh,’ said Mildew, pointing down towards the school grounds. ‘Never mind Camelfroth or your mother. What’s that?’

‘What?’ said Sponge.

‘There!’ said Mildew. ‘Running along the bottom of the ha-ha.’

‘The ha-ha?’ said Sponge.

‘Yes,’ said Mildew. ‘The ha-ha.’

‘The ha-ha?’ said Sponge.

‘Stop saying ha-ha!’ said Mildew.

‘But what do you mean?’ said Sponge. ‘What are you talking about?’

‘The ditch at the end of the sports field, you chump,’ said Mildew. ‘It’s called a ha-ha.’

‘Oh,’ said Sponge. ‘Really? What’s it for?’

‘To stop sheep wandering into the school grounds,’ said Mildew.

‘Why on earth would sheep want to wander into the school?’ said Sponge, shaking his head and smiling. ‘If I were them I’d –’

‘Never mind that,’ said Mildew. ‘Look! There!’

Sponge followed Mildew’s pointing finger. Running along the bottom of the ha-ha was a man. That was quite extraordinary in itself as the only man in Maudlin Towers with any inclination to move at speed was high above him leading a chorus of ‘Mildew is a Russian!’

But more unusual still was the fact that this man appeared to be wearing a winged helmet and carrying, albeit with some difficulty, what looked, even from that distance, remarkably like a large axe.

'Wait,' said Mildew, and rummaging around in Sponge's backpack, he produced the telescope.

Mildew searched for the figure and focused in on its blurred form.

'There's a Viking in the ha-ha!' said Mildew.

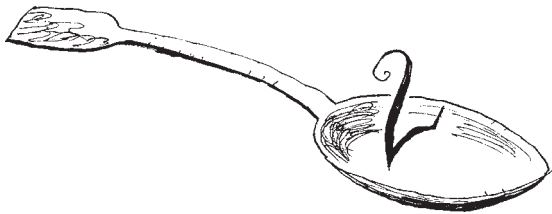
'A Viking? But there can't be,' said Sponge.



'And yet there is,' said Mildew, handing him the telescope.

The boys stared at the Viking in silent amazement as he disappeared out of sight behind a laburnum bush. Before they could say anything, Mildew and Sponge were knocked down like skittles and trampled on by the rest of the boys as they returned from the peak of Pig's Pike.

'Last one to the bottom is a poet!' trumpeted Mr Stupendo as he bounded by.



A Kerfuffle in the Corridor

Mildew and Sponge returned to the school to shower and get changed. If anything, the boys dreaded this more than the exercise itself, the freezing water for the shower coming straight from the beck that ran – rather quicker than the boys – down the side of Pug’s Peak.

They dressed as hurriedly as possible and headed off to discuss the mysterious sighting, finding a quiet spot just outside the trophy room.

‘Who shall we tell first about the Viking, Mildew?’ said Sponge when his jaws had finally stopped rattling with the cold. ‘Although I wonder if they’ll believe us.’

‘Of course they will,’ said Mildew. ‘Why wouldn’t they?’

‘Well, I saw it myself and I scarcely believe it,’ said Sponge.

‘I know what you mean,’ said Mildew. ‘We need to pick our moment. We don’t want to be mocked.’

‘Any more than usual,’ said Sponge.

‘Quite,’ said Mildew. ‘Oh no, here comes Kenningworth. Quick – in here.’

The boys ducked into the trophy room as Kenningworth and some of the other boys strode down the corridor towards them. They said nothing until they heard the footfalls die away.

The trophy haul at Maudlin Towers was a sorry sight. The school had a long history of failure in almost every branch of the sporting arena. Were it not for the school’s own tournaments – like the dreaded Fell-Runner’s Cup – the room would be empty save for a couple of items of special significance to the school’s history, like the much revered School Spoon.

‘Did you hear that?’ said Sponge.

‘What?’



'It sounded like breathing.'

'Breathing?'

'In the room with us. But not us.'

Mildew and Sponge surveyed the room but saw no sign of anyone else.

'There's no one here, Sponge,' said Mildew. 'You're imagining things.'

Sponge didn't look convinced.

'Can we go, Mildew? I don't like it.'

'Of course,' he said with a smile. 'You are such a—'

Suddenly there was a loud sneeze and both boys almost leaped out of their skin.

'Eeeek!' squeaked Sponge, knocking into Mildew, who banged into one of the cabinets, nearly knocking it over.

They hurried from the room without a backward glance and off to their maths lesson with Mr Painly, who walked to the blackboard and began to write in chalk thereon.

'Very well. If $x = 5$ and $y = \text{Brazil}$, what is the square root of Thursday?'

Almost two hours later, the boys staggered out of the classroom hollow-eyed and filled with self-loathing and a mind-numbing sense of limitless despair – as they did after every maths lesson.

'Break time,' gasped Mildew in the voice of a man released from prison after serving many years for a

crime he did not commit. 'At last. We have much to talk about, Sponge.'

But before they could say a word, they were distracted by a great kerfuffle ahead of them.

'Look,' said Sponge. 'A kerfuffle.'

'Yes,' said Mildew. 'What on earth is occurring?'

The corridor was full of boys who were being herded like reluctant rabbits towards the hall. Mildew grabbed a passing rabbit by the arm.

'Hipflask,' he said. 'What's happening?'

Hipflask shrugged his bony shoulders, making his hair quiver like a startled spider.

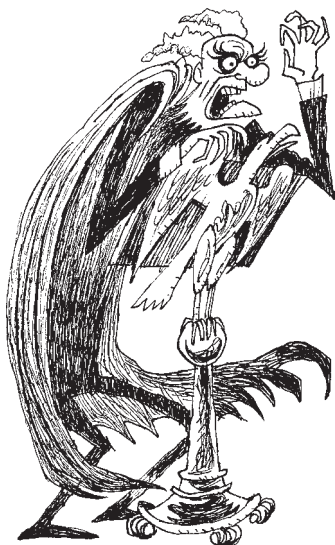
'No one knows, Mildew,' he replied. 'Everyone's been told to go to the hall.'

'Perhaps we're not the only ones who've seen the Viking,' whispered Sponge as Hipflask walked on.

'Perhaps,' said Mildew.

They stepped into the river of boys and were carried along in its flow until they came to rest midway down the packed assembly hall, each boy speculating noisily with their neighbour as to what might be happening.

'Silence!' boomed Reverend Brimstone, his face glowing hellfire red, leaning over the lectern, wide-eyed, his eyebrows leaping about his forehead like crazed porcupines.



The boys were immediately quiet. Flintlock, the groundsman, stood silhouetted against a window, rifle in hand.

'What's he doing here?' whispered Mildew, who was sure Flintlock was looking at him.

Sponge shrugged.

'Thank you, Reverend,' said the Headmaster, walking forward and smiling.

Reverend Brimstone gave one last growl before retreating, making the first couple of rows of boys step back with a whimper.

'My boys,' said the Headmaster, smiling wistfully. 'My dear, dear boys. As you know, I think of you as my own children. In fact there are many of you whom, it's fair to say, I prefer to my own children.'

There was a plaintive cry from the Headmaster's two sons, who attended the school. The Headmaster paid no heed, but carried on smiling benevolently.

'As you know, there was a spate of thefts at the school before we broke up for half-term. A

baffling variety of items were stolen – Reverend Brimstone’s armchair, the hall clock, and so on.’

Reverend Brimstone stared boggle-eyed at the mention of his stolen armchair and lurched forward alarmingly.

‘Quite what lay behind these incidents,’ continued the Headmaster, ‘is hard to fathom. But we shall get to the bottom of it, mark my words.’

‘However,’ he went on, ‘I’m afraid – and I can hardly bring myself to give voice to the words – the theft of the hall clock pales into insignificance next to this new abomination ...’

‘What’s gone now?’ whispered Mildew with a withering look at Sponge. ‘The staffroom door knob?’

Sponge tittered.

‘Shut up, Mildew,’ said Kenningworth, ‘accidentally’ nudging him in the ear with his elbow. The Headmaster carried on.

‘I’m afraid I must tell you that ...’ He paused and shook his head as though not quite able to believe the words he was about to utter. ‘Only this very morning, some boy – or boys – has – or indeed, have – stolen the School Spoon!’

The gasp that followed this revelation rattled the windows. Mildew turned to stare at Sponge.

‘The sneeze, Mildew,’ whispered Sponge.

The Headmaster looked out at them, sadness in his eyes.

‘It is hard to imagine how anyone in their right mind could even contemplate a crime of such outrageous villainy – of such depravity. I need not remind you that the School Spoon belonged to our beloved founder, Lord Marzipan Maudlin, the seventh Earl of Maudlin, whose ancestral home we are so fortunate now to inhabit.

‘With no children to inherit it, Lord Maudlin, the end of his noble line, left Maudlin Towers in his will, with instructions for this glorious school to be founded within its lofty walls. The School Spoon was perhaps the greatest of all the mementos associated with Lord Maudlin, for he was given the Spoon, in person, by none other than the Duke of Wellington and King George III themselves!’

The boys gasped, as they always did, when told this. Quite why the Duke of Wellington and George III had given Lord Maudlin the Spoon, or what its significance might have been to anyone concerned, was never explained.

‘Someone – or ones – among you knows – or know – who is responsible for this appalling crime, and I would encourage anyone who has such information to come forward now.’

There followed a long silence broken only by the damp swish of swivelling eyeballs as each boy looked at his neighbour. But no one spoke up.

‘If someone were to come forward now,’ said the Headmaster, ‘then they might – and, I stress, only *might* – expect some degree of leniency. But this is your final chance.’

The Headmaster looked out expectantly, but his expectation was squashed. Reverend Brimstone strode to the edge of the stage like a rabid moose.

‘If you do not come forward now and are subsequently revealed to be the culprit, you will be taken to the usual place and burned at the stake!’

Some of the more imaginative boys began to sob. The Headmaster tapped the reverend’s arm and whispered into his ear. The vicar looked confused and aghast.

‘I’ve been informed that we no longer burn boys at the stake,’ said Reverend Brimstone mournfully. ‘There has apparently been a change in the school policy. Why I seem always to be the last to know, I can’t fathom, but never mind. Where was I? Oh yes. Rest assured, there will be terrible consequences for all if the School Spoon is not found. Terrible!!! Parents will almost certainly be summoned!’

There was a collective shudder from the boys. There was no greater threat. Most boys would

gladly be burned at the stake rather than have their parents roll up at the school at any time, kissing them and asking to be introduced to their chums – but to be *summoned by the headmaster*. It was too terrible to contemplate.

‘Now I would like us all to bow our heads and think for a moment about our dear departed colleague and esteemed physics master, Mr Particle, who sadly passed away during the half-term holidays after a short illness ...’

Mildew noticed that there was a strange glance exchanged between the Headmaster and Flintlock at the end of this request. He might have seen more had Kenningworth not knuckled him on the top of the head to encourage him to think pleasant thoughts about Mr Particle.

‘What are we going to do?’ whispered Sponge afterwards. He had a morbid fear of any contact with his parents.

‘I don’t know,’ said Mildew thoughtfully. ‘But something, be sure of that.’

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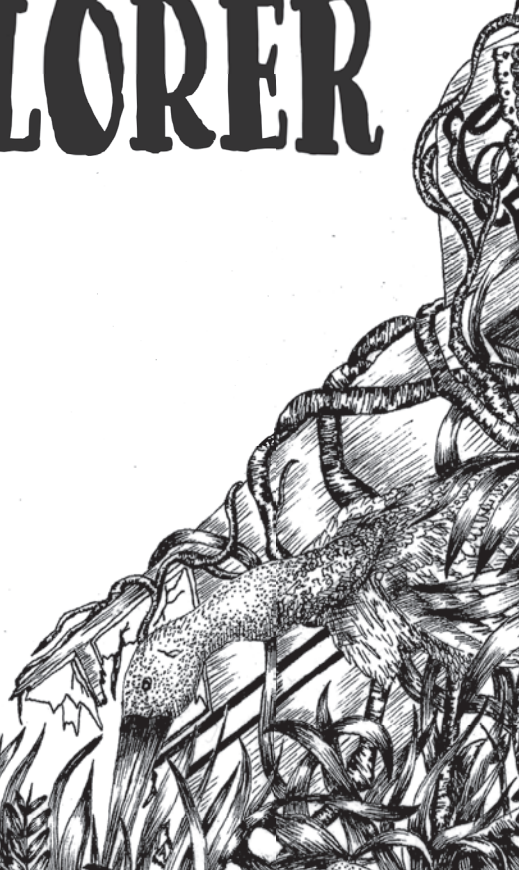


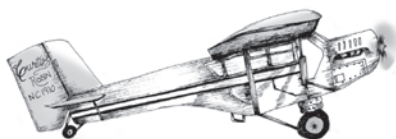
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The
EXPLORER





The
EXPLORER

KATHERINE
RUNDELL

ILLUSTRATED BY
HANNAH HORN



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FLIGHT

Like a man-made magic wish, the aeroplane began to rise.

The boy sitting in the cockpit gripped his seat and held his breath as the plane climbed into the arms of the sky. Fred's jaw was set with concentration, and his fingers twitched, following the movements of the pilot beside him: joystick, throttle.

The aeroplane vibrated as it flew faster into the setting sun, following the swerve of the Amazon River below them. Fred could see the reflection of the six-seater plane, a spot of black on the vast sweep of blue, as it sped towards Manaus, the city on the

water. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and pressed his forehead against the window.

Behind Fred sat a girl and her little brother. They had the same slanted eyebrows and the same brown skin, the same long eyelashes. The girl had been shy, hugging her parents until the last possible moment at the airfield; now she was staring down at the water, singing under her breath, her brother trying to eat his seatbelt.

In the next row, on her own, sat a pale girl with blonde hair down to her waist. Her blouse had a neck-ruffle that came up to her chin, and she kept tugging it down and grimacing. She was determinedly not looking out of the window.

The airfield they had just left had been dusty and almost deserted, just a strip of tarmac under the ferocious Brazilian sun. Fred's cousin had insisted that he wear his school uniform and cricket jumper, and now, inside the hot, airless cabin, he felt like he was being gently cooked inside his own skin.

The engine gave a whine, and the pilot frowned and tapped the joystick. He was old and soldierly, with brisk nostril hair and a grey waxed moustache which seemed to reject the usual laws of gravity. He touched the throttle and the plane soared upwards, higher into the clouds.

It was almost dark when Fred began to worry. The pilot began to belch, first quietly, then violently and repeatedly. His hand jerked, and the plane dipped suddenly to the left. Someone screamed behind Fred. The plane lurched away from the river and over the canopy. The pilot grunted, gasped and wound back the throttle, slowing the engine. He gave a cough that sounded like a choke.

Fred stared at the man – he was turning the same shade of grey as his moustache. ‘Are you all right, sir?’ he asked. ‘Is there something I can do?’

Fighting for breath, the pilot shook his head. He reached over to the control panel and cut the engine. The roar ceased. The nose of the plane dipped downwards. The trees rose up.

'What's happening?' asked the blonde girl sharply.
'What's he doing? Make him stop!'

The little boy in the back began to shriek. The pilot grasped Fred's wrist hard for a single moment, then his head slumped against the dashboard.

And the sky, which had seconds before seemed so reliable, gave way.






THE GREEN DARK

Fred wondered, as he ran, if he was dead. *But*, he thought, *death would surely be quieter*. The roar of the flames and his own blood vibrated through his hands and feet.

The night was black. He tried to heave in breath to shout for help as he ran but his throat was too dry and ashy to yell. He jabbed his finger into the back of his tongue to summon up spit. 'Is anybody there? Help! Fire!' he shouted.

The fire called back in response; a tree behind him sent up a fountain of flames. There was a rumble of thunder. Nothing else replied.



A burning branch cracked, spat red, and fell in a cascade of sparks. Fred leapt away, stumbling backwards into the dark and smacking his head against something hard. The branch landed exactly where he'd been standing seconds before. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and began to run again, faster and wilder.

Something landed on his chin, and he ducked, smacking at his face, but it was only a raindrop.

The rain came suddenly and hard. It turned the soot and sweat on his hands to something like tar, but it began to quench the fire. Fred slowed his run to a jog, then to a stop. Gasping, choking, he looked back the way he had come.

The little aeroplane was in the trees. It was smoking, sending up clouds of white and grey into the night sky.

He stared around, dizzy and desperate, but he couldn't see or hear a single human, only the fernlike plants growing around his ankles, and the trees reaching hundreds of feet



up into the sky, and the panicked dive and shriek of birds. He shook his head, hard, trying to banish the shipwreck-roar in his ears.

The hair on his arms was singed and smelt of eggs. He put his hand to his forehead; his eyebrow had charred and part of it came away on his fingers. He wiped his eyebrow on the sleeve of his shirt.

Fred looked down at himself. One leg of his trousers was ripped all the way up to the pocket, but none of his bones felt broken. There was vicious pain, though, in his back and neck, and it made his arms and legs feel far-off and foreign.

A voice came suddenly from the dark. 'Who's there? Get away from us!'

Fred spun round. His ears still buzzing, he grabbed a rock from the ground and hurled it in the direction of the voice. He ducked behind a tree and crouched on his haunches, poised to jump or run.

His heart sounded like a one-man band. He tried not to exhale.

The voice said, 'For God's sake, don't throw things!'

It was a girl's voice.

Fred looked out from behind the tree. The light of the moon filtered deep green to the forest floor, casting long-fingered shadows against the trees, and he could see only two bushes, both of them rustling.

'Who is it? Who's there?' The voice came from the second bush.

Fred squinted through the dark, feeling the remaining hair rise up on his arms.

'Please don't hurt us,' said the bush. The accent wasn't British; it was something softer, and the voice was definitely a child's, not an adult's. 'Was it you, throwing poo?'

Fred looked down at the ground. He'd snatched up a piece of years-old, fossilised animal dung.

'Oh,' he said. 'Yes.' He was becoming accustomed to the dark, and could see the shine of eyes peering out from the grey-green gloom of the undergrowth. 'Are you from the plane? Are you hurt?'

'Yes, we're hurt! We fell out of the sky!' said one bush, as the other said, 'No, not badly.'

‘You can come out,’ said Fred. ‘It’s only me here.’

The second bush parted. Fred’s heart gave a great leap. Both the girl and her brother were covered in scratches and burns and ash – which had mixed with sweat and rain and made a kind of paste on their faces – but they were alive. He was not alone. ‘You survived!’ he said.

‘Obviously we did,’ said the first bush, ‘or we’d be less talkative, wouldn’t we?’ The blonde girl stepped out into the lashing rain. She stared from Fred to the other two, unsmiling. ‘I’m Con,’ she said. ‘It’s short for Constantia, but if you call me that I’ll kill you.’

Fred glanced at the other girl. She smiled nervously, and shrugged. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘If you say so. I’m Fred.’

‘I’m Lila,’ said the second girl. She held her brother on her hip. ‘And this is Max.’

‘Hi.’ Fred tried to smile but it made the cuts on his cheek stretch and burn so he stopped and made do with a grin that involved only the left half of his face.

Max was at the breathless stage of crying, and he clung to his sister so tightly his fingers were pressing

bruises on her skin. She was leaning over to one side to hold him up, shaking with the effort. They looked, Fred thought, like a two-headed creature, arms entwined.

‘Is your brother badly hurt?’ he asked.

Lila patted her brother desperately on the back. ‘He won’t talk – he’s just crying.’

Con looked back towards the fire and shivered. The flames cast a light on her face. She was no longer blonde; her hair was grey with soot and brown with blood, and she had a scratch on her shoulder that looked deep.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, wiping rain out of his eyes. ‘That cut looks bad.’

‘No, I’m not all right,’ Con spat. ‘We’re lost, in the Amazon jungle, and statistically speaking it’s very likely that we’re going to die.’

‘I know.’ Fred didn’t feel he needed reminding. ‘I meant –’

‘So, no,’ Con’s voice grew thin and high, ‘I think it would be safe to say that none of us are all right, not at all, not even slightly!’

The bushes rustled. The rain hammered down on Fred's face.

'We need to find shelter,' he said. 'A big tree, or a cave or something that would –'

'No!' Max gave a sudden scream: a yell that was wet with spit and fear.

Fred stepped backwards, raising his hands. 'Don't cry! I just thought –' Then his eyes followed Max's pointing finger.

There, three inches from Fred's shoe, was a snake.

It was speckled brown and black, patchworked to match the jungle floor, and its head was as big as a fist. For one second nobody breathed. The jungle waited. Then Max let out a second scream that dug deep into the night and the four of them turned and fled.

The ground was sodden and they ran pell-mell, sending up mud into one another's eyes and grazing their elbows against trees. Fred ran as if his body were not his own, faster than he'd ever run, his palms stretched ahead of him. He tripped over a root and

turned a full somersault, coming up spitting earth. He ran on. The rain blinded him and shadows flashed past him in the darkness.

There was a yell behind him.

'Please, Max!' said Lila.

Fred turned back, skidding in the mud.

'He won't run!' Lila bent over her brother. 'And I can't carry him!'

The little boy lay on his back, weeping up at the sky, his whole body shaking in the driving rain.

'Come on!' Fred heaved Max over his shoulder. The boy was far heavier than he'd expected and he screamed as Fred lifted him, but Fred grabbed both of Max's knees and started running, his whole body screaming with pain. He could hear Lila, her feet thumping close behind them.

The stitch in Fred's side was almost unbearable when he tore out of the trees and into a sudden clearing. He halted, and Max bumped his head against Fred's spine and yelled. Angrily, he began trying to bite one of Fred's shoulder blades.

‘Please don’t,’ said Fred, but he was barely paying attention to the boy on his back. He stared, stunned, ahead of him.

They were standing at the edge of a wide circle of trees, open to the sky and lit by the fat moon. There was a carpet of green moss and grass, and the stars above them were clustered so thickly that the silver outnumbered the night. Fred lowered Max to the ground and stood bent over, his hands on his thighs, panting.

‘Did the snake chase us?’ said Max.

‘No,’ gasped Con.

‘How do you know?’ wailed Max.

Lila dropped to her knees, clutching at her side. ‘Snakes don’t, Maxie. We both know that. I just ...’

‘Panicked,’ said Con. Her voice was bitter. ‘That’s what happened. See! Look: no snakes. We were stupid. Now we’re even more lost.’

The ground in the clearing sloped slightly towards a large puddle of water. Fred crossed over to it, his muscles aching, and sniffed; it smelt of rotting things, but he was feverishly thirsty. He took a tiny sip and

immediately spat it out. 'No good,' he said. 'It tastes like a dead person's feet.'

'But I'm thirsty!' said Max.

Fred looked around the clearing, hoping to find water before Max started crying again.

'If you wring out your hair,' he said, 'there'll be water in it.' He tugged his dark fringe down over his forehead and twisted it: a few drops fell on his tongue. 'It's better than nothing.'

Max chewed on his hair for a second, then scrunched his eyes closed. 'I'm scared,' he said. It was said without whining, as simple matter-of-fact. Somehow it was worse than the tears, Fred thought.

'I know,' Lila said softly. 'We all are, Maxie.' She crossed to her brother and pulled him close to her. His small bony fingers closed over a burn on her wrist, but she didn't brush him away. She began to whisper in his ear in Portuguese: something soft, almost a song; a lullaby. They were both shaking slightly.

Fred swallowed. 'All this will look less bad in the morning,' he said.

‘Will it?’ said Con. There was bite to the question.
‘Will it, really?’

‘It can’t look much worse,’ he said. ‘Once it’s light, we’ll be able to work out a way to get home.’

Con looked hard at him: there was challenge in the look, and Fred stared, unblinking, back at her. Her face was all geometry; sharp chin, sharp cheekbones, sharp eyes.

‘What now, then?’ she said.

‘Our mama and papa say—’ began Lila. The mention of her parents made her face crease and crumple, but she swallowed and went on. ‘They always say: you need to sleep before you think. They say, when you’re exhausted, you do stupid things. And they’re scientists. So we should sleep.’

Fred found his whole body was aching. ‘Good. Fine. Let’s sleep.’

He lay down on his side in the wet grass. His clothes were soaked through, but the air was warm. He closed his eyes. Perhaps he would wake up in his bed at school, he thought, next to the snoring

of his roommates, Jones and Scrase. An ant crawled over his cheek.

‘But aren’t we supposed to stay awake in case we die of concussion?’ said Con.

‘I think if we’d got concussion we’d be dizzy,’ said Lila.

Fred, already half-asleep, tried to work out if he was dizzy. The world began to spin away from him.

‘If we all die in the night, I’m blaming both of you,’ said Con.

It was on that cheering thought that Fred felt himself dropping down, down, away from the jungle and the thick night air and into sleep.



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For Terence



ZiZi



*Books aren't the only
thing that begin with a "B"*



Towards the end of my freshman year in high school, Jude Fielder touched my breast.

So you don't get the wrong idea, there was nothing sexy or romantic about it. It wasn't like we were in some passionate clinch in a dark corner of somebody's basement. We were in the town library. I was looking for a book for my history assignment. I guess I left it a little late, because by the time I got around to finding something, everything under three thousand pages had been taken out of the school library. I begged the librarian to see if maybe there was one little, reasonably sized book that hadn't been shelved yet or was in the back waiting to have its spine fixed or something, which he did (he was always very helpful). But there wasn't. He was really, really sorry, but what could he do? The problem wasn't what he could do, but what I had to do. This was one

of those times when you couldn't just slap something together from the Internet. You actually had to read a book. *Quel pain in the butt.*

So anyway, there I was on a Saturday morning, when I could've still been in bed or on my way to the mall, standing in the world history section of the public library, hoping to find something no thicker than a crispbread for my assignment, when Jude Fielder came up beside me. I knew he was looking at me, but I was used to guys looking at me, so I acted like the only thing next to me was air. He sighed, he looked, he took a book off the shelf, he put the book back on the shelf. And then, instead of reaching for another book he wasn't interested in, he suddenly put his hand on my breast. Just like that! It was really quick. I was so surprised I could hardly believe it. I'm not really sure, but I think he may have pressed. Lightly. He laughed, like it was a joke, and then he apologized. "Sorry," said Jude Fielder. "I just wanted to see if it was real." I didn't think there was much I could say to that. (*What made you think it wasn't real? Do I look like a robot?*) Or much I could do. I know I'm not supposed to say this (at least I know it now!), but I was kind of flattered. I mean, what's the point of push-up bras and cleavage and low-cut tops if no one notices? If you don't want to be noticed, you wear baggy turtlenecks and dungarees.

And anyway, I guess I was a little embarrassed (even if I wasn't sure why). I figured he was probably embarrassed, too, for doing such a dumb thing, but I wasn't too worried about how he was feeling right then. I just wanted to get out of there. So I took the book I'd been flipping through (which turned out to be more boring than white socks) and left without opening my mouth. As I said, I was used to guys looking, but nobody'd ever groped me before. And anyway, the library isn't where you'd ever expect something like that to happen. Seriously? You don't exactly go into the library thinking, *Wow, I wonder if someone's going to grab my boobs while I'm looking for a book on the Romans*. So even though I wasn't really mad or anything, I was kind of shocked. But it wasn't a gigantic big deal because Jude Fielder was pretty okay. When our science class had to get garbage out of the river for Earth Day, in middle school, Jude Fielder let me carry the bag while he did all the work and got dirty. Plus he was one of the better-looking boys in my year. Not gorgeous, but not gross like some of them, either. (Just the thought of one of the creeps from the deep touching me would've made me throw up.) So anyway, I got out my book and left. I didn't run (in case my breasts bounced too much – that always gets looks) but I walked pretty fast. I was halfway to the sidewalk when I heard this

kind of wounded-animal cry and then someone shouted, “What the hell, you crazy bitch!”

That made me stop and turn. There were other people around (like the background crowd in a movie), but right behind me were Loretta Reynolds and Jude Fielder. They were staring at each other like they were checking out flaws in a mirror. Jude Fielder was red in the face. Loretta Reynolds was her usual colour (wet, unbaked pastry). Loretta said, “Sorry. I just wanted to see if it was real.” She said it really loud.

Quel day for surprises! You could’ve knocked me over with an eyelash.

Jude Fielder looked pretty surprised, too. (You wouldn’t have needed a whole lash to knock him over.) He didn’t laugh that time. What he did was stomp off, shouting at me as he passed, “Your freakin’ dyke friend’s crazy, you know that, Abruzzio? Like two hundred per cent certifiable!”

Here’s the thing: Loretta Reynolds was not my friend. I knew her from being in school with her since for ever, just like Jude Fielder did. I didn’t dislike her (most people like her okay even if they think she’s pretty weird), but I didn’t really know her. I could’ve picked her out of a police line-up, and if I’d run into her at the airport on my way to Paris, I would’ve said hello, but that’s it. Loretta is the

girl who always sits at the front of the room and is either first with her hand in the air to give an answer or the only person with a question. (That's from primary school on.) She's really smart and never cared who knows it. And she's always been confrontational. My first vivid memory of Loretta disagreeing with a teacher was in Year Two when she argued with Mrs Dansk about whether or not cats and dogs can think. (Loretta won. Yes, they can.) But until that fateful Saturday, if I ever spoke to Loretta directly it was only to say sorry for bumping into her. (Although, like just about everyone else who'd ever had a class with Loretta, I'd more than once muttered under my breath "Please shut up" when she was yammering away about something, or "Please don't start" when she was about to.)

So, as Jude Fielder stormed away, I screamed at him, "I'm really sorry. And she's not my friend."

The next thing I knew, Loretta Reynolds was shouting at me. (*Quel ironic!*)

"Are you out of your tiny little mind?" she roared. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Me? What was wrong with *me*? How did I get to be the one who was nuts? The one who had something wrong with her? I didn't do anything.

"Excuse me," I said, "but I'm the innocent victim here."

"If you're such an innocent victim, maybe you could

explain to the incredulous TV audience why *you* apologized to *him!*”

“Excuse me, but I wasn’t apologizing for me. I was apologizing for *you*.”

“Oh, thank you so much.” (In books, people’s voices drip with sarcasm. But not Loretta’s. It poured.) “You apologized for the one person in this little drama who has nothing to apologize for.” She said that really scornfully. “And just to clarify things, Giselle Abruzzio, you are not an innocent victim.” Only teachers or parents who are mad at me call me Giselle – everybody else calls me ZiZi. “What you are is an unconscious enabler. How come you just stood there like a doll and let that jerk maul you?”

I said I didn’t let him – he did it without asking me. Plus, he didn’t maul me. Maul was an exaggeration. (Exaggeration is a Loretta Reynolds trademark. She should patent it.) And anyway it wasn’t exactly the crime of the century. “Chrissake, it’s not like he hit me or ripped off my blouse.” I was poised and calm, not enraged and waving my arms around like some people. “All he did was touch me.” Really lightly. “And, anyway, what about you? What did you do to *him?*”

“Tat for tit,” said Loretta. “If he’d grabbed my breasts, I’d’ve decked him.”

Yeah, right. Only no boy was going to go grabbing

Loretta Reynolds' breasts. He'd have to find them first.

I thought she was seriously overreacting (something else she's known for). He didn't really grab my breast. (Already I knew better than to mention the possibility of a squeeze to Loretta.) I said it was more like someone brushing against you at the mall when it's really crowded. Like when there's some big sale on or it's Christmas.

Loretta flapped her hands in the air some more. It was amazing she didn't take off. "Except that someone shoving past you in the mall isn't deliberately going for your private person! He had no right to do that. That counts as assault."

I didn't think so. It was more an imposition than an assault. I mean, it wasn't like Jude Fielder went into the library planning to go for my private person. I figured he acted on impulse. Like when you buy a pair of shoes you know you can't walk in because they look so cool you just can't help yourself.

That argument scored in the high nineties on the Loretta Reynolds' contempt meter.

"So if I have the impulse to push somebody in front of a car, that's okay because I didn't plan it?"

I still don't know anyone else who can scream and sneer at the same time. I said that was like comparing lipstick to leggings. He wasn't trying to kill me. I think

I shrugged. Philosophically. (Loretta's not the only one who can be philosophical.) "If you ask me," I said, "getting all warped out about what happened's dumb. It's like being mad at the cat for scratching you when you're dangling a piece of string in front of it. He was just being a boy. They can't help it."

Talk about dangling a piece of string in front of a cat. If Loretta had been a cat, I'd've been covered in blood.

"Don't tell me," shouted Loretta. "Let me guess. You think it's cool when guys gawp and make comments when you walk down the street. You think it's part of being a girl."

Not all girls. It for sure wasn't part of being Loretta Reynolds. But she was annoying me with her attitude, like she was the only one who could ever be right, so I gave her what I knew was the wrong answer. "It is kind of a compliment. You know, unless they're saying your butt's too big or you have a nose like a pelican or something like that. They're letting you know you're attractive. What's bad about that? I mean, unless it's some ugly old loser with a beer gut or someone really creepy. That would be pretty gross."

The contempt meter went through the stratosphere.

"You hear that sound?" bellowed Loretta. "You know what it is?"

I didn't hear anything besides traffic and normal people talking in normal voices about normal things as they walked past us. And Loretta. They could probably hear her in Florida. I pictured all these old people sitting by their pools, looking around trying to figure out who was making the big racket.

"I'll tell you what it is." If you don't know something Loretta feels it's her duty to fill in the gaps. "It's the sound of Emma Goldman rolling in her grave!"

I had no idea who Emma Goldman was, but I figured the smart move would be not to ask. Not that Loretta gave me a chance. She answered anyway.

"In case you're interested, she was an outspoken champion of women's rights."

I wasn't interested, but I knew better than to say that, too. So I tried to lighten the mood. "Does that mean we can thank her for miniskirts and sexual liberation?"

"You can thank her for more than that," snapped Loretta. And away she went again. We stood there while half the town passed by and Loretta lectured me on male violence and aggression and female passivity – and at least a dozen things that started with the word "gender". Which wasn't a word I was used to hearing in everyday conversation. I didn't know what she was talking about. It was like when you have a couple of years of school

French and then you go to Quebec and the only things you understand when someone talks to you are hello, no and goodbye. I figured God probably didn't know what Loretta was droning on about either. If He was smart, He'd tuned out after the second sentence the same as I did.

"Maybe it's this sweater," I said when she finally stopped. That's what I'd been thinking about while she gabbled away. My sweater was orange.

"Sweater?" Loretta blinked. "Maybe what's this sweater?"

"The reason Jude did that. Bright colours make you look bigger."

Which could be considered the first fashion tip I ever gave her. And the first she totally ignored.

"So the whole thing was really your fault, is that what you're saying? That you were right to apologize?"

See how she twists things?

"I told you, I was apologizing for *you*, not for me."

You know how sometimes your parents look at you like they're wondering if the babies were switched in the hospital? That was the way Loretta was looking at me. Then she closed her eyes and counted to ten. When she was done counting, she opened her eyes again and said, "Okay. Let's start over. I guess at least you're right about

it not being planned. If he'd planned it one of his friends would've been at the end of the aisle, taking a picture. And then it'd be all over the Internet."

So there was some good news.

I said I was the one who should've taken a picture. The next time she did something like that she should give me some warning so I'd have my phone ready.

Loretta laughed. "His face was great, wasn't it? You'd think I'd just hit him with a dead fish."

I laughed, too. "More like the entrails."

When we stopped laughing Loretta asked if I wanted to go somewhere for a coffee.

I guess because we were laughing like normal people my guard was down. I said, "Sure."

Quel day for firsts.



Although there is a lot of randomness in the universe, I am the sort of person who likes to know what's going to happen next. I'm not happy bobbing along on the ocean of life, waiting to see where the current takes me. I make lists, schedules and plans – and I keep to them. If I say I'm going to do something, I do it. If I say I'm going to be somewhere at a certain time, I'm there no matter what – because I'm also the person who always takes the variables like weather, traffic and unexpected events into consideration. Which means I knew all the things I was doing that Saturday – and becoming friends with Giselle Abruzzio was not on my agenda.

We'd known each other since we started school, but ZiZi and I had never been what you'd call friends. Not the kind who walk together if they happen to be going the same way, and for definite not the kind who

eat lunch together and go to each other's house to play. I don't remember ever having an actual conversation with her, but in primary school we were always in the same groups for reading, etcetera, so we must have said something to each other sometime. I do remember that once – in Year Three or Four – some boys in our class threw her backpack up on the roof, expecting her to burst into tears or go running to a teacher, but she just climbed up and got it. In Year Five, she and I tied for first place in the school-wide Math Marathon. And in Year Six we were in the group that did a project on the effects of oil spills on ocean life for the Science Fair (we won second prize). What I'm trying to say is that, in my memory, ZiZi Abruzzio used to be smart and feisty (and really good at things like Science and Math). But when we got to middle school I guess she discovered there was more to life than reading, independence, algebra and environmental degradation. There were clothes, make-up and boys. Which means that she went from being a person who could shimmy up a pole to the roof of the school to being a Girl with a capital "G". Girls with a capital "G" are so bouncy and energetic that even if they aren't cheerleaders, they seem like they are – cheerleaders when it's always half-time in an important game. I've always thought of them as the Misses Bubble. They talk a lot,

shop a lot, talk about shopping a lot, talk about boys even more, and laugh as if they're in a laughter competition – especially if it's at some unfunny joke by a guy. For reasons I don't understand, they don't like to be seen to be smarter than boys – especially ones they like. The only climbing they do is into or out of a car. After we moved up to middle school I know for definite that ZiZi and I didn't talk to each other. Not until The Assault in the library.

The night before The Assault, I'd watched a documentary about Emma Goldman, the twentieth-century American political activist, philosopher and orator who led the struggle for workers' and women's rights. File under the heading: *Positive role model*. I fell asleep thinking of her. I dreamed that she was giving a speech on a street corner. There was an enormous crowd gathered to listen – mesmerized by her eloquence and passion, and surrounded by policemen. Suddenly, it began to rain and people started to run for shelter, until I was the only one left – I had my emergency rain hat with me – and Emma continued as if I was a multitude. It was better than the dream where I win a Nobel Prize. When I woke up, Emma Goldman was still in my mind.

On my list of things to do that day were a couple of odd jobs in town – I did everything from mowing lawns

and putting up screens to rewiring lamps and putting up shelves. I started fixing things around our house when I was eight or nine. My dad and mom are both great at their jobs but they're fairly useless when it comes to basic household upkeep. They can change a fuse and clean out the filter on the washing machine, but that's their limit – and as far as the car goes, their expertise stops at putting in petrol. Somebody had to be able to do necessary maintenance and repair, and the cats weren't interested. I taught myself basic plumbing and carpentry, the man next door had a vintage motorcycle and he taught me basic mechanics. Our middle school offered an elective in woodwork and I took it – I was the only girl. I started fixing things in other people's houses and putting the money I earned away for college when I was twelve – which may sound a little extreme but, as I said, I make plans and one of them is to take several college degrees.

On my way home that Saturday, since she was still on my mind, I decided to go to the library to see if it had a book on Emma. It didn't, which wasn't exactly the surprise of the year. Howards Walk isn't what anyone would call a bastion of radical thinking. I was on my way out when I glanced down one of the non-fiction aisles and there were Giselle Abruzzio and Jude Fielder. I don't know whether I stopped because the sight of either of them in

the library was so unusual that I wanted to be certain my eyes weren't deceiving me, or because Jude Fielder wasn't actually looking at the shelves of books as Zizi was, but at ZiZi's breasts. And then he grabbed one – a breast not a book. To be fair to ZiZi, she looked as shocked as I felt. My first thought was: *What would Emma Goldman do?* Zizi didn't do anything. She just stood there as if she'd been turned to plastic. Jude Fielder laughed. Then he said, "I just wanted to see if it was real." Which made me think that he's probably even more stupid than I'd always thought. ZiZi had a half-smile on her face, like she wasn't sure what had just happened, but she must have been sure because she left so quickly she might have been on wheels. Jude Fielder waited a few minutes – presumably because he was at least smart enough to give her time to get away in case she recovered the power of speech and not because he'd suddenly discovered a love of books.

I followed him out, still thinking, *What would Emma Goldman do?* As soon as I stepped outside, I knew exactly what Emma Goldman would do if she were alive now. She was an activist, after all – and she wasn't afraid of making a scene. I'm not exactly known for my spontaneity, but I hurried to catch up with Jude, and when I was right behind him I called his name. Jude Fielder stopped and turned. I made a grab for the crotch of his jeans.

He jumped back so fast and screamed so loudly that I didn't actually touch him, but the effect was the same. He was horrified, but, unlike ZiZi, he still had the power of speech; he yelled that I was crazy. I said I was sorry, that I just wanted to know if it was real. I was pretty pleased with coming up with that line; usually I don't think of the really good, zinger response until it's too late. He didn't find that a fraction as funny as he'd found molesting ZiZi. Well, he wouldn't, would he? Then he marched off, yelling at ZiZi about her dyke friend – which would be me, despite the fact that at that time I was neither of those things. And what do you think Giselle Abruzzio, having been assaulted in broad daylight in a public place by a boy whose only documented talent is the ability to run a piece of dental floss through his nostrils (Year Six, cafeteria, absolutely disgusting) did next? Here's a hint: it for definite wasn't what Emma Goldman would have done. ZiZi apologized! Of all the things that had happened in the last ten minutes that I couldn't believe, that was the one I couldn't believe the most. She said, "I'm sorry," and sounded as if she meant it. *I'm sorry?* Was she insane? What the hell was she sorry for? Having breasts? Not letting him grab the other one, too? Not taking off her top? Talk about blaming the victim. Here I was listening to the victim blame herself.

That's when I decided I had to talk to her. She didn't seem to realize that this is the twenty-first century, and women are no longer considered the property or inferiors of men. Not in our society, at least. But, as soon as I opened my mouth, I kind of lost it. I may have shouted. I do tend to shout when I feel strongly about something, and I felt very strongly about what had just happened in the non-fiction section, world history aisle, of the public library. ZiZi didn't want to know. Talk about defensive! Why was I getting on her case? She was completely innocent. If you ask me, she was more comatose than innocent. Why didn't she do something when he grabbed her? Yell, scream, hit him over the head with the book she was holding. Instead, all she did was apologize. *She* apologized to *him*! Had we all fallen down a wormhole? That's when she shifted everything around so that I was the one in the wrong – which I now know is a typical Giselle Abruzzio manoeuvre. She said she was apologizing for my behaviour, not hers. She said that I was overreacting. Apparently, it's flattering to be sexually harassed. According to ZiZi, Jude Fielder hadn't done anything wrong; he was just being a boy. At least she got that part right. I tried to make her see all the other things that were examples of boys being boys and men being men – war, murder, genocide, rape, pornography, colonialism,

slavery, torture, domestic violence, paedophilia, recreational hunting, etcetera – but she wasn't listening. She was thinking deeply. I know that because when I finished she said she thought the reason Jude Fielder assaulted her was because of the sweater she was wearing. I felt as if I'd been walking down an ordinary street in an ordinary way and suddenly ploughed into a mastodon eating an ice-cream cone. *Where the hell did that come from?*

I said I guessed that meant she was five hundred per cent right to apologize since the whole thing was her fault – her and her orange sweater. What had she been thinking when she got dressed that morning? Why didn't she wear black? Why didn't she put on something baggy over it like a bathrobe? Maybe she should start wearing a suit of armour. That would make her breasts virtually non-existent. ZiZi smiles the way everyone else breathes. "I wasn't blaming myself," she said. "I was just saying." How can you reason with someone like that? We might as well have been speaking different languages. It was like trying to convince a climate change denier of global warming. I was still thinking of ZiZi as the Koch brothers when she said that next time I did something like that I should give her some warning so she could take a picture. I immediately saw Jude Fielder's face in front of me, looking as if I'd just hit him with a dead fish. And

ZiZi said it was more like I'd hit him with the entrails. We both started laughing.

I think that was when I realized there was hope for ZiZi. She'd been smart and spirited before; she could be smart and spirited again. She was drowning in the frothy, pink sea of girliness, and I was in the solid boat of persondom. It was my duty to pull her aboard.

I asked her if she wanted to get a coffee or something. File under the heading: *Fate*.

Lockwood & Co.



Classroom
Resources by

Michael
Lockwood

Hauntings
are our
business ...

'Stroud is
a genius'
Rick Riordan

**THE
SCREAMING STAIRCASE**
JONATHAN STROUD

Jonathan Stroud

Jonathan Stroud was born in Bedford in 1970. After studying English Literature at York University, he moved to London, where he worked as an editor in a publishing firm. *The Bartimaeus* sequence is published in 35 languages and has sold 6 million copies worldwide. As well as four other novels: *Heroes of the Valley*, *The Last Seige*, *The Leap* and *Buried Fire*. Jonathan is now the author of the *Lockwood and Co.* series. He lives in Hertfordshire with his family.

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Lockwood & Co: The Screaming Staircase

Chapter 1

Of the first few hauntings I investigated with Lockwood & Co. I intend to say little, in part to protect the identity of the victims, in part because of the gruesome nature of the incidents, but mainly because, in a variety of ingenious ways, we succeeded in messing them all up. There, I've admitted it! Not a single one of those early cases ended as neatly as we'd have wished. Yes, the Mortlake Horror was driven out, but only as far as Richmond Park, where even now it stalks by night amongst the silent trees. Yes, both the Grey Spectre of Aldgate and the entity known as the Clattering Bones were destroyed, but not before several further (and, I now think, unnecessary) deaths. And as for the creeping shadow that haunted young Mrs Andrews, to the imperilment of her sanity and her hemline, wherever she may continue to wander in this world, poor thing, there it follows too. So it was not exactly an unblemished record that we took with us, Lockwood and I, when we walked up the path to 62 Sheen Road on that misty autumn afternoon and briskly rang the bell.

We stood on the doorstep with our backs to the muffled traffic, and Lockwood's gloved right hand clasped upon the bell-pull. Deep in the house, the echoes faded. I gazed at the door: at the small sun-blisters on the varnish and the scuffs on the letterbox; at the four diamond panes of frosted glass that showed nothing beyond except for darkness. The porch had a forlorn and unused air, its corners choked with the same sodden beech leaves that littered the path and lawn.

'OK,' I said. 'Remember our new rules. Don't just blab out anything you see. Don't speculate openly about who killed who, how, or when. And above all don't impersonate the client. Please. It never goes down well.'

'That's an awful lot of don'ts, Lucy,' Lockwood said.

'Too right it is.'

'You know I've got an excellent ear for accents. I copy people without thinking.'

'Fine, copy them quietly after the event. Not loudly, not in front of them, and particularly not when they're a six-foot-six Irish dockworker with a speech impediment, and we're a good half-mile from the public road.'

'Yes, he was really quite nimble for his size,' Lockwood said. 'Still, the chase will have kept us fit. Sense anything?'

'Not yet. But I'm hardly likely to, out here. You?'

He let go of the bell-pull and made some minor adjustment to the collar of his coat. 'Oddly enough, I have. There was a death in the garden sometime in the last few hours. Under that laurel halfway up the path.'

'I assume you're going to tell me it's only a smallish glow.' My head was tilted on one side, my eyes half closed; I was listening to the silence of the house.

'Yes, about mouse-sized,' Lockwood admitted. 'Suppose it might have been a vole. I expect a cat got it or something.'

'So . . . possibly not part of our case, then, if it was a mouse?'

'Probably not.'

Beyond the frosted panes, in the interior of the house, I spied a movement: something shifting in the hall's black depths. 'OK, here we go,' I said. 'She's coming. Remember what I said.'

Lockwood bent his knees and picked up the duffel bag beside his feet. We both moved back a little, preparing pleasant, respectful smiles.

We waited. Nothing happened. The door stayed shut.

There was no one there.

As Lockwood opened his mouth to speak, we heard footsteps behind us on the path.

'I'm so sorry!' The woman emerging from the mists had been walking slowly, but as we turned she

accelerated into a token little trot. 'So sorry!' she repeated. 'I was delayed. I didn't think you'd be so prompt.'

She climbed the steps, a short, well-padded individual with a round face expanding into middle age. Her straight, ash-blond hair was fixed back in a no-nonsense manner by clips above her ears. She wore a long black skirt, a crisp white shirt, and an enormous woollen cardigan with sagging pockets at the sides. She carried a thin folder in one hand.

'Mrs Hope?' I said. 'Good evening, madam. My name is Lucy Carlyle and this is Anthony Lockwood, of Lockwood and Co. We've come about your call.'

The woman halted on the topmost step but one, and regarded us with wide grey eyes in which all the usual emotions featured. Distrust, resentment, uncertainty and dread – they were all there. They come as standard in our profession, so we didn't take it personally.

Her gaze darted back and forth between us, taking in our neat clothes and carefully brushed hair, the polished rapiers glittering at our belts, the heavy bags we carried. It lingered long on our faces. She made no move to go past us to the door of the house. Her free hand was thrust deep into the pocket of her cardigan, forcing the fabric down.

'Just the two of you?' she said at last.

'Just us,' I said.

'You're very young.'

Lockwood ignited his smile; its warmth lit up the evening. 'That's the idea, Mrs Hope. You know that's the way it has to be.'

'Actually, I'm not Mrs Hope.' Her own wan smile, summoned in involuntary response to Lockwood's, flickered across her face and vanished, leaving anxiety behind. 'I'm her daughter, Suzie Martin. I'm afraid Mother isn't coming.'

'But we arranged to meet her,' I said. 'She was going to show us round the house.'

'I know.' The woman looked down at her smart black shoes. 'I'm afraid she's no longer willing to set foot here. The circumstances of Father's death were horrible enough, but recently the nightly . . . disturbances have been too persistent. Last night was very bad, and Mother decided she'd had enough. She's staying with me now. We'll have to sell up, but obviously we can't do that until the house is made safe . . .' Her eyes narrowed slightly. 'Which is why you're here . . . Excuse me, but shouldn't you have a supervisor? I thought an adult always had to be present at an investigation. Exactly how old are you?'

'Old enough and young enough,' Lockwood said, smiling. 'The perfect age.'

'Strictly speaking, madam,' I added, 'the law states that an adult is only required if the operatives are undergoing training. It's true that some of the bigger agencies always use supervisors, but that's their private policy. We're fully qualified and independent, and we don't find it necessary.'

'In our experience,' Lockwood said sweetly, 'adults just get in the way. But of course we do have our licences here, if you'd like to see them.'

The woman ran a hand across the smooth surface of her neat blonde hair. 'No, no . . . That won't be necessary. Since Mother clearly wanted you, I'm sure it will be fine . . .' Her voice was neutral and uncertain. There was a brief silence.

'Thank you, madam.' I glanced back towards the quiet, waiting door. 'There's just one other thing. Is there someone else at home? When we rang the bell, I thought—'

Her eyes rose rapidly, met mine. 'No. That's quite impossible. I have the only key.'

'I see. I must've been mistaken.'

'Well, I won't delay you,' Mrs Martin said. 'Mother's completed the form you sent her.' She held out the buff folder. 'She hopes it will be useful.'

'I'm sure it will.' Lockwood tucked it somewhere inside his coat. 'Thank you very much. Well, we'd better get started. Tell your mother we'll be in touch in the morning.'

The woman handed him a ring of keys. Somewhere along the road a car horn blared, to be answered by another. There was plenty of time till curfew, but night was falling and people were growing antsy. They wanted to get home. Soon there'd be nothing moving in the London streets but trails of mist and twisting moonbeams. Or nothing, at least, any adult there could clearly see.

Suzie Martin was conscious of this too. She raised her shoulders, pulled her cardigan tight. 'Well, I'd better be going. I suppose I should wish you luck . . .' She looked away. 'So very young! How terrible that the world should have come to this.'

'Goodnight, Mrs Martin,' Lockwood said.

Without reply, she pattered down the steps. In a few seconds she had vanished among the mists and laurels in the direction of the road.

'She's not happy,' I said. 'I think we'll be off the case tomorrow morning.'

'Better get it solved tonight, then,' Lockwood said. 'Ready?'

I patted the hilt of my rapier. 'Ready.'

He grinned at me, stepped up to the door and, with a magician's flourish, turned the key in the lock.

When entering a house occupied by a Visitor, it's always best to get in quick. That's one of the first rules you learn. Never hesitate, never linger on the threshold. Why? Because, for those few seconds, it's not too late. You stand there in the doorway with the fresh air on your back and the darkness up ahead, and you'd be an idiot if you didn't want to turn and run. And as soon as you acknowledge that, your willpower starts draining away through your boots, and the terror starts building in your chest, and bang, that's it – you're compromised before you begin. Lockwood and I both knew this, so we didn't hang around. We slipped straight through, put down our bags, and shut the door softly behind us. Then we stood quite still with our backs against it, watching and listening side by side.

The hall of the house lately occupied by Mr and Mrs Hope was long and relatively narrow, though the high ceiling made it seem quite large. It was floored with white and black marble tiles, set diagonally, and flanked by palely papered walls. Halfway along, a steep staircase rose into shadows. The hall kinked round this to the left and continued into a void of black. Doorways opened on either side: gaping, choked in darkness.

All of which could have been nicely illuminated if we'd put on the lights, of course. And there was a switch on the wall right there. But we didn't attempt to use it. You see, a second rule you learn is this: electricity interferes. It dulls the senses and makes you weak and stupid. It's much better to watch and listen in the dark. It's good to have that fear.

We stood in silence, doing what we do. I listened. Lockwood watched. It was cold in the house. The air had that musty, slightly sour smell you get in every unloved place.

I leaned in close to Lockwood. 'No heating,' I whispered.

'Mm-hm.'

As my eyes grew used to the dark, I saw more details. Beneath the curl of the banister was a little polished table, on which sat a china bowl of potpourri. There were pictures on the wall, mostly faded posters of old-time musicals, and photographs of rolling hills and gentle seas. All pretty innocuous. In fact it wasn't at all an ugly hallway; in bright sunlight it might have looked quite pleasant. But not so much now, with the last light from the door panes stretching out like skewed coffins on the floor in front of us; with our shadows neatly framed inside them; and with the manner of old Mr Hope's death in this very place hanging heavy in our minds.

I breathed hard to calm myself and shut out morbid thoughts. Then I closed my eyes against the taunting darkness and listened.

Listened . . .

Halls, landings and staircases are the arteries and airways of any building. It's here that everything is channelled. You get echoes of things currently going on in all the connecting rooms. Sometimes you also get other noises that, strictly speaking, ought not to be there at all. Echoes of the past, echoes of hidden things . . .

This was one such time.

I opened my eyes, picked up my bag and walked slowly down the hall towards the stairs. Lockwood was already standing by the little polished table beneath the banister. His face shone dimly in the light from the door. 'Heard something?' he said.

'Yep.'

'What?'

'A little knocking sound. Comes and goes. It's very faint, and I can't tell where it's coming from. But it'll get stronger – it's scarcely dark yet. What about you?'

He pointed at the bottom of the steps. 'You remember what happened to Mr Hope, of course?'

'Fell down the stairs and broke his neck.'

'Exactly. Well, there's a tremendous residual death-glow right here, still lingering three months after he died. I should've brought my sunglasses, it's so bright. So what Mrs Hope told George on the phone stacks up. Her husband tripped and tumbled down and hit the ground hard.' He glanced up the shadowy stairwell. 'Long steep flight . . . Nasty way to go.'

I bent low, squinting at the floor in the half-dark. 'Yeah, look how the tiles have cracked. He must've fallen with tremendous force'

Two sharp crashes sounded on the stairs. Air moved violently against my face. Before I could react, something large, soft and horribly heavy landed precisely where I stood. The impact of it jarred my teeth.

I jumped back, ripping my rapier from my belt. I stood against the wall, weapon raised and shaking, heart clawing at my chest, eyes staring wildly side to side.

Nothing. The stairs were empty. No broken body sprawled lifeless on the floor.

Lockwood leaned casually against the banister. It was too dark to be certain, but I swear he'd raised an eyebrow. He hadn't heard a thing.

'You all right, Lucy?'

I breathed hard. 'No. I just got the echo of Mr Hope's last fall. It was very loud and very real. It was like he'd landed right on top of me. Don't laugh. It's not funny.'

'Sorry. Well, something's stirring early tonight. It's going to get interesting later. What time d'you make it?'

Having a watch with a luminous dial is my third recommended rule. It's best if it can also withstand sudden drops in temperature and strong ectoplasmic shock. 'Not yet five,' I said.

'Fine.' Lockwood's teeth aren't quite as luminous as my watch, but when he grins it's a close-run thing. 'Plenty of time for a cup of tea. Then we find ourselves a ghost.'



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Zoe Sugg, aka Zoella, is a vlogger from Brighton, UK. Her beauty, fashion and lifestyle vlogs have gained her millions of YouTube subscribers, with even more viewing the vlogs every month. She won the 2011 Cosmopolitan Blog Award for Best Established Beauty Blog and went on to win the Best Beauty Vlogger award the following year. Zoe has also twice received the Best British Vlogger award at the 2013 and 2014 Radio 1 Teen Awards and the 2014 and 2015 Nickelodeon Kids' Choice award for UK's Favourite Vlogger, and she was named Web Star for Fashion and Beauty at the 2014 Teen Choice Awards.

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I want to dedicate this book to all the people who made this possible. The people who have subscribed to my channel, watched my videos and read my blog, whether that was in 2009 or yesterday. Your support means the absolute world to me. There are no words to express just how much I love every single one of you – without you this book would not be in your hand.

★ ★ *One year ago . . .* ★ ★

22 November

Hello, World!

I've decided to start a blog.

This blog.

Why, you might ask?

You know when you shake a Coke can and then you open it and it explodes everywhere? Well, that's how I feel right now. I have so many things I want to say fizzing up inside of me, but I don't have the confidence to say them out loud.

My dad once told me that I should start writing a diary. He said that keeping a diary is a great way of expressing our innermost thoughts. He also said it would be great to look back on when I was old and that it would 'really make me appreciate my teenage years'. Hmm, it's obviously been so long since he was a teenager he's forgotten what it's actually like.

I did try, though – writing a diary. I managed about three entries before I gave up. Most of them went something like this:

Rained today; my new shoes got ruined. Jenny contemplated skipping maths. She didn't. John Barry got a nosebleed in science because he poked a pencil up there. I laughed at him. He wasn't impressed. It was awkward. 'Night.

Not exactly Bridget Jones, right? More like 'can't be bothered'.

The thought of writing stuff to myself in a diary seems a bit pointless, really.

I want to feel like someone, somewhere, will be able to read what I've got to say.

That's why I've decided to give this blog a go – so that I have somewhere I can say exactly what I want, when I want and how I want – *to someone*. And not have to worry that what I say won't sound cool or will make me look stupid or lose me friends.

That's why this blog is anonymous.

So that I can be totally me.

My best friend Wiki (*that's not his real name by the way – I can't give his real name or this won't be anonymous*) would say that the fact I'm having to be anonymous in order to be myself is an 'epic tragedy'. But what does he know? He's not a teenage girl with anxiety issues. (*He's actually a teenage boy with parental issues, but that's a whole other story.*)

Sometimes I wonder if it's *because* I'm a teenage girl that I have anxiety issues. Let's face it – there is a lot to get anxious about.

Top Ten Reasons for Teenage Girls Getting Anxious

1. You're supposed to look perfect all of the time
2. This coincides with your hormones deciding to go bonkers
3. Which leads to the spottiest time of your entire life (*making number 1 totally impossible!*)
4. Which also coincides with the first time you've had the freedom to buy chocolate whenever you like (*making number 3 even worse!*)
5. Suddenly everyone cares about what you wear
6. And what you wear has to look perfect too
7. Then you're supposed to know how to pose like a supermodel
8. So you can take a selfie in your outfit of the day
9. Which you then have to post on social media for all your friends to see
10. You're supposed to be wildly attractive to the opposite sex (*while dealing with all of the above!*)

Please picture me giving a dramatic, heartfelt sigh at this point.

But surely I can't be the only teenage girl who feels like this?

I have this dream that secretly all teenage girls feel exactly like me.

And maybe one day, when we all realize that we all feel the same, we can all stop pretending to be something we're not.

That would be awesome.

But until that day I'm going to keep it real on this blog. And keep it unreal in 'real' life.

I'm going to say what I want to say, and it would be really cool if you (*whoever you might be*) join me.

This can be our very own corner of the Internet, where we can talk about what it truly feels like to be a teenage girl – without having to pretend to be something we're not.

I also love taking photos (*don't you just love the way photos are able to freeze special moments in time forever? Beautiful sunsets, birthday parties, salted-caramel cupcakes with thick frosting . . .*) so I'll be posting lots of those too. But there won't be any selfies, obviously, for anonymity reasons.

OK, well I guess that's all for now. Thank you for reading (*if anyone actually has been reading!*). And let me know what you think in the comments below.

Girl Online, going offline xxx

★ Chapter One ★

Present day . . .

Hey, Penny, did you know that William Shakespeare is an anagram for 'I am a weakish speller'?

I look at the text from Elliot and sigh. In the time I've been watching the dress rehearsal for *Romeo and Juliet* (three hours of my life that I will *never* get back), Elliot has bombarded me with hundreds of random texts about Shakespeare. He's supposed to be doing it to relieve my boredom but, seriously, does anyone really need to know that Shakespeare was baptised in 1564? Or that he had seven siblings?

'Penny, could you get a shot of Juliet leaning out of the trailer?'

I quickly grab my camera and nod to Mr Beaconsfield. 'Yes, sir.'

Mr Beaconsfield is the Year Eleven drama teacher. He's one of those teachers who likes being 'down with the kids' – all gelled hair and 'call me Jeff'. He's also the reason our version of *Romeo and Juliet* is set in a Brooklyn ghetto and Juliet is leaning out of a trailer rather than off a balcony. My BFIS (*Best Friend in School*), Megan, loves Mr Beaconsfield, but then he does always cast her in all the lead roles. Personally, I think he's a little creepy. Teachers shouldn't want to hang out with teenagers. They should want to mark books and stress about school inspections and whatever else they get up to in the staffroom.

I go up the steps at the side of the stage and crouch down beneath Megan. She's wearing a baseball cap with SWAG printed on the front and has a thick fake-gold chain with a huge fake-gold dollar sign dangling from her neck. There's no way she'd be seen dead in that outfit anywhere else; that's how much she loves Mr Beaconsfield. I'm about to take a picture when Megan hisses down to me: 'Make sure you don't get my spot.'

'What?' I whisper back.

'The spot on the side of my nose. Make sure you don't get it in the picture.'

'Oh. Right.' I shift to one side and zoom in. The lighting from this side isn't the best but at least the spot isn't visible. I take the picture then turn to leave the stage. As I do, I glance out into the auditorium. Apart from Mr Beaconsfield and the two assistant directors, all of the seats are empty. I instinctively breathe a sigh of relief. To say I'm not very good with crowds would be a bit like saying Justin Bieber isn't very good with the paparazzi. I don't know how people can

actually perform onstage. I only have to go up there for a couple of seconds to take a photo and I feel uneasy.

‘Thanks, Pen,’ Mr Beaconsfield says as I hurry down the steps. That’s another cringe-fact about him – the way he calls us all by a nickname. I mean, seriously! It’s OK for my family but not my teachers!

Just as I get back to my safe spot at the side of the stage my phone bleeps again.

Oh my God, Juliet used to be played by a man back in Shakespeare’s day! You have to tell Ollie – I’d love to see his face! 😊

I look up at Ollie, who is currently gazing up at Megan.

‘But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?’ he says, in the worst New York accent ever.

I can’t help but sigh. Even though Ollie’s dressed in an even worse costume than Megan’s – making him look like a cross between a *Jeremy Kyle* guest and Snoop Dogg – he still somehow manages to look cute.

Elliot hates Ollie. He thinks Ollie’s really vain and calls him the Walking Selfie, but, to be fair, he doesn’t really know him. Elliot goes to a private school in Hove; he’s only seen Ollie when we’ve bumped into him on the beach or in town.

‘Shouldn’t Penny take a picture of me in this scene too?’ Ollie asks when he finally gets to the end of his speech. He’s still talking in his fake American accent – which he’s been

doing ever since he got the part. Apparently all the top actors do it; they call it ‘method acting’.

‘Of course, Ollz,’ says Call-Me-Jeff. ‘Pen?’

I put down my phone and run back up the steps.

‘Can you make sure you get my best side?’ Ollie whispers at me from beneath his cap. His one has *STUD* printed on the front in black diamanté.

‘Sure,’ I reply. ‘Er, which side is that again?’

Ollie looks at me like I’m crazy.

‘It’s just so hard to tell,’ I whisper, my face flushing crimson.

Ollie continues to frown.

‘Because they both look good to me,’ I say, desperation setting in. Oh my God! What is wrong with me?! I can practically hear Elliot shrieking in horror. Thankfully at this point, Ollie starts to grin. It makes him look really boyish and way more approachable.

‘It’s my right side,’ he says, and turns back to face the trailer.

‘Is that – er – your right, or mine?’ I ask, wanting to make double sure.

‘Come on, Pen. We haven’t got all day!’ Mr Beaconsfield calls out.

‘It’s my right, of course,’ Ollie hisses, looking at me like I’m demented again.

Even Megan’s frowning at me now. My face burning, I take the picture. I don’t do any of my usual things, like checking the lighting or the angle or anything – I just press the button and stumble out of there.

When the rehearsal is finally over – and I’ve learnt from

Elliot that Shakespeare was only eighteen when he got married and he wrote thirty-eight plays in total – a group of us head to JB’s Diner to get milkshakes and chips.

As we reach the seafront, Ollie starts walking along beside me. ‘How you doin’?’ he says in his fake New York drawl.

‘Um, OK, thanks,’ I say, my tongue instantly tying itself in knots. Now he’s out of his Romeo gangster gear, he looks even better. His blond surfer-dude hair is perfectly tousled and his blue eyes are sparkling like the sea in the winter sunshine. To be honest, I’m not entirely sure if he’s my type – he may be a little too boy-band-meets-athlete perfect – but it’s so unusual for me to have the undivided attention of the school heart-throb that I can’t help feeling embarrassed.

‘I was wondering . . .’ he says, grinning down at me.

Instantly my inner voice starts finishing his sentence: *What do you like to do in your spare time? Why have I never properly noticed you before? Would you like to go out with me?*

‘. . . if I could take a look at the picture you took of me? Just to make sure I look OK.’

‘Oh – er – right. Yes, OK. I’ll show you when we get to JB’s.’ It’s at exactly this moment that I fall into a hole. OK, it’s not a big hole and I don’t actually disappear inside it or anything, but I do catch my foot and end up tumbling forward – making me look about as attractive and sophisticated as a Saturday-night drunk. That’s one thing I hate about Brighton, where I live. It seems to be full of holes that exist just for me to fall into! I style it out and, luckily, Ollie seems not to notice.

When we get to JB’s, Ollie dives straight into the booth next to me. I see Megan raise her eyebrows and I instantly

feel like I've done something wrong. Megan's very good at making me feel this way. I turn away and concentrate on the Christmas decorations around the diner instead – the swirls of green and red tinsel, and the mechanical Father Christmas who yells 'Ho, ho, ho!' every time someone walks past. Christmas is definitely my favourite time of the year. There's something about it that always calms me. After a few moments, I turn back to the table. Luckily, Megan's now absorbed with her phone.

My fingers twitch as the inspiration for a blog post pops into my head. Sometimes it feels as if school is one big play and we're all supposed to perform our set roles all the time. In our real-life play, Ollie isn't supposed to sit next to me; he's supposed to sit next to Megan. They aren't actually dating or anything but they're both definitely on the same rung of the social ladder. And Megan *never* falls into holes. She just seems to glide through life, all glossy chestnut hair and pouting. The twins slide into the booth next to Megan. The twins are called Kira and Amara. They have non-speaking parts in the play and that's kind of how Megan treats them in real life – as extras to her lead role.

'Can I get you guys anything to drink?' a waitress says, arriving at our table with a pad and a grin.

'That would be awesome!' Ollie says loudly in his pretend American accent, and I can't help cringing.

We all order shakes – apart from Megan, who orders a mineral water – and then Ollie turns to me. 'So, can I see?'

'What? Oh, yes.' I fumble in my bag for my camera and start scrolling through the pictures. When I get to the one of

Ollie, I pass it to him. I hold my breath as I wait for his response.

‘Sweet,’ he says. ‘That looks really good.’

‘Ooh, let me see my one,’ Megan cries, grabbing the camera from him and pressing at the buttons wildly. My whole body tenses. Normally, I don’t mind sharing things – I even give half my advent-calendar chocolates to my brother, Tom – but my camera is different. It’s my most prized possession. It’s my safety net.

‘Oh. My. God. Penny!’ Megan shrieks. ‘What have you done? It looks like I’ve got a moustache!’ She slams the camera down on the table.

‘Careful!’ I say.

Megan glares at me before picking up the camera and fiddling with the buttons. ‘How do I delete the picture of me?’

I grab it back from her a little too forcefully and one of her false fingernails catches on the strap.

‘Ow! You’ve broken my nail!’

‘You could have broken my camera.’

‘Is that all you care about?’ Megan glares at me across the table. ‘It’s not my fault you took such a terrible picture.’

In my head an answer forms itself: *It’s not my fault you made me take it that way because you’ve got a spot.* But I stop myself from saying it.

‘Let me see,’ Ollie says, taking the camera from me.

As he starts to laugh and Megan glares at me even harder, I feel a familiar tightness gripping my throat. I try to swallow but it’s impossible. I feel trapped inside the booth. *Please don’t let this be happening again,* I silently plead. But it is. A burning

heat rushes through my body and I can barely breathe. The pictures of movie stars lining the wall all suddenly seem to be staring down at me. The music from the jukebox is suddenly too loud. The red chairs too bright. No matter what I do, I can't seem to control my own body. The palms of my hands go clammy and my heart starts to pound.

'Ho, ho, ho!' the mechanical Father Christmas by the door calls. But he doesn't sound cheery any more. He sounds menacing.

'I need to go,' I say quietly.

'But what about the picture?' Megan whines, flicking her glossy dark hair over her shoulder.

'I'll delete it.'

'What about your milkshake?' Kira says.

I take some money from my purse and put it on the table, hoping they don't notice my fingers trembling. 'One of you guys have it. I just remembered I have to help my mum with something. I need to get home.'

Ollie looks at me and, for a second, I think he actually looks disappointed. 'Will you be in town tomorrow?' he asks.

Megan glares at him across the table.

'I guess so.' I feel so hot it's making my vision blurred. I need to get out of here, now. If they keep me trapped in this booth for much longer, I'm certain I'm going to pass out. It takes everything I've got not to yell at Ollie to get out of my way.

'Cool.' Ollie slides out of the booth and hands me my camera. 'Maybe see you around then.'

'Yes.'

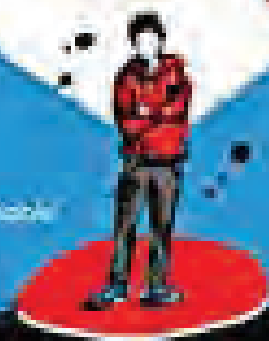
One of the twins, I can't tell which, starts to ask if I'm

OK, but I don't stop to answer her. Somehow, I make it out of the diner and on to the seafront. I hear the shriek of a seagull followed by a shriek of laughter. A group of women are tottering towards me, all spray tans on high heels. They're wearing Barbie-pink T-shirts, even though it's December, and one of them has a string of learner plates round her neck. I internally groan. That's another thing I hate about living in Brighton – the way it's invaded by stag and hen parties every Friday night. I dart across the road and head down to the beach. The wind is icy and fresh but it's exactly what I need. I stand on the wet pebbles and stare out to sea and wait until the waves, crashing in and rolling out, coax my heartbeat back to normal.

The
GIFTED,
the
TALENTED
and Me

'So, so funny' and recognizable

JENNY COLGAN



WILLIAM SUTCLIFFE

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The
GIFTED,
the
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Because we can

‘COME DOWNSTAIRS, EVERYONE! FAMILY MEETING!’

Even though I was mildly curious about why Dad was back from work so early, and what a ‘family meeting’ might involve, I stayed put in my room.

‘PIZZA!’ he added. ‘Last one down gets the Hawaiian!’

Doors slammed, footsteps thundered down the staircase and I leaped up. After a brief tussle with Ethan in the kitchen doorway, during which Freya somehow managed to crawl between our legs and get the first slice, we all assembled around the table, eating straight from takeaway boxes spread over a layer of drawings, uncompleted homework, unopened letters and unread magazines.

Ethan, who was seventeen and hadn’t worn any colour except black for the last three years, announced through a

mouthful of pizza, 'I don't mind who gets custody, but I'm not moving out of my bedroom.'

'Custody?' said Mum.

'Yeah. I'm not leaving, and I'm not going anywhere at the weekends.'

'You've got the wrong end of the stick, love,' said Mum. 'We're not getting divorced.'

'Oh,' said Ethan. 'So what's all this about a family meeting?'

Freya, who lived in a seven-year-old's fantasy universe populated exclusively by fairies, unicorns and cats, temporarily tuned in to reality and began to cry. 'You're getting divorced?'

Mum jumped out of her chair, dashed around the table and lifted Freya into her arms. 'We're not getting divorced. You mustn't worry.'

'But Ethan said you are!'

'Ethan's wrong.'

'How do I know you're telling the truth?' said Freya. 'How do I know you're not just saying that to protect me?'

'Ethan!' snapped Mum. 'Look what you've done. Tell Freya you made it up.'

'I didn't make it up.'

'You did! Nobody said anything about divorce until you piped up.'

'I worked it out for myself.'

'INCORRECTLY! WE'RE NOT GETTING A DIVORCE!'

'Why not?' said Ethan.

'What?' replied Mum. 'You're asking me why we're *not* getting a divorce?'

'If you can't even think of an answer, maybe we should be worried,' said Ethan.

'STOP!' said Dad. 'Rewind. Stay calm. There's no divorce. I called this meeting because we have something to tell you.'

'Trial separation?' said Ethan.

'No. It's good news.'

This shut everyone up. The idea of good news hadn't occurred to us.

'I sold my company,' said Dad, leaning back in his chair, with a grin spreading across his face.

Ethan, Freya and I stared at him blankly.

'You have a company?' I said.

'Yes! Of course I do! What do you think I've been doing every day for the last six years?'

I shrugged.

'Well, until last week I had a company. But now I've sold it!'

He beamed at us, waiting for a response. None of us had any idea what he was talking about, or why he was making

such a performance of this fantastically dull information. Freya, losing interest in the entire conversation, pulled a notebook from her pocket and began to draw.

‘For a lot of money,’ he added.

Ethan’s eyes rose from his pizza.

‘When you say a lot ... are you saying ... ?’

‘We’re rich!’ said Mum, leaping up with Freya still in her arms and beginning to dance around the kitchen. ‘We’re rich! We’re rich! Goodbye, Stevenage! Goodbye, cramped, boxy little house! It’s going to be a whole new life! Nobody believed he could do it, but he did! He made it! We’re rich!’

‘How rich?’ said Ethan.

‘Comfortable,’ said Dad.

‘Stinking,’ said Mum.

‘Not stinking,’ said Dad. ‘Mildly smelly.’

‘Can I have a new phone?’ said Ethan.

The only clue this might have been about to happen was Dad’s job. Or lack of one. When Freya was still a baby, he walked out on whatever it was he was doing back then – something that involved wearing a tie and getting home after I was in bed – and installed himself in the shed at the bottom of our garden. He spent months on end squirrelling around down there, dressed like he’d just

crawled out of a skip (which, in fact, he often had), and from this point on, when people asked him what he did for a living, he said he was an 'entrepreneur'. If he was trying to sound interesting, he sometimes said 'inventor'.

He was always coming and going with random bits of machinery, then occasionally he'd turn up in the kitchen wearing a suit, and we'd all be kind of, 'Whoa! Who are you? How did *you* get into the house?' But after making fun of him for looking like an employable adult, none of us ever remembered to ask him where he was going.

One of those meetings must have generated a source of serious money, because at some point he stopped tinkering in the shed, upgraded his wardrobe from skip-diver to blind-man-stumbling-out-of-a-jumble-sale and went off to work in a warehouse somewhere. Or maybe it was an office. I never thought of asking him. He was just my dad, going out to work like everyone else's dad. What this actually involved didn't seem important. As long as he showed up at breakfast and weekends, and drove me where I needed to go, it didn't occur to me to wonder what he did all day.

Then there was a week when he flew off to America, carrying brand-new luggage and a floppy suit bag I'd never seen before. This time I remembered to ask what he was up to, but he just said 'meetings'. There was something in the way Mum wished him luck as he set off that did seem

odd – the way she said it, like she genuinely meant it – but a couple of minutes later I forgot all about the whole thing.

It was just after he got home from America that our first-ever family meeting was called.

‘Hang on,’ I said, interrupting Mum’s celebration dance. ‘What do you mean goodbye, Stevenage?’

‘You don’t think we’re going to stay here, do you?’ said Mum. ‘Rich people don’t live in Stevenage. They live in London! Dad’s sold his company, I’ve handed in my notice at work, and we can finally get out of this dump and move to London!’

‘But I like Stevenage,’ I said.

‘The only people who like Stevenage are people who’ve never been anywhere else,’ said Ethan.

‘I’ve been to the same places as you.’

‘No, you haven’t. And you’ve barely read a book in your life. Your idea of culture is ten-pin bowling.’

‘What’s that got to do with liking Stevenage?’

‘See? Ignorant.’

I looked across at Mum for support, hoping she’d take my side, but it looked like she hadn’t even heard. Her expression reminded me of the thing you see in cartoons when people’s eyeballs turn into dollar signs.

‘So we’re moving?’ I asked.

‘Yes!’ said Mum. ‘As soon as we can! To a place I’ve been dreaming of all my life. There are beautiful Victorian houses, and it’s in London but it’s near an enormous park, and even though it’s expensive, it’s filled with artists and musicians and publishers and creative people. It’s called ...’ her voice dipped to a reverential whisper ‘... Hampstead.’

‘That’s where we’re going to live?’ said Ethan.

‘Yes, and there’s an amazing school where the artists and musicians and publishers send their children. It’s called the North London Academy for the Gifted and Talented. I’ve been in touch already, and we have places for all three of you. Freya, you’ll be able to do as much painting as you like, taught by real artists. Ethan, you’ll be able to concentrate on your music and maybe start a band. And Sam, you’ll ... er ... you’ll have a lovely time and meet lots of interesting new friends.’

‘I don’t want new friends. I like the friends I’ve got,’ I said.

‘Your friends are very nice, I know, but there’s a much more exciting world out there. You’re going to love it.’

‘Are you saying my friends are boring?’

‘No! They’re sweet kids.’

‘*Sweet kids!?* I’m fifteen, not five!’

'I'm talking about being stuck here, in Stevenage! It's this town that's boring! London's a global metropolis. The whole world is there. It's going to be fantastic!'

'You always say it's noisy and polluted.'

'Do I?'

'Yes! And dirty and crowded.'

'Well, we'll get used to that. Once you're a proper Londoner you hardly notice those things.'

'And what is an academy for the gifted and talented, anyway? Why can't we just go to a normal school?'

'I'll show you the website. It's a holistic educational environment that fosters creativity and engagement with the performing arts.'

'Sounds like a nightmare,' I said.

Mum reached across the table, took my hand and stared into my eyes. 'Open your mind, Sam. Mainstream education is restrictive and conformist and obsessed with pointless targets and tests. This is an amazing opportunity to break free of all that nonsense and have your true self fostered and nourished! Even if you don't take to it straight away, in time you're going to find new depths you never realised you had.'

'I don't want to find new depths. I like the ones I've got already.'

'Those aren't depths,' said Ethan. 'They're shallows.'

‘Wearing black, watching boring films and playing the guitar doesn’t make you deep, Ethan.’

‘Actually, it does,’ he replied.

I rolled my eyes at him, while privately wondering if he might in fact be right.

‘Is this really, definitely happening?’ he said to Dad, sounding more excited than I had ever heard him.

‘Yes,’ Dad replied.

‘You promise?’

‘Yes!’

Ethan’s face broke into an enormous grin. He leaned back in his chair, let out a long, ecstatic sigh and said, ‘I can’t believe it! This is like getting out of jail halfway through your sentence.’

‘If it’s a school for the gifted and talented,’ I said, ‘shouldn’t there be some kind of test to check that you actually are? Because I’m not.’

‘Of course you are,’ said Mum. ‘You just haven’t quite hit your stride.’

‘We made a donation,’ said Dad.

‘How do you know everyone else didn’t make a donation?’ I asked.

‘Don’t be so cynical,’ said Mum. ‘I’ve been watching for years how you kids are over-tested and crushed with stress and how uncreative the whole system is, and I’ve got you

out. This is going to set you free to find out who you really are! I don't want you to just be moulded into three more cogs in the capitalist machine. I want you to be unique and different and unafraid!

'WOO HOO!' yelled Ethan. 'Go, Mum!'

'Dad's a cog in the capitalist machine,' I said. 'He seems to quite like it. So are you.'

'Not any more!' she said. 'I never have to look at another spreadsheet again! That job's been eating me alive, but now I'll be free to concentrate on being there for the three of you.'

'Being where?' said Ethan.

'Wherever you need me.'

'Everyone's going to be so much happier,' said Dad.

I was unconvinced that increased parental surveillance was necessarily such good news. Judging by the look on Ethan's face, so was he.

'And while you're at school, I'll have time to pursue my own interests,' said Mum. 'I'm going to buy a kiln and take up pottery!'

Nobody had an answer to this.

'It's going to be great,' said Dad. 'Not the pottery – the whole thing. But also the pottery. That'll be excellent. Home-made pots! Wow!'

Freya held up a drawing of a puppy, a unicorn and a

kitten sitting on a cloud under a double rainbow. 'Is this what Hampstead looks like?' she asked.

'Kind of,' said Dad.

'Can I go now? Have we finished?' said Ethan, typing something into his phone as he walked out of the room.

Lost in a dream about our new life, Mum stared through the window towards where the horizon would have been if Stevenage had one.

'Dad? Do we really have to move?' I asked.

'I've worked for this all my life,' he said. 'Everything's going to be so much better from now on.'

'But all my friends are here. Why do we have to go to London?'

'Because we can. London's an amazing city. Whatever it is you're interested in – anything from anywhere in the world – it's there.'

'What I'm interested in is Stevenage.'

'Why are you being so negative?'

'Why are you sending me to a school for weirdos?'

'It's not a school for weirdos. It's somewhere we think you'll all be happy. We're trying to protect you. I've made some real money for the first time in my life, and this is what money's for, more than anything else. To protect your children.'

'From what? Reality?'

'I'll show you the school website. It looks amazing.'

'For Freya and Ethan.'

'For all of you! You're going to like it.'

'You reckon?'

'Yes! You'll be fine. Once you get used to it.'

This was deeply unconvincing.

'We're going to be so happy!' said Mum, seeming to snap out of her daydream, but the look in her eye was far, far away, as if our cramped kitchen, our thin-walled house and the whole town we were living in had already ceased to exist.

Goodbye, Stevenage!

Mum spent the next few weeks driving to and from the dump as if gripped by an extended back-to-front version of a manic shopping spree. Going out and buying loads of stuff would have been the obvious reaction to our family windfall, but true to Mum's habit of always doing what you least expect, she chose to celebrate getting rich by throwing away everything she could get her hands on. It was like getting burgled in slow motion.

As our house gradually emptied, Ethan, Freya and I twigged that the only way to hang on to any possessions was to hide them.

By the day the removal van came, we had hardly any furniture and had to watch TV standing up. We only still had the TV because as she was setting off for a charity shop I'd blocked the door and refused to move, while

she gave a long speech that included lots of words like 'capitalist', 'brain rot', 'imagination' and 'creativity'. I counter-attacked with an even longer and more impassioned speech, making heavy use of 'stealing from your own child', 'video games as a vibrant art form' and 'help with my anxiety about moving house'. It was the last one that swung it. Naked emotional blackmail laced with mental-health buzzwords was always the best way to get Mum onside.

As we drove away for the last time, following behind our strangely small removal van, Mum rolled down her window and whooped like she was on some chick-flick drive through the California desert. An old bloke at the bus stop almost fell off his mobility scooter. People don't usually whoop in Stevenage.

'Goodbye forever, Stevenage!' she yelled out of the window.

'Forever?' I asked.

'YES!'

'I thought you said I could come back and see my friends.'

She shot Dad a guilty look, which I spotted in the rear-view mirror.

'I saw that!' I said.

'Saw what?'

‘That look!’

‘What look?’

‘The one you gave Dad.’

‘I didn’t do anything.’

‘When can I come back and see my friends?’

‘Soon.’

‘That’s what you say when you mean never.’

‘It means soon. After we’ve settled in. You’ll make new friends before you know it.’

‘I’m too old for new friends.’

‘You’re fifteen!’

‘You don’t go around trying to make new friends when you’re fifteen. It’s tragic.’

‘I’m over forty! What do you think I’m going to do? You think I don’t need a social life?’ said Mum.

‘That’s different.’

‘Why is it different? Listen – nobody is ever too old for new friends.’

‘Except maybe the Queen,’ said Dad.

‘Your friends aren’t really friends, anyway,’ said Ethan. ‘They’re just people you grew up with.’

‘That’s what friends are! As you’d know if you had any!’

‘So all the best people in the world happen to live within half a mile of our cul-de-sac in Stevenage?’

'I never said they're the best people in the world! They're just my friends.'

'Let's not argue,' said Mum. 'We're starting a new life! It's going to be fantastic!'

'I don't want a new life. I want my old life,' I said.

'That's a perfectly natural reaction at your age.'

'What's my age got to do with it?'

'Well, I've been reading about this, and during puberty boys often have the urge to cling on to aspects of childhood they know they're about to leave behind.'

I buried my face in my hands. 'Oh, my God, I can't believe you just said that.'

'What's puberty?' asked Freya.

'It's a change the body goes through at Sam's age.'

'STOP!'

'When you become a teenager, the body changes shape and you begin to grow extra hair in new places ...'

'STOP STOP STOP!'

'I'll explain later. I think Sam's feeling uncomfortable. Finding your parents embarrassing is part of it.'

'YOU DON'T SAY!'

'Extra hair?' said Freya.

'Is anyone hungry?' said Dad. 'Shall we stop for a coffee? Who wants a snack? Snack anyone? I'd love a Danish.'

'They're called pubes,' said Ethan.

‘ETHAN!’ snapped Mum and Dad.

For most of the remainder of the journey, Freya muttered ‘pubes pubes pubes’ to herself.

Our new house was somehow both really posh and a bit of a dump. Mum was so proud of it you’d think she’d built it herself. She led us from room to room, detailing complicated plans about how she was going to rip up the carpets and ‘strip the place back’, even though it didn’t seem like there was anything to strip back, and the only thing I liked was the carpets. I thought I heard her refer to the rotten-looking shed at the bottom of the garden as her ‘studio’, but I couldn’t be sure, because I was too busy staring out of the window at the strangeness of this new place to listen to her.

Right outside, a middle-aged guy in a pair of expensive-looking ripped jeans and bright red trainers was getting into a Mercedes, while a woman in a BMW was hovering behind his parking space with her hazards flashing, blocking the road. Behind her a man in a convertible was frantically sounding his horn and shouting insults. Over the road, a team of skinny guys in filthy clothes were carrying bucket after bucket of rubble out of the basement of an enormous house and dumping it in a skip.

So this was Hampstead. No puppies, unicorns, kittens or rainbows were visible. I hadn’t even walked down my new

street yet, but I already sensed this was a place where rich people got very stressed about parking. Compared to the quiet little cul-de-sac of modern houses I'd come from, this felt like another universe. Back home, there were always kids playing out on the street. Here, you'd get mown down in seconds.

Mum quickly set about filling the house with new furniture that turned out to be older than our old furniture, which had been bought new but had got old. Our new new stuff was all properly old. 'Vintage' was the word she kept using, which I think must mean crappy.

Ethan took the room in the attic and painted it black. Given his choice of clothes, this worked as a form of camouflage, rendering him almost invisible.

I got the bedroom directly underneath him, which looked out over a row of tiny gardens towards the jumbled brick edifice that made up the back walls of the houses on the next block. People stacked upon people stacked upon people. Everywhere you looked.

If London really was where rich people came, the question I had was – why? Why why why?

Dad left the house every morning wearing a suit, which made me think he must have got some kind of job, but I never got round to asking him what it was. Everyone else

spent the last month of the summer holidays nesting and decorating and sanding floors and putting up curtains, but I did precisely nothing to improve the state of my room. I managed to unpack – just – and that was about it. I didn't move any furniture, or get any shelves, or paint anything, or even put up so much as a poster. I thought if I didn't properly move in, this house where I didn't want to be wouldn't really count as my home.

Messages carried on popping up on my phone from my Stevenage friends, but they were all about things I'd missed, or plans I'd never take part in, so after a while, when I realised that every time my phone pinged I felt a lonely, echoing twang in my chest, I switched off the notifications and stopped looking.

Now that I was utterly friendless, I had long, empty hours to fill, and chucking a tennis ball around my empty bedroom was the pastime I came up with. If you're bored enough, this can kill most of an afternoon relatively painlessly. It was also the only activity that allowed me to stop thinking about the clock ticking ever closer to the day when I would have to start at the North London Academy for Exactly the Kind of People I Instinctively Hated. Starting at any new school was frightening. The thought of my first day at this one filled me with blood-curdling terror.

Only by attempting to catch a hundred in a row with

my left hand, or throw ten perfect corner-ricochets, or some other random challenge, could I stop my mind turning endlessly back to the awful thought of the inexorable approach of the new term.

Everyone in the family had a different way of complaining about the ball-throwing noise:

Dad – shouting.

Ethan – physical violence.

Freya – stealing the tennis ball.

Mum – telling me I seemed withdrawn and asking if I wanted to talk about my feelings.

I never took up the talk-about-my-feelings offer. Eventually, Mum resorted to trying to talk to me about why I wouldn't talk about my feelings, followed by literally begging me to make some kind of effort to be happy.

I told her I was trying, but we both knew this was a lie. I was sulking, and, quite frankly, I had every right to sulk.

When the begging failed to work, Mum told me to pull myself together and stop being self-indulgent.

I informed her there was nothing self-indulgent about being depressed when your whole life has been stolen away from you by your social-climbing parents.

She told me that kind of ludicrous and unfair exaggeration was more or less a definition of the word self-indulgent.

I told her that was two words.

We then argued about hyphens for a while, until I stormed upstairs, slammed the door and set about making as much noise as I could with my tennis ball.

On the last Sunday of the summer holidays, over dinner, Mum announced that she'd decided to start writing a blog about creative parenting. She asked if we'd like to hear her first piece, and before anyone had time to ask what she was talking about, she cleared her throat, raised her iPad and began to read.

'The theme is motherhood and creative rebirth,' she said. 'This post is called "The Journey Begins."'

'Can I have a sick bowl?' asked Ethan.

'You don't have to listen if you don't want to.'

'OK, then my journey begins like this,' he replied, walking out of the room and heading upstairs.

Mum looked back at her screen and began to read. *'Is a life without change a life worth living? How can you nurture creativity in yourself and your children in a rushed-off-your-feet lifestyle? Is it possible in today's world to truly be yourself while also being there for your children? These are the questions I hope to answer in this blog.'*

'My family and I have just moved to London. That's hubby and me, and our three inspiring children: F___, seven and

already a burgeoning artist; E___, seventeen, a highly talented musician; and S___, fifteen, a little stranded between the twin states of childhood and adolescence ...'

'WHAT!? Is that all you can say about me? What do you mean stranded?'

'It's not a bad thing. And I haven't used your name.'

'Did you call me "hubby"? Please tell me you didn't say "hubby".'

'I ... I'm not going to write this by committee!'

'Artist, musician and ... *stranded*. What's that supposed to mean?' I said.

'Just that you're in transition. We're all in transition. We're starting a new life.'

'Who is this *for*, exactly?' asked Dad.

'Oh, that's a really encouraging thing to say. You don't think anyone's going to read it, do you?'

'No! Yes! I mean – I'm sure they will. Loads of them. I'm just interested to know who. So I can picture them.'

'I haven't even finished two paragraphs and already you're all picking holes in it! Freya's the only one who's actually listened.'

'Do I have to listen to any more?' asked Freya.

'Right! That's it!' Mum slammed the iPad cover shut. 'Negative negative negative. That's all I get from you lot, isn't it?'

An ashamed silence filled the room, as if everyone apart from Mum had simultaneously let out a silent but toxic fart.

‘Sorry, Mummy,’ said Freya. ‘Can you read some more, please?’

Mum gestured with an open palm towards Freya, raising her eyebrows at me and Dad as if to say, ‘Why do you both have worse manners than a seven-year-old?’

Neither of us had an explanation.

‘What I cook for you merits your attention, but not what I write, is that it?’

‘No,’ we said.

At this point, Ethan reappeared in the kitchen. ‘I’m hungry,’ he said.

‘Is that something you’re telling me or your father?’ asked Mum.

‘Er ...’

‘We’ve just eaten dinner!’ said Dad.

‘Well, I’m hungry again.’

‘You know what?’ said Mum. ‘Be hungry. It won’t kill you. Or make yourself some food. I’m going upstairs to finish my blog.’

‘Is this your blog about how to be a good mum?’ asked Ethan pointedly as the door slammed behind her.

An edgy silence fell.

'That was tactless,' Dad said to Ethan.

'What did I say?'

'Why is Mummy angry?' asked Freya.

'You mustn't worry,' said Dad. 'She's just a bit ...'

More silence.

'A bit what?' I asked.

'Mental?' offered Ethan.

'She's on a creative journey,' said Dad. 'She's ... I think ... maybe she's just happy.'

'I don't think it's that,' I said.

'Happy people don't stamp off in a huff,' said Freya. 'Happy people brush their hair a lot and have picnics.'

'I'm sure we'll go on a picnic soon,' said Dad.

Freya looked sceptical.

'I hate picnics,' said Ethan, gazing forlornly into the fridge.

'This is a big change for all of us,' said Dad. 'We have to be understanding with each other.'

'THERE'S NOTHING TO EAT!' wailed Ethan.

Just Call Me Tony

As I walked into the North London Academy for the Gifted and Talented on the first day of term, and began the long trudge to my form room, my whole body felt weighed down with dread. All around me, swarms of teenagers who mostly looked like they'd stepped out of the pages of a glossy magazine greeted one another with noisy post-holiday hugs. In my last school everyone looked more like they'd stepped out of Stevenage shopping centre. Which they usually had.

I'm not the kind of person who knows how much things cost, but everyone seemed to glow with an aura of money and confidence, sporting fancy bags, designer clothes, the latest trainers, complicated hairdos and shiny iPhones. Judging by their passionate greetings, everyone looked like they'd been friends for years. And on top of that, they were all (supposedly) either gifted or talented.

Ever since hearing about this school I'd sensed that it would make me feel like a loser; what I hadn't realised was that this sensation would hit me within seconds of walking through the doors. Immediately and viscerally, I knew this was not my place and these were not my people. I just wanted to sink into the floor and disappear.

By the way I was greeted when I reached my classroom it almost seemed as if my disappearance fantasy had come true. Following a flurry of quick glances in my direction, all I saw was a wall of backs. Nobody made even the slightest attempt to acknowledge my existence, so I made my way towards the emptiest corner of the room and pretended to read a noticeboard.

After a while, a bearded man walked in, wearing brown corduroys and a white smocky shirt-type-thing with a neckline low enough to reveal a hairy tuft of man-cleavage. At first I assumed he must be the teacher, but nobody stood up, or greeted him, or stopped chatting, and he didn't seem to mind, so I began to think perhaps he wasn't.

He walked over to me and said, 'So you're Sam,' extending a clenched hand as though he was attempting to greet me with a fist bump.

I put both hands in my pockets by way of a response.

'I'm Mr Phillips, but just call me Tony,' he said.

I nodded and tried to smile, concluding that this really was, despite all evidence to the contrary, the teacher.

‘Shy?’ he asked, clapping me on the shoulder.

There is nothing in this world more likely to make me feel shy than someone asking me if I feel shy, even though I don’t actually think I am particularly shy, so I instinctively wanted to respond to this with something loud and shameless, just to prove I wasn’t shy, but in the end I didn’t, because I was too shy.

‘Don’t be,’ he said, in response to my non-answer. ‘This is a friendly place. Don’t think of it as a school. Think of it as a laboratory of curiosity.’

‘Er ... which is my desk?’ I asked, meaning, *please can we end this conversation?*

‘Take your pick,’ he said. ‘We have a non-territorial approach here. Some people find that hard to get used to.’

‘Er ... I’ll have this one then.’

‘Do you mean “have”? Or “use”?’

‘I ... I don’t know.’

‘Hey – don’t look so worried. This is just the beginning. Rome wasn’t built in a day.’

I nodded, attempting to give the impression that I understood what he was talking about.

‘So – what’s your thing?’ he said, perching one buttock on the corner of the desk I had just claimed.

‘My thing?’

‘Yeah. Art? Drama? Music? Dance?’

‘Football,’ I said.

The smirk that seemed to permanently curl up one corner of his mouth froze.

‘You’re kidding, right?’

‘No. Why would I be kidding?’

‘Er ... listen, Sam, it’s perfectly natural at your age to want to challenge authority. I respect that. It can be a very healthy thing, and in a permissive environment it can be hard to find outlets for that urge. Am I right?’

‘No. I just like football.’

‘Listen – if there’s one word I hate using in this classroom it’s “rules”. That’s not how we operate. But your parents must have told you something about our pedagogical ethos, right?’

‘Pedawhatical whatos?’

‘We have a child-centred, non-hierarchical framework here. There are just a few things we insist on. Mutual respect. Inclusiveness. And no football.’

‘What?’

‘Kicking is a violent act. We’ve found that it increases aggression and accentuates gender stereotyped behaviour. Ball games are fine, up to a point, as long as they’re not competitive, but football is out. Football and smoking.

Though we usually turn a blind eye to smoking.’

‘But ...’

‘OK – it’s registration time. We can talk more later, Sam. Don’t sweat it. Everyone loves this place eventually. It’ll be the making of you.’

He stood and began to clap, not to applaud his own wonderfulness (at least not entirely) but to quieten the class.

‘Listen up, guys! It’s register! Is anyone not here?’

There was no discernible response.

‘OK. Cool. Welcome back, everyone. Hope you all had a good summer. It’s fantastic to see you all again. I’m sure you’ve all got a million stories – triumphs, disasters, breakthroughs and breakdowns – only kidding – anyway, can’t wait to hear what you’ve all been up to – it’s great to be back in the saddle again – not literally – only kidding – anyway, we’ll have to catch up on news later, cos it’s first period now, but I want you all to say hi to Sam here – he’s new to our strange and amazing ways – fresh blood – only kidding – anyway, he’s come here from mainstream education, so this is all completely new to him and probably kind of frightening and hard to keep up with – like a battery hen released in a forest – only kidding – anyway, I need someone to help him out and guide him through the first few days, so who’s going to be Sam’s buddy?’

I looked around at the class, who were all concentratedly avoiding eye contact with the teacher, as if this question had suddenly made the walls, floor and ceiling fascinating to look at.

‘No volunteer? OK – it’ll have to be you, then, Darius.’

‘Why me?’ said a boy in skinny jeans so skinny they were basically just denim tights. His hair seemed to have been meticulously gelled in at least seven different directions, and he was wearing glasses with frames so chunky and hideous they could only be expensive and highly fashionable.

‘Because of your charm and diplomacy,’ said Just Call Me Tony, as Darius rolled his eyes and chucked his bag on the floor, mouthing what looked like a stream of obscenities.

‘OK – that’s that, then. See you all later, guys. Peace out.’

Within seconds the room emptied, apart from me and Darius. I looked at him, read his T-shirt a couple of times (it said ‘T-SHIRT SLOGANS ARE SO LAST YEAR’) and thought, *Who is this freak?* He looked back at me, his eyes travelling up and down over my short, un-gelled hair, my grey hoodie and sagging jeans, and I saw on his face an expression that clearly seemed to say, *Who is this freak?*

For some reason, I got the feeling that to speak first would be conceding defeat, so I just stared at him.

He stared back.

I soon realised I was never going to win. Darius looked like the kind of kid who could go a week without speaking. Or blinking. Or eating.

‘So, you’re Darius?’ I said reluctantly.

‘Yup.’

‘Where do we go now?’

‘Follow me.’

He led me out of the room with a loping, stiff-shouldered walk that made him look like a very slow rollerblader.

We walked down a long corridor, which was covered from floor to ceiling in artwork ranging from finger-paintings to anatomical drawings to lurid abstract scrawls and perfectly rendered still lifes. Half of it looked like it belonged in a gallery, some of it wouldn’t have been out of place in a gynaecology textbook and a significant proportion could easily have been painted by a dog.

‘Worst lesson of the week now,’ said Darius eventually.

‘What’s that?’

‘Maths. Nobody does anything if you bunk off, but I can’t be bothered.’

‘Oh. OK. That’s good to know.’

Darius stopped walking and stared at me through his hideous glasses. ‘Let me guess,’ he said. ‘You probably like maths, don’t you?’

‘No,’ I lied. ‘It’s so boring.’

‘Hm.’

He turned away and carried on down the corridor. I followed, a few steps behind, and we walked the rest of the way in silence, with me wishing I was back at my Stevenage comprehensive, and him, presumably, wishing he was at a photo shoot for an indie band specialising in suicidally depressing music.



The Rise of Wolves

Kerr Thomson

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Chapter 1

The howl pierced the darkening sky and made Innis Munro stop dead in his tracks. He pulled his hood down, listened intently. The only sound was his beating heart.

That was a wolf, he thought.

But it couldn't have been. There were no wolves on the island of Nin, no wolves in Scotland any more, not for almost three hundred years. It was just a trick of the wind.

He pressed on but kept his hood down. The afternoon light of early March was fading fast, snow was falling, and he was still a good half-mile from home.

Innis walked faster, told himself it was not the howl that made him hurry but the gloomy sky and gathering snow. He was crossing 'the Barrens' – the middle of the island where the land was hummocky and boggy.

At the northern edge of the moorland stood a mountain called *Beinn Ainmhidhean*. Translated from Gaelic, it was the Hill of the Beasts, and Innis went there to watch the golden eagles that nested on its crags. The mountain was the only feature on the landscape. A few stumpy birch trees clung to the hollows but this was empty land; no crofts, no roads, no people.

To a stranger, a mainlander, it would have seemed he was lost in the middle of bleak nowhere, but Innis knew this ground, knew every rise and dip, every boggy pool and gorse bush. His grandfather's croft was over the next ridge and he knew Gramps would have the peat fire roaring and something thick and tasty simmering in a pot.

Another howl came; long, bloodcurdling, wolf-like.

Innis stopped again, caught his breath and held it. He turned full circle, scanning the landscape, peering through the snow and the gloom. Closer this time.

It was someone playing a trick, trying to frighten him. Someone from school looking to mock him in a new and different way. It was pretty lame, actually. There were no wolves on Nin.

Innis cupped a hand to his mouth and returned the best horror-movie wolf howl he could muster. There was an immediate response but from further away this time, in the distance up by the mountain. And then another howl, much closer, a sound that no boy could make.

Innis whirled around and stared across the moor. Twenty paces from where he stood was a shape, dark

against the brightness of swirling snow. The silhouette of an animal. It stood side-on to him, front and back legs splayed, back arched, bushy tail curved down. Innis watched the creature raise its head slowly to the sky and another howl shattered the silence.

It was the unmistakable silhouette of a wolf.

Innis turned and ran, leaping across the marshy ground, rasping air in and out. He slid down shallow slopes and sank into boggy puddles, rammed hands into the mud to haul himself out, moved forwards at speed, too frightened to look back in case the wolf was upon him and his legs gave out. In the distance, he saw the lights of four crofts that sat nestled below the higher ground of the Barrens. Home. He took a glance behind as he ran, saw nothing and stumbled and fell, landing face first in the marsh.

Innis sat up, felt water ooze beneath his trousers and melting snow run down his back. He gave a shiver and looked around. No wolves – but a boy was walking towards him, the snow lying thick enough now to hear the crunch of his steps.

Innis struggled to his feet. He didn't recognize the boy.

'Are you okay?' asked a gruff voice.

'I'm fine, I just tripped.'

The boy hesitated for a moment, then said, 'All right then.'

He was smaller than Innis but seemed older, maybe fourteen or fifteen. In appearance, the boys were the

exact opposite. Innis was tall and thin with lanky legs and straggly black hair. The stranger was squat, with short, fair hair, shaved almost to the scalp. He had dark, unfriendly eyes. Innis didn't know him.

The boy turned and took a step away, and Innis asked, 'Where are you going?'

'What's it to you?' the boy asked, without turning or stopping.

He was heading inland, across the Barrens. 'There's a wolf out there,' Innis said.

The boy stopped and headed back towards Innis. 'Where exactly?'

Innis pointed. 'Out there somewhere.'

'You saw it?' probed the boy.

'I heard it *and* I saw it.'

The boy didn't answer, asked instead, 'How far?'

'Not far, five minutes from here.'

The boy sighed and wiped snow from his face. He turned and strode off without another word.

LUCY WORSLEY

The time
will come
for bravery

LADY
MARY

BLOOMSBURY

LADY
MARY

LUCY WORSLEY

Illustrated by Joe Berger

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY



Prologue

April 1525, Greenwich,

in the Queen's Bedchamber, Mary is nine ...

Press a little harder with the pen, Mary. Your letters are all faint.
'Like a spider's footsteps.'

Mary had spoken without thinking, but the image was striking, and it made her mother laugh. The tiny feet of a spider, trailing across the paper. Yes, Mary's handwriting was difficult to read, unlike the bold, strong strokes of her mother's draft that she was copying.

'Mary! You are daydreaming again, aren't you?'

'Yes, *Mother*. Daydreaming. As always.'

'No need to be pert!'

Mary returned her attention to the task, but the spider wouldn't leave her mind. She imagined him

stopping a moment for a sit-down, crossing his many legs. It made her giggle. Laboriously, she tried to copy out the next few words.

... *my heart and soul will always be yours* ...

Her mother was hovering anxiously, and Mary wished she would go away. Mary did not mind writing, even enjoyed it sometimes, but she hated to be watched. Yet she had to do this for Charles, the emperor, her beloved. Yes, he was her beloved. She had been told it so many times that she almost believed it. Mary stroked her gold brooch, its letters spelling out his name: THE EMPEROUR.

Mary's mother noticed what she was doing.

'Ah yes!' she said, delighted. 'You are thinking of your husband-to-be. I see it! Thoughts of love and honour fill your head, *angelito mio*. What a magnificent future you have ahead of you – an empress! Nothing could be better, nothing more splendid. Your Spanish grandmother would be proud.'

Mary was so used to her mother's rhapsodies about her imperial future that she barely listened. But while her ears might not have been working, her eyes certainly were.

‘What’s that, Mother?’

Mary noticed that Queen Catherine was holding something in her own fingers, turning it over and over, as if it were precious. She looked up from her examination of the tiny, glinting object, a triumphant smile on her face.

‘Can you see what it is?’

Mary peered. It was a ring, clearly. But what kind?

Mary racked her brains for the colours of the precious stones that she had learned with Mr Featherstone. What colour was it? She examined it, turning it to the light.

‘It’s green, isn’t it? Is it ... an emerald?’

‘Yes!’ Her mother was rapturous, in a way that always slightly embarrassed Mary. It was easy to learn her lessons from Mr Featherstone. It was harder to know what to say in any given situation. She wished, often, for less fuss and to be left alone with her thoughts. Mary rolled her eyes. Green and gold, green and gold; they were her mother’s favourite colours.

‘It’s a huge emerald, isn’t it?’ her mother continued. ‘As green as poison. And in a magnificent

setting of gold as well. This will be your gift to your *amado*, Mary. We will send it with your letter.'

Mary slightly lost interest in the ring, if it was to pass so quickly through her possession. 'Oh Mary,' her mother sighed. 'You are not like other girls. You aren't interested in jewels, are you? Don't you want to keep it for yourself?'

'Not really,' Mary admitted. 'I would rather have a sister. Or, if I can't have a sister, then a kitten.' Mary knew that she shouldn't ask for a sister, or a baby brother. It made her mother upset. 'Yes, I'd rather have a kitten,' she said definitively.

Her ruse worked. 'Oh no, not kittens again!' The queen was exasperated. 'They have fleas, *querida*. And there is no place for them in the train of an army.'

'But Mother!' This time Mary's attention was captured to the extent that she threw down her pen. 'I am not in the train of an army. I will never be in the train of an army. I am stuck here in this royal palace, with nothing much to do, and nobody to play with, and loads of people gawping at me whenever I set foot out of our chamber.'

Catherine at once looked very grim, and crouched down by Mary's chair, looking sternly into her daughter's face.

'You,' she said savagely, holding Mary's eyes and jabbing at Mary's chest with her finger, 'are a daughter of Spain. You will not always be kept safe inside this *luxurious* palace, as you are now. You will look back on this as a time of great good fortune. The Wheel of Fortune can take you down as well as up, you know.'

'But *Mother*,' Mary said drily. She tired of this debate. She crossed her arms, sulky again. 'My father is the king of England. Who could know better than him? And he says that women don't go to war.' It really was too exhausting to have this argument over and over again.

Catherine continued exactly as if Mary had not spoken. 'The time will come for bravery,' she said, tapping a finger on the table. 'You are a daughter of Spain,' she said. 'Your grandmother Isabella was a warrior queen. Even when with child she rode to war! And daughters of Spain are always ready to fight! To fight to the death!'

Mary sighed. 'But I don't want to fight to the death,' she said under her breath. 'We're not in the country of the blood-drinkers now.'

She had heard her father refer to Spain in this manner. Although she did not know if Spaniards really did drink blood – what, out of goblets? – she thought it sounded impressively dismissive. But her mother wasn't listening.

'When you are married to Charles ...'

Catherine was clicking her fingers to regain Mary's attention. It worked. Mary turned to find her mother's blue eyes blazing at her, a sharp crease between her eyebrows.

'When you are married to Charles, when you have come of age in a few years' time, you will be an empress. You will have many enemies. People will try to take your power away from you. You must always, *always* be ready to fight to the death. I give you a great gift in telling you this.'

Mary's attention wandered again, as it so often did. She tried to imagine being married to Charles. She had of course met him, four years ago, when their marriage contract had been drawn up. But it

would still be another four years until she would go to Brussels and live with him. It was hard to remember his face. It was hard to imagine being an empress, and being ready to fight to the death every single day.

‘I’d rather be queen of England than an empress,’ Mary said, with decision. ‘Can’t Charles come and live with me here?’ What a lovely thought this was! ‘He could live here, with me, and you, and Father!’ Mary spun round to her mother, stretching out her arms in enthusiasm, the letter forgotten, enraptured with her new idea.

Catherine’s fierce look dissipated in an instant, as it often did when something amused her. But then a shadow crossed her face. She turned back to Mary, revealing her profile like a hawk’s, her heavy eyelids that came down half over her pupils, making her look ancient, timeless.

‘Girls like you, *Princess Mary*,’ Mary’s mother said, ‘must always go to live abroad. Like I did, you know that! And you should be pleased to leave this miserable land of England, where they don’t care for girls anyway. Just look at the way your father insists that

he still has no children. No children! Despite having you, a wondrous Spanish beauty. Although you have red-gold hair – that's not so Spanish. But of course you get that from me.'

Mary lowered her chin to her chest. Red-gold hair, *indeed*. It was more like a sort of warm light brown. And despite her mother's pride in the colour of Mary's hair, she personally thought it was the same shade as her father's. It was kind of her mother to call her a beauty, but Mary was suspicious of such terms. She had often examined her nose in the curve of the silver water jug. It flared, rather like the nose of a mule. She would turn her head from side to side, trying to make it look smaller, and indeed, at a certain point the swell of the vessel would make it disappear. All bad things could disappear, she thought, if you looked at them in the right light. But what was it that her mother was going on about now? The letter, oh, the letter. Yes, she must finish the letter to Charles.

The half-empty page looked enormous. Mary's writing had so far only filled a tiny bit at the top. She should have started lower down, so as to make

it look like a long letter with less work. She picked up her pen.

Will anything even come of it? Mary asked herself as she dipped it into the ink. Charles never wrote back. Mary sometimes suspected that her mother *went on* about things too much, and that this had the effect of boring people and turning them away. Too many letters; too many words.

She tried to imagine Charles reading the letter, trying on the ring. But what came to mind was a frowning man tossing the letter aside, as her father so often did. Secretaries picked up his discarded correspondence afterwards, from the floor, and took it away to deal with it, while he instead strode out saying that he was going hunting.

‘Perhaps,’ she said tentatively, ‘I write too often to Charles. Perhaps it bores him to receive all these letters.’

‘Mary! It is *your duty* to write often to your *amado*.’

It wasn’t easy to suggest that her mother might ever be wrong.

Mary sighed. She had known, really, that she would not get off so easily. ‘He needs to be reminded,’

Catherine said, as if to herself, 'of his ties to Spain. Of his ties to me, his aunt, stuck here in this damp island and married to a piece of soft curds of cheese. He needs reminding,' she said, her voice rising, 'of his own duty, which is *to marry my daughter*.'

'Soft curds?' In her mother's ravings, these were the only words that Mary picked out. 'My father is not *soft like cheese*, you know!'

'Ah, you are indignant, my spitting cat!' Catherine said, with a laugh. 'That's the spirit. I never knew such a girl for daydreaming, nor one who more admired her father. You worship him too much. You should save your worship for God!'

'Honour thy father and mother,' Mary said primly. 'Isn't that true?'

Catherine knelt again, looking closely into Mary's face. For a moment Mary feared that she'd get told off for answering back.

But not this time.

'It is true,' Catherine said gently. 'But *especially* honour your mother, and honour God. That is the Spanish way. There are many spies and liars in the world, but you must always, always trust me.'

Now, to work. Finish writing out that letter and then we can play.'

I would prefer to make up my own letter rather than copy yours, Mary thought to herself rebelliously as she pulled the draft closer to see it better. And my father is not soft like cheese at all. He says that girls can't be king. And because he's the king, and knows everything in the world, he can't be wrong.

PART ONE

AT COURT





Chapter 1

April 1527, Greenwich

Mary is eleven ...

‘And where ...’
AThe great bellowing roar came from the courtyard outside the window. Mary looked up, delighted.

‘And where is the high ...’

The deep, booming voice was louder now, coming closer, climbing the stairs. Mary had been stuck in a velvet chair for hours, with her mother’s ladies fussing all around her, doing her hair and fastening heavy necklaces around her throat until her head almost ached with the strain of remaining upright. She felt the gold links move and clank a little as she stretched her neck round to look between the ladies towards the door.

‘And where is the high, mighty and powerful princess ...’

Mary was now giggling, and wiggling out of her chair, and darting between the ladies-in-waiting. It was two years later. Mary knew that she was too grown up, now, for playing the old games with her father. But somehow, she could not stop. Behind her, she sensed her mother’s body give a slight resigned droop, and her unwilling smile.

‘The PRINCESS MARY?’

With that, Mary’s father was in the queen’s bedchamber, and picking Mary up under the armpits, and spinning her round and round in the air. She shrieked with excitement.

‘Oof!’

Unceremoniously, her father dumped her to the floor. The ladies-in-waiting did their usual trick of disappearing, slipping away silently with serene smiles. As they left, they revealed Mary’s mother standing by the dressing table.

‘Yes,’ said Catherine drily. ‘She is not so light now that she is eleven!’

‘Eleven, nearly a lady! And nearly ready to be

married! Now, let me see you.'

Mary's father had been staggering about, pretending that she had broken his back, while she smirked and giggled. But now he drew himself up and settled his fur-trimmed robe back on his shoulders.

'Come on, stand up straight!' Mary's father said, scanning her up and down with his blue eyes. 'Let us see this princess of ours! The ambassadors are here from your suitor, and they want to inspect you. They'll report back to him, you know.'

'Oh, I think that our daughter will make you proud,' said Catherine lightly. She stepped forward and placed her hands on Mary's shoulders. 'Stand straight, *angelito mio*,' she whispered in Mary's ear.

Mary slowly twirled for her father in her velvet dress and necklaces, slightly resisting the pressure of her mother's hands.

'Have we not done well, my love?'

Queen Catherine showed off two hours' handiwork in Mary's carefully selected velvet gown. She and her ladies had sewn Mary into it, stitching pearls along her neckline and braiding her hair into a crown. Although she was eleven, Mary was too young, still,

to hide her hair under a pointed hat like her mother's. She sometimes longed to feel the weight of such a headdress. Then she would be grown up, and probably married. People would take her seriously, not just tell her how clever she was, then move the conversation on to other things.

'Where are her fur-trimmed sleeves?'

He was asking suspiciously.

Catherine pantomimed surprise.

'I thought she was to play the virginals,' she said.

'Catherine, don't start again. This is all agreed. Yes, my daughter is certainly to play the virginals.'

Mary twitched at the sudden chill in the atmosphere. She knew that it had been long ago confirmed that she would perform for the ambassadors on the virginals, despite her mother's reluctance to have her do so.

'It is agreed, my liege,' Catherine said, smooth as silk. She was using a voice that Mary thought of as treacherous. She would say the nicest things in this voice, but she didn't mean them. 'Oh yes, it is agreed that Princess Mary will play the virginals. And for that she cannot wear her heavy sleeves. That's why she is not wearing them, obviously.'

They're quite safe, here in the box.' She nodded to a heavy leather trunk, brought up that morning from the royal wardrobe department in London, and raided by the ladies for Mary's costume.

Catherine's father nodded, appeased.

'All right, no sleeves,' he said. 'I'll give you credit, Catherine – you might not want this match for our daughter, but you have made her look as fine as any princess in Europe.'

Mary was not feeling particularly fine. In fact, she was beginning to feel more than a little foolish under her heavy clothes and her parents' scrutiny. Her scalp was starting to complain where her hair had been plaited a bit too tight. But then, her father's approval was important. He so rarely came up to see them in their chamber. It was worth going through all this to make him proud.

'Up, stand up straight!' he said tetchily. 'And what's this? Oh, but this is a nice touch.'

Mary pressed out her chest, where she was wearing a golden brooch.

'THE DUKE, it says,' she told him proudly. 'My one true love.'

For a second she felt her parents' eyes meeting over her head, and something powerful being exchanged. She felt cross. It was always like this. She was called the first princess of Europe, and then the next second she was utterly ignored. Much better to be an animal, she decided. Life as a princess was rather like being a piece of fine furniture, to be admired, cooed over, then swiftly forgotten.

'Yes,' said Catherine. 'Mary's heart is committed to this French duke now. The brooch makes it plain who owns her: the French people. I had hoped that she would marry my nephew, the emperor. I admit it. I had hoped that she would not be called upon to play the virginals once more, to yet another set of ambassadors, like a common wench on display, to be sold to the highest bidder. I had hoped to avoid that for *our daughter, the princess*. But I have embraced it in good faith.'

Mary's fingers felt the outline of her brooch once more. THE DUKE, it read, in golden letters, meaning the younger son of the king of France. She didn't mind, really, that her betrothed was no longer Charles, the emperor, but Henri, the Duke

d'Orléans. And THE DUKE was no easier to imagine than THE EMPEROUR, although her mother was much less keen on him.

Henry smiled. 'I understand your dislike of the French,' he said. 'No one can fault you, Catherine, on your constancy. Nor your devotion to that fierce old-fashioned God of yours. But today let's be merry. Have we not got a fine girl? The ambassadors will love her. And how your fingers twinkle on those keys, hey, Mary? You get your musical skills from your father.'

He was taking her hand again, and now spinning her round into a dance, drawing Catherine reluctantly into the movement. '*C'est bonjour, monsieur,*' he sang, to a silly tune of his own devising, 'this prince, this *duc d'Orléans*, he will be your husband, Mary! And maybe one day you'll be queen of France, which is second only to being queen of England.'

At that, he bowed down with a sweeping gesture towards his wife. Of course, Mary's mother really was queen of England. Despite her constant talk of Spain, which made Mary forget it from time to time.

Catherine extricated herself with dignity, but her husband's buffoonery caused an unwilling smile to creep across her face. As Mary continued to join her father in his ridiculous capering, she craned her neck to watch her mother, anxious to see her happy. Mary could see that the crease between Catherine's eyes had not disappeared. But she did manage to give Mary a tight little grin.

Soothed, Mary stopped dancing, and placed her hand formally in her father's.

'I'm ready,' she said. 'Take me to my *amado*.'

'Your *bien-aimé*,' her father corrected her.

They both sensed Catherine's small angry gesture behind them at his use of French rather than Spanish. The king stopped suddenly in the doorway, forcing Mary to stop too.

'You are not a princess of Spain now, *Catherine*,' he said sternly. 'It's no part of your duty to hate the French as the Spanish do. You are a queen of England, and my wife, and I say it is your duty to love the French. And I hope you will come down to the party tonight, to see our daughter dance with the French ambassador. I don't want any talk of

your being ill, and I don't want you skulking away and eating your dinner up here in your room.'

'Oh, I'll be there,' said Catherine coldly. 'But it's been three suitors for our daughter now, and she's only eleven. First the dauphin; then the emperor; now this Duke of Orléans. To whom will you marry our daughter off next? You are fickle, my love, fickle like the wind.'

Mary knew that her father had a burning desire to answer. He expressed it through the savage squeeze he gave to her hand. She knew that he was struggling with himself, for one second, for two. But he did manage to remain silent. He pulled Mary with him through the door.

'Spaniards!' he muttered as they went down the stairs. 'Blood-drinkers! What a bloody stubborn race they are.'



Chapter 2

April 1527, Greenwich

Later, much later, the same day, Mary was sleepy. It was past her usual bedtime. The green gown had grown extremely heavy and was hurting where it hung from her hips. As she walked with her mother through the palace, Mary began to shuffle and stumble with her feet. She trod on the hem of her long skirt.

Catherine noticed, and grabbed Mary's hand to force her to keep up. 'Hold your dress up properly, Mary,' she hissed. 'Use your other hand.' It was a chilly evening, a wet wind had been blowing in across the river, and the air was damp and cold from the rain even now falling hard upon the roof.

'Mother, I've had about enough of celebrating,'

Mary said. 'Can't I go to bed?' Both hands were trapped now, and she felt like a prisoner.

'No, you can't,' said Catherine grimly. 'Court celebrations aren't for fun, you know. They're work. They're your job as a princess, and mine as a queen. And you must look like you are happy and proud to be present. That is the secret of success.'

Not for fun. All too often Mary had heard those words. She hung her head, dispirited. Her mother noticed, and relented a little.

'Courage!' Queen Catherine said. 'Just one more hour to go. Then you can go to bed. You played well today. Don't you ever get nervous?'

'A daughter of Spain never feels pain,' chanted Mary, something her mother often said, even though it wasn't true. She would have liked to close her eyes there and then, as keeping them open almost hurt. In fact, she did close them, pretending for a minute that she was sleepwalking.

'Ah, you have a gift, Mary,' the queen said, laughing softly. 'You can lose yourself in music, can you not? And reading? You can live inside yourself. That is important for a princess. You will be much alone.'

Mary opened her eyes long enough to consider the question. She *felt* like she was never alone, never left to play, or think, or just to lie around doing nothing.

But yes, when she was playing her music, she did not notice the people around her. She *had* felt nervous when she entered the Great Chamber, it was true, for there were many people there, more people than she could remember seeing at court before. Then, though, she had seen the table laid with a carpet, and upon it the little square box of her instrument. Seating herself, she had simply pushed up her linen cuffs and played. It seemed to have worked.

Afterwards there had been a great deal of talk between her father and the ambassadorial party from France, and inevitably the focus moved off from Mary. Most of the talk had seemed to consist of technical and boring descriptions of the staffing of the court of the French king, punctuated by Mary's father's great booming laugh. Come to think of it, she did not remember her mother speaking once the whole afternoon. She had just sat there, a mysterious smile on her face, like a basilisk.

And there was something a little grim in the grip of her mother's hand dragging her along the corridor now.

'Can't we go to bed?' Mary asked, hearing a whimpering tone that she disliked in her voice. It only came out when she was tired, or hungry, but she felt unable to control it.

'No, we cannot,' said her mother. 'It is the will of your father that we should be present, and our absence will be noticed. Also, you want to show off your green dress, do you not? We're on duty!'

Mary did not think her dress particularly pretty – it was a stiff green brocade with a pattern of golden flowers woven in – but she looked down at it and straightened her brooch. The brooch had been a very good idea of her mother's. When the French ambassador had seen it, he'd burst into delighted laughter and bowed very low. But Mary would have preferred to wear something lighter and floatier, something, oh, something in a brighter colour than her mother's favourite – and endless – green.

As they turned the corner of the gallery, Mary started to hear the faint strain of music, the high

piping notes of an oboe. The sound, a teasing tune, lifted her spirits. Suddenly she began to feel more awake. Her mother noticed. 'Ah yes,' she said. 'It is true that the English court can put on a good show, even in this miserable endless rain. Now, *Princess Mary*, remember you *are* a princess, and dance with dignity.'

They picked up their pace, and moved along the gallery towards the Great Hall.

It was warmer now, and the air seemed richer, even perfumed. The entryway was thronged with people. Mary was not surprised when they turned towards her mother, exclaimed, bowed and parted to let them through. This was the way it was at the palace of Greenwich. She and her mother never had to wait for anything. And if they did, why then her mother would lose her temper. Everyone was afraid of that, and did all they could to avoid it. Mary knew that even her father feared one of her mother's explosions.

Mary nodded to the bent heads and lifted hats, suddenly feeling alive, and curious as to what might lie beyond. As they entered, she saw that the hall was lined on each side with crowds of courtiers,

mainly men, but several women too. A great blast of heat came out from the burning braziers and the people and the candles. Mary's eye dwelt particularly on the unfamiliar women among the crowd, in their beautiful, bright dresses. One lady had curiously highly arched eyebrows, so curved that they almost looked like they weren't real but drawn on with a pencil. Another had hair in tiny, perfect curls like the whorls of a snail.

She wanted to look for longer at the French ladies, but the French ambassador, whom she recognised from the afternoon, was bowing down before her and offering her his hand for a dance. Mary panicked for a moment. What was the correct response? Did she even know this dance? But then she felt her mother give a little shove in the small of her back. A daughter of Spain never feels pain, her mother always said. Mary paused to gather herself, swaying ever so slightly on her feet, remembering for half an instant how tired she was before taking his hand.

It was a relief, seconds later, when the music started again. Oh yes, of course she knew this dance;

it was a pavane. After a stately curtsy, she promenaded alongside the French gentleman, noticing that he had a small, sharp, clipped beard, which he nodded in time to the music. It made him look rather like her mother's cockatoo bird; oh yes, he had just the same chin whiskers.

Mary kept her eyes firmly fixed on her partner's funny little beard, because now she sensed that the whole room was looking at them. It was important not to make a mess of this. She tried to blot out the crowd and concentrate, giving all her attention to prancing in a stately manner down the room and bowing solemnly to the other couples left and right. This was how her mother had told her to get through, by concentrating on doing the right thing, one step at a time. Mary sometimes wondered if there was any more to it than this. Maybe there wasn't, in which case Mary might change her mind, she thought, and not be a princess after all.

But there was one person she couldn't ignore. He must be here, although she hadn't seen him yet. Where was her father? Oh, there he was. He was bowing to her, just as if she were a real grown-up lady,

and he was twinkling at her with his blue eyes. What blue eyes they were, Mary thought, not a dull grey like her own. Her father's clear, bright blue ones must be the handsomest eyes at court. The lady with him clearly thought so, too, for she was so busy looking up at him that she completely failed to notice and to bow to Mary as all the other dancers had done.

But then Mary saw that she was one of the French ladies, and didn't know who Mary was. On her return up the hall, though, the lady again failed to bow, and this time Mary realised that she had seen that disrespectful face before. It was one of her own mother's ladies-in-waiting, the one that her mother didn't like, Mistress Anne Boleyn. Catherine was always giving Mistress Boleyn the afternoon off, not through kindness, but because she didn't want to have her around. Of course Mary recognised Mistress Boleyn now – it had just been the violet gown that had made Mary think her French.

But her father seemed quite happy. Watching him dancing with the snail-haired Mistress Boleyn, Mary lost her footing for a moment. There was a gasp from the nearest dancers. Of course they had

noticed. Seething, Mary regained her balance, wishing that a tiny misstep did not always have to be made into such a drama. Her partner, seeing something of her feelings, grasped her hand more tightly, and smiled. Mary tried to smile back, recognising that his intentions were good. But then her eyes travelled past him, to her mother, who was not dancing. She was standing still as a statue, watching the ball around her and looking as cold as ice.

Mary sighed. Why could her mother never be happy? She was at least supposed to look like she was happy, wasn't she? Something of Mary's earlier weariness returned. The room no longer seemed rich and glamorous but hot and distressing. She stumbled again, and her partner took her arm and led her out from among the dancers.

'The princess is weary,' he said, 'and no surprise, it is very late. Please sit, please rest, and perhaps I may tell you of your future life in France?' She agreed, sitting down on the splendid velvet chair on the dais and gesturing him to sit on the stool beside her as she had seen her mother do to favoured visitors.

The dancers started up again, and Mary noticed with relief that the attention of the spectators returned to the centre of the hall.

‘This palace of Greenwich is very fine,’ he began, ‘and in France too you will see many magnificent palaces.’ He began to enumerate them, one by one, but they all sounded rather similar to each other. Mary began to feel her eyelids growing heavy, and as the dance wore on, she caught her head lolling to one side and had to jerk it upright.

Then her mother was before her. ‘The princess is tired,’ she said crisply, holding out one hand.

‘But Your Majesty has not yet danced with the king!’ cried the cockatoo gentleman, raising his hands as if to keep her at the ball.

‘I will not be dancing tonight.’

At that precise moment, the dancers parted, and Mary saw that her father was still holding hands with the violet-gowned lady. In fact, he was holding both of her hands, and he was holding them closely too, cradling one of her elbows with his big clumsy paw. Mary knew what that felt like, for he loved to toss her up in the air, or to dance with her himself.

The Frenchman bowed silently, and silently Mary got to her feet and followed her mother out of the room. The ball had been very strange. The day had been very strange. Everyone had been so polite, so cordial, so appreciative, but there was something not quite right.

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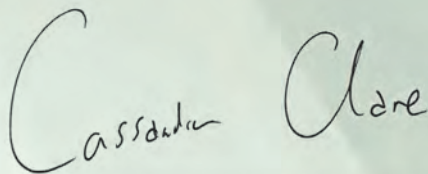
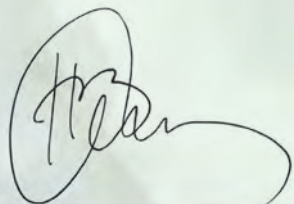
HOLLY BLACK  CASSANDRA CLARE

THE IRON TRIAL

Since we met ten years ago — at Holly's first-ever book signing — we've become not only good friends but also critique partners and collaborators. We both grew up loving fantasy, and over the last decade, fantasy has had a renaissance. Which means that readers are familiar with the tropes of fantasy. When they open a fantasy novel or go to see a fantasy movie, they expect to find a chosen hero, whose high and lonely destiny is to defeat the villain, whatever the personal sacrifice to himself.

We wanted to tell a story about a protagonist who had all the markers of a hero: tragedy and secrets in his past, magical power. We wanted people to believe they knew what kind of story they were in for. And then we wanted them to be surprised...

Thanks so much for being one of the very first readers of *The Iron Trial*, the first book in the *Magisterium* series.



HOLLY
BLACK



CASSANDRA
CLARE

THE IRON TRIAL

MAGISTERIUM

BOOK ONE

THE IRON TRIAL

HOLLY BLACK *and*
CASSANDRA CLARE



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FOR SEBASTIAN FOX BLACK,
ABOUT WHOM NO ONE HAS WRITTEN ANY
THREATENING MESSAGES IN ICE.

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PROLOGUE

FROM A DISTANCE, the man struggling up the white face of the glacier might have looked like an ant crawling slowly up the side of a dinner plate. The shantytown of La Rinconada was a collection of scattered specks far below him, the wind increasing as his elevation did, blowing powdery gusts of snow into his face and freezing the damp tendrils of his black hair. Despite his amber goggles, he winced at the brightness of the reflected sunset.

Still, the man was not afraid of falling, although he was using no ropes or belay lines, only crampons and a single ice axe. His name was Alastair Hunt and he was a mage. He shaped and molded the frozen substance of the glacier under his hands as he climbed. Handholds and footholds appeared as he inched his way upward.

By the time he reached the cave, midway up the glacier, he was half frozen and fully exhausted from bending his will to tame the worst of the elements. It sapped his energy to exert his magic so continuously, but he hadn't dared slow down.

The cave itself opened like a mouth in the side of the mountain, impossible to see from above or below. He pulled himself over its edge and took a deep, jagged breath, cursing himself for not getting there sooner, for allowing himself to be tricked. In La Rinconada, the people had seen the explosion and whispered under their breaths about what it meant, the fire inside the ice.

Fire inside the ice. It had to be a distress signal . . . or an attack. The cave was full of mages too old to fight or too young, the injured and the sick, mothers of very young children who could not be left — like Alastair's own wife and son. They had been hidden away here, in one of the most remote places on the earth.

Master Rufus had insisted that otherwise they would be vulnerable, hostages to fortune, and Alastair had trusted him. Then, when the Enemy of Death hadn't shown up on the field to face the mages' champion, the Makar girl upon whom they'd pinned all their hopes, Alastair had realized his mistake. He'd gotten to La Rinconada as fast as he could, flying most of his way on the back of an air elemental. From there, he'd made his way on foot, since the Enemy's control of elementals was unpredictable and strong. The higher he'd climbed, the more frightened he'd become.

Let them be all right, he thought to himself as he stepped inside the cave. *Please let them be all right.*

There should have been the sound of children wailing. There should have been the low buzz of nervous conversation and the hum of subdued magic. Instead, there was only the howl of the wind as it swept over the desolate peak of the mountain. The cave walls were white ice, pocked with red and brown where blood had splattered and melted in patches. Alastair pulled off his goggles and dropped them on the ground, pushing farther into the passage, drawing on the dregs of his power to steady himself.

The walls of the cave gave off an eerie phosphorescent glow. Away from the entrance, it was the only light he had to see by, which probably explained why he stumbled over the first body and nearly fell to his knees. Alastair jerked away with a yell, then winced as he heard his own shout echo back to him. The fallen mage was burned beyond recognition, but she wore the leather wristband with the large hammered piece of copper that marked her as a second-year Magisterium student. She couldn't have been older than thirteen.

You should be used to death by now, he told himself. They'd been at war with the Enemy for a decade that sometimes felt like

a century. At first, it had seemed impossible — one young man, even one of the Makaris, planning to conquer death itself. But as the Enemy increased in power, and his army of the Chaos-ridden grew, the threat had become inescapably dire . . . culminating in this pitiless slaughter of the most helpless, the most innocent.

Alastair got to his feet and pushed deeper into the cave, desperately looking for one face above all. He forced his way past the bodies of elderly Masters from the Magisterium and Collegium, children of friends and acquaintances, and mages who had been wounded in earlier battles. Among them lay the broken bodies of the Chaos-ridden, their swirling eyes darkened forever. Though the mages had been unprepared, they must have put up quite a fight to have slain so many of the Enemy's forces. Horror churning in his gut, his fingers and toes numb, Alastair staggered through it all . . . until he saw her.

Sarah.

He found her lying in the very back, against a cloudy wall of ice. Her eyes were open, staring at nothing. The irises looked murky and her lashes were clotted with ice. Leaning down, he brushed his fingers over her cooling cheek. He drew in his breath sharply, his sob cutting through the air.

But where was their son? Where was Callum?

A dagger was clutched in Sarah's right hand. She had excelled at shaping ore summoned deep from the ground. She'd made the dagger herself in their last year at the Magisterium. It had a name: Semiramis. Alastair knew how Sarah had treasured that blade. *If I have to die, I want to die holding my own weapon*, she'd always told him. But he hadn't wanted her to die at all.

His fingers grazed her cold cheek.

A cry made him whip around. In this cave full of death and silence, a cry.

A child.

He turned, searching frantically for the source of the thready wail. It seemed to be coming from closer to the cave entrance. He plunged back the way he had come, stumbling over bodies, some frozen stiff as statues — until suddenly, another familiar face stared up at him from the carnage.

Declan. Sarah's brother, wounded in the last battle. He appeared to have been choked to death by a particularly cruel use of air magic; his face was blue, his eyes shot with broken blood vessels. One of his arms was outflung, and just underneath it, protected from the icy cave floor by a woven blanket, was Alastair's infant son. As he stared in amazement, the boy opened his mouth and gave another thin, mewling cry.

As if in trance, shaking with relief, Alastair bent and lifted his child. The boy looked up at him with wide gray eyes and opened his mouth to scream again. As the blanket fell aside, Alastair could see why. The baby's left leg hung at a terrible angle, like a snapped tree branch.

Alastair tried to call up earth magic to heal the boy but had only enough power left to take away some of the pain. Heart racing, he rewrapped his son tightly in the blanket and wound his way back through the cave to where Sarah lay. Holding the baby as if she could see him, he knelt down beside her body.

"Sarah," he whispered, tears thick in his throat. "I'll tell him how you died protecting him. I will raise him to remember how brave you were."

Her eyes stared at him, blank and pale. He held the child more closely to his side and reached to take Semiramis from her hand. As he did, he saw that the ice near the blade was strangely marked, as if she had clawed at it while dying. But the marks were too deliberate for that. As he bent closer, he realized they

were words — words his wife had carved into the cave ice with the last of her dying strength.

As he read them, he felt them like three hard blows to the stomach.

KILL THE CHILD



CHAPTER ONE

CALLUM HUNT WAS a legend in his little North Carolina town, but not in a good way. Famous for driving off substitute teachers with sarcastic remarks, he also specialized in annoying principals, hall monitors, and lunch ladies. Guidance counselors, who always started out wanting to help him (the poor boy's mother had died, after all) wound up hoping he'd never darken the door of their offices again. There was nothing more embarrassing than not being able to come up with a snappy comeback to an angry twelve-year-old.

Call's perpetual scowl, messy black hair, and suspicious gray eyes were well known to his neighbors. He liked to skateboard, although it had taken him a while to get the hang of it; several cars still bore dings from some of his earlier attempts. He was often seen lurking outside the windows of the comic book store, the arcade, and the video game store. Even the mayor knew him. It would have been hard to forget him after he'd snuck past the clerk at the local pet store during the May Day Parade and taken

a naked mole rat destined to be fed to a boa constrictor. He'd felt sorry for the blind and wrinkly creature that seemed unable to help itself — and, in the name of fairness, he'd also released all the white mice who would have been next on the snake's dinner menu.

He'd never expected the mice to run amok under the feet of the paraders, but mice aren't very smart. He also hadn't expected the onlookers to run from the mice, but people aren't too smart either, as Call's father had explained after it was all over. It wasn't Call's fault that the parade had been ruined, but everyone — especially the mayor — acted like it was. On top of that, his father had made Call give back the mole rat.

Call's father didn't approve of stealing.

As far as he was concerned, it was almost as bad as magic.



Callum fidgeted in the stiff chair in front of the principal's office, wondering if he'd be back at school tomorrow, and if anyone would miss him if he wasn't. Again and again, he went over all the various ways he was supposed to mess up on the mage's test — ideally, as spectacularly as possible. His dad had listed the options for failure again and again: *Make your mind totally blank. Or concentrate on something that's the opposite of what those monsters want. Or focus your mind on someone else's test instead of your own.* Call rubbed his calf, which had been stiff and painful in class that morning; it was that way sometimes. The taller he grew, the more it seemed to hurt. At least the physical part of the mage's test — whatever it was — would be easy to fail.

Just down the hall, he could hear other kids in gym class, their sneakers squeaking on the shining wood of the floor, their

voices raised as they shouted taunts to one another. He wished just once that he got to play. He might not have been as fast as other kids or as able to keep his balance, but he was full of restless energy. He was exempt from a gym requirement because of his leg; even in elementary school, when he'd tried to run or jump or climb at recess, one of the monitors would come over and remind him that he needed to slow down before he hurt himself. If he kept at it, they would make him come inside.

As though a couple of bruises were the most awful thing that could happen to someone. As though his leg was going to get worse.

Call sighed and stared out through the glass doors of the school to where his father would be pulling up soon. He owned the kind of car you couldn't miss, a 1937 Rolls-Royce Phantom, painted bright silver. Nobody else in town had anything like it. Call's father ran an antique store on Main Street called Now and Again; there was nothing he liked more than taking old broken things and making them look shiny and new. To keep the car running, he had to tinker with it almost every weekend. And he was constantly asking Call to wash it and put some kind of weird old car wax on it, to keep it from rusting.

The Rolls-Royce worked perfectly . . . unlike Call. He looked down at his sneakers as he tapped his feet against the floor. When he was wearing jeans like this, you couldn't tell there was anything wrong with his leg, but you could sure tell the minute he stood up and started walking. He'd had surgery after surgery since he was a baby, and all sorts of physical therapy, but nothing had really helped. He still walked with a sliding limp, like he was trying to get his footing on a boat that was rolling from side to side.

When he was younger, he'd sometimes played that he was a pirate, or even just a brave sailor with a peg leg, going down with

a sinking ship after a long cannon fight. He'd played pirates and ninjas, cowboys and alien explorers.

But not ever any game that involved magic.

Never that.

He heard the rumble of an engine and began to rise to his feet — only to return to the bench in annoyance. It wasn't his dad, just an ordinary red Toyota. A moment later, Kylie Myles, one of the other students in his grade, hurried past him, a teacher beside her.

“Good luck at your ballet tryouts,” Ms. Kemal told her, and started back to her classroom.

“Right, thanks,” Kylie said, then looked over at Call oddly, as though she were evaluating him. Kylie *never* looked at Call. That was one of her defining characteristics, along with her shining blond hair and unicorn backpack. When they were in the halls together, her gaze slid past him like he was invisible.

With an even weirder and more surprising half wave, she headed out to the Toyota. He could see both her parents in the front seats, looking anxious.

She couldn't be going where he was, could she? She couldn't be going to the Iron Trial. But if she was . . .

He pushed himself off the chair. If she was going, someone should warn her.

Lots of kids think it's about being special, Call's father had said, the disgust in his voice evident. Their parents do, too. Especially in families where magical ability dates back generations. And some families where the magic has mostly died out see a magical child as hope for a return to power. But it's the children with no magical relatives you should pity most. They're the ones who think it's going to be like it is in the movies.

It's nothing like the movies.

At that moment, Call's dad pulled up to the school curb with a squeal of brakes, effectively cutting off Call's view of Kylie. Call

limped toward the doors and outside, but by the time he made it to the Rolls, the Myles's Toyota was swerving around the corner and out of sight.

So much for warning her.

"Call." His father had gotten out of the car and was leaning against the passenger-side door. His mop of black hair — the same tangly black hair Call had — was going gray at the sides, and he wore a tweed jacket with leather elbow patches, despite the heat. Call often thought that his father looked like Sherlock Holmes in the old BBC show; sometimes people seemed surprised he didn't speak with a British accent. "Are you ready?"

Call shrugged. How could you be ready for something that had the potential to mess up your whole life if you got it wrong? Or right, in this case. "I guess so."

His father pulled the door open. "Good. Get in."

The inside of the Rolls was as spotless as the outside. Call was surprised to find his old pair of crutches thrown into the backseat. He hadn't needed them in years, not since he'd fallen off a jungle gym and twisted his ankle — the ankle on his *good* leg. As Call's father slid into the car and started the engine, Call pointed to them and asked, "What's with those?"

"The worse off you look, the likelier they are to reject you," his father said grimly, glancing behind him as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"That seems like cheating," Call objected.

"Call, people cheat to *win*. You can't cheat to lose."

Call rolled his eyes, letting his dad believe what he wanted. All Call knew for sure was that there was no way he was going to use those crutches if he didn't have to. He didn't want to argue about it, though, not today, when Call's father had already uncharacteristically burned the toast at breakfast and snapped at

Call when he complained about having to go to school just to be removed a couple hours later.

Now his father crouched over the wheel, jaw set and the fingers of his right hand wrapped tightly around the gearshift, changing gears with ineffectual violence.

Call tried to focus his gaze on the trees outside, their leaves just starting to yellow, and to remember everything he knew about the Magisterium. The first time his father had said anything about the Masters and how they chose their apprentices, he'd sat Call down in one of the big leather chairs in his study. Call's elbow had been bandaged and his lip was split from a fight at school, and he'd been in no mood for listening. Besides, his father had looked so serious that Call had gotten scared. And that's the way his father spoke, too, as though he was going to tell Call he had a terrible disease. It turned out the sickness was a potential for magic.

Call had scrunched up in the chair while his father talked. He was used to getting picked on; other kids thought his leg made him an easy target. Usually, he was able to convince them he wasn't. That time, however, there had been a bunch of older boys who'd cornered him behind the shed near the jungle gym on his way home from school. They'd pushed him around and come at him with the usual insults. Callum had learned most people backed down when he put up a fight, so he'd tried to hit the tallest boy. That had been his first mistake. Pretty soon, they had him on the ground, one of them sitting on his knees while another punched him in the face, trying to get him to apologize and admit to being a gimpy clown.

"Sorry for being awesome, losers," Call had said, right before he blacked out.

He must have only been out for a minute, because when he opened his eyes, he could just see the retreating figures of the

boys in the distance. They were running away. Call couldn't believe his rejoinder had worked so well.

"That's right," he'd said, sitting up. "You better run!"

Then he'd looked around and seen that the concrete of the playground had cracked open. A long fissure ran from the swings all the way to the shed wall, splitting the small building in half.

He was lying directly in the path of what looked like a mini earthquake.

He'd thought it was the most awesome thing that had ever happened. His father disagreed.

"Magic runs in families," Call's father said. "Not everyone in a family will necessarily have it, but it looks like you might. Unfortunately. I am so sorry, Call."

"So the split in the ground — you're saying I did that?" Call had felt torn between giddy glee and extreme horror, but the glee was winning out. He could feel the corners of his mouth turn up and tried to force them back down. "Is that what mages do?"

"Mages draw on the elements — earth, air, water, fire, and even the void, which is the source of the most powerful and terrible magic of all, chaos magic. They can use magic for many things, including ripping apart the very earth, as you did." His father had nodded to himself. "In the beginning, when magic first comes on, it is very intense. Raw power . . . but balance is what tempers magical ability. It takes a lot of study to have as much power as a newly woken mage. Young mages have little control. But, Call, you must fight it. And you must never use your magic again. If you do, the mages will take you away to their tunnels."

"That's where the school is? The Magisterium is underground?" Call had asked.

"Buried under the earth where no one can find it," his father told him grimly. "There's no light down there. No windows. The

place is a maze. You could get lost in the caverns and die and no one would ever know.”

Call licked his suddenly dry lips. “But you’re a magician, aren’t you?”

“I haven’t used my magic since your mother died. I’ll never use it again.”

“And Mom went there? To the tunnels? Really?” Call was eager to hear anything about his mother. He didn’t have much. Some yellowed photographs in an old scrapbook, showing a pretty woman with Call’s ink black hair and eyes a color Call couldn’t make out. He knew better than to ask his father too many questions about her. He never talked about Call’s mom unless he absolutely had to.

“Yes, she did.” Call’s father told him. “And it’s because of magic that she died. When mages go to war, which is often, they don’t care about the people who die because of it. Which is the other reason you must not attract their attention.”

That night, Call woke up screaming, believing he was trapped underground, earth piling on him as if he were being buried alive. No matter how much he thrashed around, he couldn’t breathe. After that, he dreamed that he was running away from a monster made of smoke whose eyes swirled with a thousand different evil colors . . . only he couldn’t run fast enough because of his leg. In the dreams, it dragged behind him like a dead thing until he collapsed, with the monster’s hot breath on his neck.

Other kids in Call’s class were afraid of the dark, the monster under the bed, zombies, or murderers with giant axes. Call was afraid of magicians, and he was even more afraid he was one.

Now he was going to meet them. The same magicians who were the reason his mother was dead and his father hardly ever

laughed and didn't have any friends, sitting instead in the workroom he'd made out of the garage and fixing beat-up furniture and cars and jewelry. Call didn't think it took a genius to figure out why his dad was obsessed with putting broken things back together.

They whizzed past a sign welcoming them to Virginia. Everything looked the same. He didn't know what he'd expected, but he'd seldom been out of North Carolina before. Their trips beyond Asheville were infrequent, mostly to go to car part swap meets and antique fairs where Call would wander around among mounds of unpolished silverware, collections of baseball cards in plastic sleeves, and weird old taxidermied yak heads, while his dad bargained for something boring.

It occurred to Call that if he didn't mess up this test, he might never go to one of those swap meets again. His stomach lurched and a cold shiver rattled his bones. He forced himself to think about the plan his father had drilled into him: *Make your mind totally blank. Or focus on something that's the opposite of what those monsters want. Or focus your mind on someone else's test instead of your own.*

He let out his breath. His father's nerves were getting to him. It was going to be fine. It was easy to mess up tests.

The car swung off the highway onto a narrow road. The only sign had the symbol of an airplane on it, with the words AIRFIELD CLOSED FOR RENOVATION beneath it.

"Where are we going?" Call asked. "Are we *flying* somewhere?"

"Let's hope not," his dad muttered. The street had turned abruptly from asphalt to dirt. As they bumped over the next few hundred yards, Call grabbed on to the door frame to keep himself from flying up and whacking his head on the roof. Rolls-Royces were not made for dirt roads.

Suddenly, the lane widened and the trees parted. The Rolls was now in a huge cleared space. In the middle was an enormous hangar made out of corrugated steel. Parked around it were about a hundred cars, from beat-up pickup trucks to sedans almost as fancy as the Phantom and a lot newer. Call saw parents and their kids, all about his age, hurrying toward the hangar.

“I think we’re late,” Call said.

“Good.” His father sounded grimly pleased. He pulled the car to a stop and got out, gesturing for Call to follow. Call was glad to see that his father seemed to have forgotten about the crutches. It was a hot day, and the sun beat down on the back of Call’s gray T-shirt. He wiped his sweaty palms against his jeans as they walked across the lot and into the big black open space that was the hangar entrance.

Inside, everything was crazy. Kids milled around, their voices carrying in the vast space. Bleachers were set up along one metal wall; even though they could hold many more people than were present, they were dwarfed by the immensity of the room. Bright blue tape marked *x*’s and circles along the concrete floor.

Across the other side, in front of a set of hangar doors that would once have opened to let airplanes taxi out onto runways, were the mages.