



TORCHLIGHT

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TORCHLIGHT

MA WRITING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

2017
BATH SPA
ANTHOLOGY

EDITED BY
KEL DUCKHOUSE AND REBECCA LANGTON

FOREWORD by David Almond

Professor David Almond's novels for children include Skellig, My Name Is Mina and Song for Ella Grey. His major awards include the Carnegie Medal, two Whitbread, the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize, the Michael L Printz award, and the Eleanor Farjeon Award. In 2010 he received the highest international recognition given to an author of children's fiction: the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

It is a privilege and a joy to work on Bath Spa's Writing for Young People programme. We have so many talented teachers and students, so much remarkable work is produced, there is so much industriousness, so much mutual support, and there is so much friendship and fun. The uniqueness, importance and impact of this programme are recognized throughout the literary world. And so many of our writers go on to be published, to appear on shortlists, to win prizes. But the programme is not just about such wonderful 'successes'. All of us, staff and students, share a belief that stories and books for young people lie at the heart of our culture. We truly do believe that books and art can deeply influence young people's lives, and can help to bring about a better world. As writers for the young, we are always reminded that literature is both ancient and brand new, that it exists in the telling of a tale at bedtime as well as on library shelves, that it is endlessly recreated and that it existed long before the notion of straight lines of print was even thought of.

Sometimes I'm asked, like all children's writers are asked – often by very grown up, very civilised people – Why do you write for kids? I've been asked, 'Is it the case, David, that you start off by writing for the young, then you grow up and start writing for adults and so become a "proper" writer?' My answer: When I began to write for young people, I wrote better than I ever had before. In Writing for Young People, the author in me began to grow up.

This is the place, in Writing for Young People, where all literature has its start, where stories might have their deepest meanings, where words can carry their most powerful charge. We're also asked: Why write at all? Isn't it a

strange, pretty whacky thing to do? But again, think of adults telling tales to children in the dusk and think of the children listening, and we realise that it is one of the most ordinary, the most human things, in the world. We do it naturally. Our brains are wired for it. It's in our blood and bones. And if we don't allow ourselves to take part in this, we're in danger of being damaged, and the world is in danger of being diminished. The words we write help young people to grow into the world and to become themselves. They link us with the storytellers who have gone before, a chain of storytellers reaching deep into our communal past. At Bath Spa, we are part of this endless, creative, optimistic chain.

Congratulations to all who have their work in these pages. Thank you for these words. All good wishes for the future. Keep working hard. Keep having fun. I'm proud to work with you.

INTRODUCTION by Julia Green

*Dr Julia Green is course director for the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University and Professor of Creative Writing. She has written sixteen novels for children and teenagers. Julia's seventeenth book for young people is *To the Edge of the World* (Oxford University Press, 2018).*

I'm delighted to introduce this new anthology of excerpts from the novels written by our MA in Writing for Young People students who completed the course in September 2017. I am sure that many of these new writers will find their place in the children's publishing world, and will join the long list of our successful, published children's and YA authors – too numerous to mention all by name, but including Jess Butterworth, Emma Carroll, Sophie Cleverly, Sarah Driver, Sam Gayton, Lu Hersey, Fleur Hitchcock, Eugene Lambert, Gill Lewis, Sally Nicholls, Pooja Puri, Chris Vick and so many more. In 2018 we'll see the publication of debut novels by Mel Darbon, Tracy Darnton, Alyssa Hollingsworth, Rowena House and Lucy Van Smit ... and so it goes on.

For each student represented here, the anthology marks the end of an intense period of creativity, of writing, thinking, discussing and rewriting. It's the start of the next stage of their journey as a writer. During the MA, they have forged strong friendships to support them as they move on. They have developed in confidence as writers, established good routines for writing, have laughed and played and experimented, and toughened themselves up through the rigorous process of giving and receiving feedback week by week in the writing workshops. They have listened to advice from other authors, editors and agents, and learned about the children's publishing industry, to help prepare them for the challenges ahead.

Here at Bath Spa University we have a wonderful team of published writers who teach on the MA in Writing for Young People. We care deeply about the work we do together. We share a sense of the importance of children's literature, as part of literary culture. The stories we read and love as young people stay with us for ever. We believe that the stories we write can

touch hearts and minds, can open up the world, cross boundaries, and can truly make a difference. We take our responsibility to our young audiences extremely seriously, even while we laugh and play and have fun.

As you turn these pages, be prepared for many delightful encounters with new characters, new worlds, familiar worlds seen from a fresh perspective; to go forwards and back in time; to go on journeys of exploration and adventure; to laugh and to weep, be challenged and surprised. And there's such a range of different kinds of stories here, for different kinds of readers, you're sure to find something you love.

Now I hand these wonderful, new writers over to you.

FROM THE TUTORS

We have had such wonderfully diverse stories on this year's Bath Spa MA in Writing for Young People. From apocalyptic tales, to coming out in Bradford, to posh boys do murder, to trans superheroes, they are all here. And all these stories are brilliant. I have no doubt that some of the writers in these pages will change the future face of British publishing for young people, making it broader, more inclusive and more exciting. I am hugely proud of what these writers have to offer.

Lucy Christopher

Every year I think to myself 'I've seen it all, there are no more stories left to tell', but every year the new cohort surprises me. In this collection, you will meet a huge variety of characters with brand new adventures to take you on. Coming of age tales, magical voyages and deadly worlds, each one as diverse and interesting as their authors. You will travel all over the globe, far into the future and back into the distant past, and while sometimes the roads are paved with danger, hope is always just around the corner. The sky's the limit for these very talented writers and I hope their own journeys are only just beginning.

CJ Skuse

Our writers bring you a host of characters with amazing stories to tell. Their voices, strong and exciting, transport us to a range of worlds: dark and punishing, wild and romantic, fierce, quirky, funny, unique. Each story has been written with passion, critiqued with care, and revised and edited with discernment. The first few flames kindled at the start of the course are now trailblazers: a true torchlight procession. They represent an enormous amount of hard work by some incredibly talented writers, each with something wonderful to say to the readers of tomorrow. Open – and enjoy!

Janine Amos

The thing that struck me most about this year's anthology is the love of words, the love of rhythm and of language that is woven through each and every story. There are snatches of songs and poems effortlessly intertwined with dialogue and prose while the words sing of both the sacred and profane; spirit realms, elves and rune masters jostle for space with bullies, babies and boxers, while deserts of heat and dust share their borders with ancient forests and city streets. You only need turn the pages to see the breadth of talent and the rich variety of voices on offer. Some shout, some scream, some only whisper. But each one is saying the same thing: 'Pull up a chair and listen to me. For I have a story to tell ...'

Steve Voake

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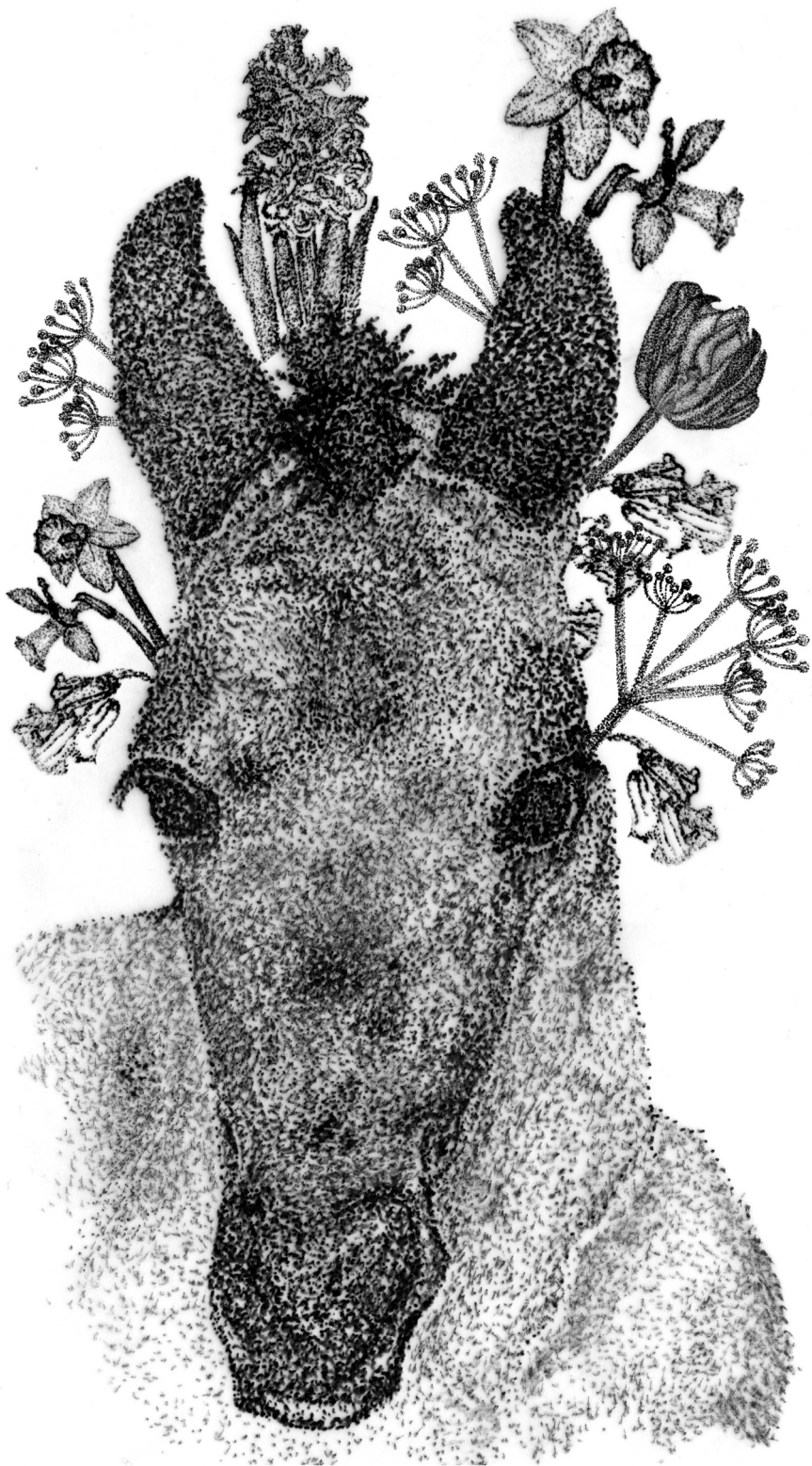
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✕ YOUNGER READERS





SF BAILEY

Sue grew up in northern England, close to purple moorland and long, silvery beaches. Books were her earliest friends. When she was small, she made up stories and brought them to life with paper people on cardboard theatre stages. Sue has shared in the real-life stories of many children through her career in social work, and has five inspiring children of her own. Study at Bath Spa University has enabled her to fulfil her lifelong dream of writing a novel for young readers.

In 2016 Sue was awarded the Bath Spa University Undergraduate Prize for Writing for Young People. She now lectures part-time in creative writing.

Snow Foal, was shortlisted for the 2017 Joan Aiken Future Classics Prize, and received an Honourable Mention in the 2017 United Agents/Bath Spa Prize.

About Snow Foal

Addie is taken to live with foster carers on an Exmoor farm, far away from her city home. She hates the winter farm, where everything is grey, dead or frozen. Addie doesn't belong there, with selfish Sunni and the small boy who screams like a wild creature in the night. She's supposed to be at home, looking after Mam.

But no one is listening. No one understands. No one except a tiny wild foal, found all alone in the icy moorland drifts. *He* needs his mam, too.

And whatever the dangers, Addie is going to take him back to her ...

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SNOW FOAL

Chapter One

Winter

Everything around him was changed: white, shifting, silent. The wind had form now. It swirled around him, like feathers from the forest floor, hiding the sky. Hiding his mother.

The foal sniffed the ground. That had changed, too. It clung to his muzzle. It stung.

He smelled the air, seeking his mother's warm, milky scent. He called. Listened. Called again. He thought he heard his mother's voice lifting through the trees. Then he remembered.

His mother was gone.

*

Addie peered out through splinters of frost on the hall window. No one about except Mrs Donovan, shuffling up her drive with her bags. Could Addie go now? She had to. She was starving. And Mam would need something when she woke.

She crouched on the floor next to her mother. 'I'm getting milk, Mam,' she said. 'And bread. I'll be quick.'

Mam shifted her shoulders, then rolled on to her side. She mumbled something, and went back to sleep. Addie would only be five minutes. Mam would be OK.

Addie stood on the doorstep and pulled up her hood. Her breath floated

on the air for a moment, then disappeared. She counted the coins again: just enough, with the fifty pence from under the fridge. She checked up and down the grey street. Nobody at all now. Just cracked puddles and litter drifting in the gutter; the still orange light from the corner shop.

She hurried past the squashed row of brown brick houses with their faded doors and broken fences. She stayed close to the kerb, kept her head down. The baby at number six was screaming again. Someone shouted – a man’s voice, deep and angry. A dog started to bark.

Addie pushed open the shop door. The bell clanged. Addie peered round the shelves. Please let it be Mr Borovski today, she thought, not Mrs Crabtree, with her thin nose poking into everyone’s business. Mrs Crabtree with her mean eyes and mean words.

No such luck. Mrs Crabtree came out from behind the counter and folded her arms across her bony chest. She watched Addie’s every move, hovered like a hungry crow.

Addie thumped the brown loaf and milk down by the till.

‘One pound, ten pence,’ she said. ‘The bread’s reduced.’

She pointed to the yellow sticker and counted the coins into Mrs Crabtree’s hand. The shopkeeper poked at them with a thin finger. She sniffed.

‘Where’d you find it this time? Down the back of sofa?’

Addie grabbed her shopping and turned away. She wasn’t going to give Mrs Crabtree what she wanted. She needed to get back to Mam.

*

There was no sound from inside the house. Addie rummaged in her coat pocket for her key. It had slipped through the hole and into the lining. Again. Why hadn’t she remembered about the hole? She put down her shopping, wriggled the key free, and unlocked the door.

Then she saw him. Darren Oates. Where had *he* come from? She snatched up her bread and milk, tried to slip around the door before he noticed her. The carton of milk slid from her grasp, bounced on the broken edge of the step and exploded like a white bomb on the gravel path. Milk splashed the air, trickled between the tiny stones.

Addie watched it disappear. No more milk. No more money.

‘Clumsy cow!’ Darren was at the gate, leaning on his rusty bike. He was smirking, as usual.

‘Get lost, Darren.’ Addie snatched up the carton, stared him in the eye, and moved to cover the doorway.

‘Not very friendly.’ Darren threw the rusty blue bike on to its side. He vaulted over the gate.

Addie backed towards the doorway.

‘Go and ride your stupid bike,’ she said. ‘Get out of my garden.’ Her heart thumped under her coat. She hoped that Darren couldn’t tell.

Darren sniggered. ‘Garden?’ He kicked at the gravel, kicked over the plant pot by the step; kicked the clump of dry earth and twigs inside it – high into the air and into the street.

‘Goal!’ he shouted. He came closer, nodded towards the partly open door. ‘Where’s your weirdo mam, then? In for visitors, is she?’

Addie pushed at Darren’s chest. He stumbled backwards. Addie turned and tried to squeeze into the house. Darren grabbed her hood. She lost her footing, stumbled against the door. It swung wide open; clattered against the wall.

Addie’s heart thundered. Could Darren see Mam? Was she still there, on the floor?

Darren twisted Addie’s hood in his hands, pulling her coat collar tight against her neck, so that she could hardly breathe. He spun her round and dragged her close to his chest. She kicked at his shin. He yelped; drew in a sharp breath.

‘Big mistake,’ Darren said, through his teeth. He pushed Addie backwards. In through the open front door. Into the hall.

Mam hadn’t moved.

Darren let go. He stared at Mam, stared at Addie. ‘She dead, or what?’ he asked, backing away.

‘Get out,’ Addie said, ‘or you *will* be.’

Darren barged past Addie. ‘Stinks in here,’ he said. ‘Smells of nutters.’ And he ran.

Addie shut the door and leaned against it. She squeezed her eyes hard, pressed back her tears.

Darren Oates. Biggest blabbermouth in Gas Street School. Darren Oates who hated her. Darren Oates, whose loudmouth mam would love to get Addie's mam into trouble. Again.

She'd really done it now.

They would all come back – the police, the social workers – all of them, with their smiles that don't reach their eyes, their knowing what's best for other people. There was a black hole where Addie's stomach used to be.

She knelt on the cold tiles. She shook Mam's shoulder. Once. Twice.

'Mam! Wake up. You've got to wake up!'

Mam opened her eyes a little. She smiled her lovely, soft smile. Just for a moment. She whispered something.

Addie leaned closer. She moved a strand of stringy hair from Mam's mouth, smelled the bitter whisky on her breath.

'Mam,' she whispered. 'Mam.'

Mam's smile slid away, like it was too heavy for her face.

Addie lifted Mam's hand and held it between her own. No point hiding the bottles. The ones Mam promised not to buy any more. When the social workers got here, they'd know. This time, they'd take Addie away for good.

*

Addie waited, listened for footsteps; voices. The knock at the door. The eyes through the letterbox.

Hail rattled on the window, doors slammed, children called, cars stuttered into life. Mam slept.

Then the siren. The coloured lights splitting the frost on the window, spinning across the floor; spinning over Mam. Blue/red/blue. Heavy boots on the gravel, the ring, ring, ring of the doorbell, the thump of fists on the thin door.

Addie stared down at the black buttons on her coat. One of them hung loose, on the end of a dark thread. She tugged the button free, threw it to the floor and watched it disappear amongst a pile of shoes and coats. She wrapped the dark thread around her little finger, pulled it tighter and tighter, until it hurt.

'Sorry, Mam,' she said.

Chapter Two

Driven by hunger, the foal left the shelter of the old oaks, and drifted across the open moor. He nuzzled the newly white earth, seeking green blades of grass, or the prickly yellow gorse he had been learning to eat alongside his mother's milk.

He moved slowly, his body tensed for flight. He listened for the black monster, with its glaring eyes and thunderous roar.

And for the humans who had forced his mother into its terrible jaws.

*

They didn't let Addie go in the ambulance with Mam. She'd be fine, they said. She was coming to already. Addie would see her very soon. They made Addie let go of her hand, made her sit down in the wrong chair in the lounge.

They made tea with too much sugar in it. They spoke to Addie in quiet voices. Their radios crackled and hissed. Their silver buttons flashed under the light. Their eyes swept the room.

Penny, Addie's social worker, was on the way, the woman said. She put her hand on Addie's arm. It was small and dry. Penny would get Addie sorted for the night, she said; make sure she was safe. Explain things.

Addie stared at the clay figures on the bookshelf by her chair. She remembered the softness of the clay in her hands, the warmth of Mam's fingers on her own as they pushed and pulled the figures into life. The clay people stared past Addie with empty eyes.

A grey skin grew across the mug of tea beside her. The windows darkened. The police woman kept on smiling.

*

As night fell, and the moon spilled silver light across the moorland, instinct pulled the foal towards the protection of the hedgerow.

He pushed his soft muzzle beneath frozen branches, twisted his tongue around the bitter, brittle leaves nestled beneath. He shook snow from his nostrils, and stretched forward, searching for more food.

*Then he was sliding, falling: thin legs flailing amidst a tangle of sharp twigs.
Snow slid with him, pressed him into the ditch behind the hedge.
When he opened his eyes, the foal could no longer see the moon.*

Chapter Three

‘Not much further, Addie,’ Penny said. ‘We should see the farmhouse soon.’ She squinted out through the windscreen, adjusted her round glasses. ‘This weather’s slowed us up a bit. You must be so tired.’

Addie shrugged, watched the wipers whip back and forth through the sleet and snow. Penny’s car struggled on, taking Addie further and further away from her brown brick home. Further away from Mam.

She couldn’t see much at all since they’d left the town, with its pale streetlamps and vivid neon signs. Just glimpses of flat fields, shadowy forests and spiked hedges. Trees, edged with white, trembled like ghosts in the beam from the car headlights.

‘Can we ring the hospital when we get there?’ Addie asked. ‘To tell Mam I’ll be back in the morning?’

A golden light cut through the darkness, revealed a wooden sign on a tall pole. Penny slowed the car, turned it to the left. Her long nails flashed red on the steering wheel.

‘It’s late, Addie,’ she said. ‘Your mam needs to rest, sweetheart. I’ll go check on her first thing. See what everyone thinks. And then I’ll come and talk to you. I promise.’

She leaned forward over the steering wheel, slowed the car to a crawl.

‘There we are,’ she said. ‘They’ve left the gate open for us. We’re here.’

‘I’m not staying here tomorrow,’ Addie said. ‘Mam’ll be worried about me.’

Penny sighed. A soft, sad sound. Was she even listening?

The car bumped through the gate and along a rough track. Addie’s stomach lurched. She squinted through the darkness, chewed at the skin around her thumb nail.

Where *were* they?

And when would Penny take her back home to Mam?

*

The farmhouse was huge: the biggest house Addie had ever seen. Wide windows threw yellow light on to a snow-covered courtyard. Smoke curled from tall chimneys into the night.

The front door opened as Addie and Penny approached, and a small woman in wellington boots hurried across the yard to meet them. She was holding a jacket around her shoulders. Addie saw that she was wearing pyjamas underneath.

'You made it,' she said. 'I was worried. The weather's really closed in since this morning.'

'Hi, Ruth,' Penny said. 'Sorry, it's got so late. These roads ...'

'Never mind. You're here now, that's the thing,' Ruth smiled at Addie. 'Let's get you inside.'

She hurried them through the door into a long, bright hallway full of jackets, boots and bags. 'Come on into the kitchen. And let me have your coats,' she said, 'I'll put them by the fire to dry.'

The fire in the kitchen was a real one, inside a huge brick hearth.

'Get it going a bit more, shall we, Addie?' Ruth said, smiling again. 'Sit here, love.' She pointed to a wooden rocking chair by the hearth. 'Let's get you warmed up.'

She bent down and poked at the fire with some kind of stick. Small red flames flickered and jumped between the logs inside. Addie smelled smoke.

'There's hot chocolate, if you'd like,' Ruth said. 'And I've made sandwiches for you both.'

'Perfect. Thank you,' Penny said. She put her briefcase on the table. Addie stared at it. She knew all about that briefcase, with its files full of secrets and lies.

She looked away.

She was thirsty. And freezing cold, even in Ruth's warm kitchen.

'Yes,' she said. 'Hot chocolate. Please, Ruth.'

'Good. Just pop your trainers off, I would, Addie,' Ruth said. 'They look soaked.'

Addie perched on the edge of the rocking chair, pulled at her wet laces, took off her shoes. She held them up for a moment. Where was she supposed

to put them? Ruth was deep in conversation with Penny, over by the stove. Addie tucked the trainers under her seat. She looked around.

It was the kind of kitchen you see in films, or in magazines at the doctor's surgery. Big tiles on the floor, big wooden furniture, big, dark beams across the ceiling. There was an enormous fridge, covered in stickers, scribbled notes and photographs of children. Addie wondered who the children were, and whether they all lived here, with Ruth and Sam.

Whatever Penny and Ruth were planning, Addie's photo was *never* going on that fridge.





MAX BOUCHERAT

Here's some of what Max has gotten his younger siblings to believe at one point or another:

- Cobblestones are actually troll eggs.
- Dad used to make him sweep chimneys, and the soot is why his hair is dark.
- He is a hundred and fifty years young.

Frankly, Max probably needs to brush up on his brother skills.

In the meantime, he puts his imagination to good use by writing fantasy adventures for ages ten plus. Unfortunately it doesn't make up for the fib he told about slime monsters turning children into slime monster babies. Yuck.

About *The Thief of Dreams*

After their mother's death, Mia and her older brother, Zach, move to a place south of friendship and in the heart of loneliness. Mia doesn't know if she has the courage to make new friends. Zach's the only one who understands her.

Then Zach is kidnapped by Astrid, a unicorn who runs a Dream House deep in the Spirit Realm: a palace where gods and monsters come to experience the finest hand-crafted dreams, and where Astrid's rule is absolute.

Mia refuses to leave Zach to his fate. But it's going to take all her courage, and help from a mysterious bird-girl, to stand any hope of rescuing her brother ...

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THE THIEF OF DREAMS

Chapter One

There was a girl named Mia, who dreamed of horses and of becoming a horse. She would dream of a one-roomed hut in a boundless meadow, where star flowers glowed under the watching moon, and where horses gathered around her doorstep.

Not that she realised she was dreaming. Not that she *ever* realised.

As always, the horses started to leave.

‘Wait,’ Mia said. ‘You’re not going, are you?’

‘But of course,’ replied a nearby stallion as he turned to look at her. ‘It is time for the nightly gallop. Will you join us, Mia Hartman?’

Mia beamed, for this was her favourite part of the dream: riding on horseback as the herd galloped through endless night-time. The wind was always fresh against her skin. Occasionally, magic would grasp hold of her – wilderness magic – and she would even, for a while, transform into a horse herself! She would grow a mane and tail and hooves, and those were the most cherished dreams of all.

‘Give me a moment,’ Mia said. ‘I just need to fetch something.’

The horse gave her a knowing nod. She rushed inside and shut the door, and for a moment basked in the warmth of her meadow hut. There was a wooden floor and wooden walls and a wooden ceiling, and dozens of candles, which rested amongst the rafters. The place smelled of dirt and grass – the smell of her old riding school – and it contained everything she needed. She had her privacy. No one ever bothered her, here, in her secret hideaway in the deep of her dreams.

Reaching under her bed, Mia pulled out a tattered saddle: her mum’s

saddle, back from when Mum had been a young girl who had also dreamed of hooves and horses. She sat on the floor with her hand on the leather and Mum's love in her heart. She sat in star-silence.

Then there was a

whack

bang

bash

upon the door.

Suddenly, the room wasn't warm, but it was shadow flooded, for half the candles flickered out, and those that remained turned navy blue. Mia shot up. The saddle lay forgotten on the floor.

'Zach?' she said, but from the chill in her bones she knew it wasn't her older brother. Neither was it the horses. A glance through the window showed her that the herd had fled.

There was another bang, another bash.

'Who's there?' Mia cried.

A draught blew out the remaining candles, all but one of them, so that the room was blue-cold and dark.

'H-hello?'

Mia gasped as a pair of eyes appeared in the window, wide and open, and bright purple. In a shock of wonder, she realised they were the eyes of another girl.

It was hard to be sure, but there was something peculiar about her. Her skin was sea-green-blue – a trick of the gloom, perhaps? More troublingly, something like twin shadows sprouted from her back. The more Mia stared at the girl, the less sense she could make of her.

'Who *are* you?' Mia asked, stepping closer to the window. 'Are you lost? Do you want to come in?'

The girl jabbed a finger at the door. Mia's instinct was to help her. She wanted to let her inside and into the warmth. But for a chill-struck moment, part of her hesitated – just a small part, a dust-mote part. Who *was* this girl? To find the hut, she must have wandered her lonesome way across the length of the Meadow of the Wild Horses, even though the meadow was larger than the largest countries.

Again, the girl pointed at the door. Her eyes were wet with pleas and pity.

Mia couldn't stand to see a girl so scared. So, she flung the door wide open, and the girl rushed in and bolted it shut.

(The dust-mote part of Mia wondered: why the urgency, and why the bolt? What was coming for them? What was *out* there?)

The girl held a finger to her lips. Now she was inside, Mia saw her sea-green skin was no trick of the light, nor a lie of the dark. She had pale, blond hair, nearly white, that reached past her shoulders. She looked around the same age as herself, Mia thought, perhaps eleven or twelve: a girl with feathers that covered almost the whole of her body. Only her feet, hands and face remained featherless. Her rags were adventure worn, little more than muddy tatters. From her back, she unfurled a pair of wings, which from tip to tip were wider than Mia was tall. Suddenly, Mia understood what the twin shadows had been.

All of her feathers were cut clean in half.

'Oh goodness,' Mia said, rushing to the girl's side. 'Are you OK? Do you need help?'

The bird-girl shook her head. Terror hung about her like a sticky mist; above them, the last candle dimmed and died. Then Mia gasped as the tip of the girl's right index finger began to glow, and long shadows crept over the bedroom.

The girl *wrote* with her finger.

She moved it through the air, leaving a trail of yellow light in its wake. When she was finished, a single word hung in the dark.

Hush.

Mia gaped at the floating word. It was sunshine bright, yet its message was as stark as the moon.

'How did you do that?' she asked the girl in a voice halfway between a breath and a whisper.

The bird-girl gave a quavering smile as the writing faded into nothing. She replaced it with a new message, the two most startling words Mia had ever seen.

You're dreaming.

The letters were knives, and Mia knew at once they told the truth. Of *course* this was a dream. It had to be, because she was *happy* here, in her hut in the meadow. She was wildly, impossibly happy; and these days, happiness

was something reserved only for the deepest sleeps, the most vivid and tangible dreams: that breed of dream where you can taste magic in the air, and feel the warmth of your own skin as though the warmth is real.

Mia's breath came in heavy gulps. The bird-girl wrote a new message.

Hide me.

Although Mia's belly lurched, although a thousand worried questions swarmed in her mind, she found there was no question at all that she should help the bird-girl hide.

But where?

Outside, the meadow stretched into the far reaches of forever. Maybe she could hide the girl amongst the grass and star flowers? Instinct, however, warned Mia that it was safer indoors than out, and that trying to hide her in the open was as good as giving up.

She clicked her fingers. 'What if I wake up?' she asked. 'Then no one could find you here, because I wouldn't even be dreaming it!'

The girl's eyes widened. She shook her head, shook her hands, and pointed again and again at the bewildering words – *Hide me*. Mia knew that, for whatever reason, waking up would do more harm than good.

'But why?' she asked. 'Who's chasing you? Couldn't we try and stop them instead of hiding?'

The bird-girl scrawled another message in the air.

Help!

The dust-mote part of Mia longed to wake up: the part of her that lived for hot chocolate on winter evenings, and for snuggling beneath blankets as rain smacked, whacked and beat, beat, beat against her bedroom window. It was *desperate* to wake up, for this was the worst dream she had ever had, the most vile-foul nightmare. Yet, over the past year, her brother had taught her that, sometimes, the only way forward was to shine light in the darkness.

The bird-girl needed help. That meant, whatever was coming for her, Mia wouldn't let it lay a hand, finger or dreadful claw upon one feather of her new friend's body.

Mia gulped.

She glanced out of the window. There was nothing but meadow and moonlight and softly glinting stars.

‘What if I dreamed we were in a fort instead of a hut?’ she asked.

The bird-girl’s answer was written in her eyes. *No good*, Mia imagined her scribbling. *No use*. But then she raised a glowing finger, and what she actually wrote was:

She’s almost here

‘Who’s almost here? What do they want?’

The bird-girl didn’t answer.

Mia sighed. ‘Maybe I won’t dream the hut into a fort, then. But I have to change *something*. There’s nowhere to hide you in here.’

Mia looked at the bed. It was small, and piled thick with sheets and pillows and blankets: a poor hiding place. So, she closed her eyes, and in her fingertips, she felt the thrum of her heartbeat. In her head, she pictured the biggest beds she could imagine, beds built for kings and queens.

Something *happened*.

She felt a crackle in her fingers, and an electric thrill passed through her skin. The feeling was enormous, as though something vast and ancient brushed against the edge of her heart and lent her its power. When she opened her eyes again, it was to find that the candles had all relit themselves, and flickered orange once more instead of navy.

And the bed had changed. It was giant sized. Half the room was now a marvel of sheets and mattress, and a dozen blankets hung over the sides and spilled over the floor, concealing the space beneath.

Amazement drummed in Mia’s chest, but there wasn’t time to admire her dream-work, not with a girl’s life at stake.

‘Quick!’ she said, giving the bird-girl a push towards the bed.

The bird-girl threw her arms around Mia and squeezed the breath from her. Mia held up the sheets, and the girl knelt on her hands and knees and crawled beneath the mattress. She had trouble at first. Somehow, there were dozens of boxes Mia hadn’t meant to conjure into existence. Where had they come from? What was in them?

There was no time to wonder. Mia helped the bird-girl move the boxes out of the way, and then lowered the sheets again, so that both girl and boxes were hidden.

It wasn’t a moment too soon.

Knock, knock, went the door.

This time, Mia didn't flinch, but breathed deeply and thought of Zach, and then of Mum, and then of her new friend crammed under the bed.

Please, she thought. Let it be enough. Please, please let it be enough.

There was another knock upon the door. Mia heard the muffled voice of a woman.

'I know you are in there, child,' the woman said. Mia was put in mind of glamorous ladies waltzing down red carpets, turning their noses up at their adoring public. Whoever this woman was, she was stupendously important. Yet it was a royal brand of importance: cold, distant, imposing. 'You are harbouring a fugitive. Hand her over, and we can pretend none of this ever happened. We can carry on with our lives and I will let you continue your dream in peace. Does that sound fair to you?'

From the way the woman spoke, Mia suspected that, regardless of her answer, she had little choice in the matter.

She took a deep breath of imaginary air: the air of a dream.

She opened the door, and in marched a unicorn.

Chapter Two

At once, Mia understood the bird-girl's terror. By the standards of most horses, the unicorn wasn't tall. Even so, she had to duck to fit through the door, for her horn was longer than the blade of a sword and as sharp as flint. (Mia felt she might cut herself just by looking at that horn, or just by thinking of it.) Her mane and tail were golden. Her coat wasn't snowy like the unicorns in Mia's adventure books, but half brown and half white, and covered in brown and white splotches. Three scars, like claw marks, ran down the side of her belly.

She nodded at Mia, fixed her with a royal gaze, and said, 'Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Lady Astrid Andromeda Starhooves – although, should you wish to, you may call me Astrid. Do not attempt to wake up. I have locked this dream, and so awaking is impossible. I have reason to believe you are hiding someone from me. A girl, to be exact.'

Mia tried to ignore the words 'I have locked this dream'. She tried even harder not to glance at the bed. Both were impossible.

Keep the bird-girl safe, she thought. Don't let Astrid find her.





E REGINA BYERS

ERegina Byers grew up in the American Pacific Northwest and has lived and studied in Canada and the UK. After enjoying a year in England completing her MA in Writing for Young People, she went back across the sea to New England, where she works on the publication of scientific articles about weather (while not understanding a word of them). She loves trees, mountains, animals, words, cheese and asking questions. When not writing, her favourite activity is wandering, both along city streets and down forest trails.

About A Singing Bird Will Come

Skye can identify any tree in her city's arboretum and shares her treeish love with her artist father. But when Dad becomes depressed, her family move to a small town by the woods. Skye has to leave her best friend behind, and even in their peaceful new home, Dad is as withdrawn as ever.

Lonely and sad, Skye explores the forest, where she makes a new friend, Silvia, a girl truly one with the woods. Silvia carries her own sorrows, and she needs Skye's help. Together, the girls learn how to mend their hearts, finding space to grow and courage to bloom.

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A SINGING BIRD WILL COME

Chapter One

Leaping Greenly

If I were a tree, I would not want to be planted in the playground of Gretchen Gloor Elementary School.

The playground only had two trees – scraggly birches in opposite corners of the concrete courtyard. I always felt sorry for them, especially right now, because their wilted yellow leaves were dropping from their branches, collecting in limp piles underneath.

‘Skye!’ I heard my best friend, Alicen, calling from the other side of the playground. I ran from the birch by the lunchroom door to the swings, dodging shrieking kids and bouncing basketballs.

I hopped on to the swing next to Alicen’s and we both pushed off. Alicen’s auburn hair swept behind her in the sunshine. We pumped our legs hard and flew higher and higher, up towards the bold autumn sky, in between the grey school walls that glowered over the playground.

Below us, Hilary sauntered up with her gaggle of friends.

‘Hiiii Skyye,’ she called in her fake-sweet voice. Her eyes were little and mean, like the eyes of our class pet rat, Scissors. ‘Whatchya doing up there? No more trees to hug?’

‘Shut up, Hilary!’ shouted Alicen, thrusting her feet out as she swooped past Hilary’s head. Hilary jumped out of the way.

‘Oooh, Alicen Wonderland, you almost kicked me!’

Hwweeeet! A whistle blasted and a playground duty teacher shouted at Hilary, ‘Stand back from the swings!’

Hilary gave us one rat-eyed glare and turned away, leading her gaggle off to the corner beneath the other birch tree.

‘Hilary looks exactly like Scissors,’ I said. ‘The rat, I mean.’

‘Yeah, that’s just what I was thinking,’ Alicen said. ‘I wish we could put *her* in a cage.’

Back and forth we went, our swings exactly in time with each other.

‘Are you going to the arboretum after school?’ Alicen asked.

‘Yeah, we’re supposed to,’ I said. ‘Dad said he might be too tired though.’

‘Why’s he tired?’

‘I don’t know. Yesterday he slept in really late. And he’s working on a painting but it’s taking him for ever. He just sits there staring at the canvas without doing anything.’

Alicen and I looked at each other as we swung.

‘Do you think something’s wrong?’ I asked.

‘Nah,’ said Alicen. ‘Grownups always get tired. They’ve lost all their energy from when they were kids, or something, I bet he’s fine.’

But worry twisted through my heart like a root growing in the soil. Dad and I always went to the arboretum on Friday afternoons. He’d never told me before that he might be too tired to go. What if he wasn’t there after school to take me?

The bell rang, and we slowed our swings and returned grudgingly to the ground. I stood up, my head and my stomach still swooping with the swing.

‘Quit worrying,’ said Alicen.

‘I didn’t say anything.’

‘I know. That means you’re worrying.’

I laughed, and we ran inside.

Our classroom buzzed with clatter and chatter, people talking and shouting and wriggling, Michael stabbing Josh with his pencil, Annalee playing shouty music on her phone. I squeezed behind my desk and took out my book, even though I knew I wouldn’t be able to read in all that racket.

‘All right, everyone, settle down,’ barked Ms Klink, coming in. ‘Annalee, turn that off and put it away or it’ll be mine till the end of the day.’

The noise in the room hushed. Ms Klink moved behind her desk and said, ‘Get out your fall project materials, and we’ll have some *quiet* work time. Michael, if you don’t know the purpose of a pencil by now, maybe I should send you back to kindergarten.’

Everybody looked at Michael, who now had the end of his pencil shoved up his nose. Across the room, Alicen flashed me an *ewww-that's-gross!* look. I scrunched up my nose and gave her one back.

I took out my project, which was called How To Be A Tree, and got to work on my chart of leaves and needles. Dad and I were supposed to do some sketches in the arboretum today. He must remember that I needed those. He'd be there after school and we'd head off just the way we always did. Right?

When the bell finally rang at three o'clock, I shot out of the classroom with Alicen right behind me, dodged two boys scuffling over a soccer ball, and clattered down the stairs. I burst out the big front doors and stood on tiptoe, peering over the heads of the waiting parents and bouncing little kids outside.

'Do you see him?' I asked Alicen. She stretched her neck and looked around. During the summer Alicen had grown a whole head taller than me. We'd been friends since we were six, two saplings growing side by side, only now she was shooting up fast and I was still stubby and short.

'No ... oh, wait! There he is – he's coming.' Alicen pointed at someone running up the pavement from the right, dressed in paint-splotted jeans and an orange T-shirt. My dad.

I glanced around to check that Hilary wasn't nearby, then leapt down the steps, rushed at Dad, and threw my arms around him.

'Whoa, hi!' he gasped as we both staggered backwards from the impact of my hug.

'Hi, Daddy!'

I heard a scoffing noise from behind me, and I turned around. Hilary had appeared out of nowhere with Christina and Annalee. Hilary looked right in my eyes, and I felt even shorter than usual. Then she turned and traipsed away, the other two following, and called back over her shoulder, 'Bye, Skye! Have fun with your daaaaaaddy!'

Alicen glared after Hilary. 'Just ignore her,' she said. 'But —' she glanced at me and then quickly away again '— maybe don't say "Daddy" at school.'

I didn't *usually* say 'Daddy' any more – just when I was really excited. I felt my face go hot. Did Alicen also think I was dumb for saying it?

Dad pulled me back into a hug with one hand and put the other on Alicen's arm.

‘We can say whatever we like,’ he said softly. ‘And we don’t have to worry about what other people think.’

Alicen looked down at the pavement and scuffed her shoe against the concrete. ‘Sorry I was a bit late,’ Dad added.

I looked at him more closely. There were dark shadows under his eyes that I didn’t remember seeing before. Was he OK?

Dad looked back at Alicen. ‘Would you like to come with us, Alicen? We’re doing some sketching for Skye’s project.’

‘No, sorry, I’ve gotta go to Bryn’s violin recital.’ Alicen made a face. Bryn was her little sister, and when she played the violin, it sounded like a donkey singing a duet with a squeaky door.

‘Ahhh,’ said Dad. ‘Well, good luck. See you soon.’

‘See you!’ I called.

Alicen waved and turned one way down the street, and Dad and I turned down the other.

Dad took my hand, and we strode down the pavement, swinging our clasped hands between us. Cars and buses rumbled by, and high buildings towered above us on both sides. Along the pavement stood a line of scrawny maple trees, planted in squares of dirt just like the birch trees in my playground.

‘Don’t these trees look sad?’ I said, pointing at the spindly branches and brown-spotted leaves. ‘They’re stuck in their own little squares, and there’s nowhere for their roots to grow, and they have to stand there while people go by and don’t even care.’

Dad looked at me, then at the trees. ‘Hmm. You’re right.’

‘What if we dug them up and took them to the arboretum where they’d be happy?’

‘The other day you wanted to take all the homeless dogs and cats home with us,’ he said, smiling. ‘Now you want to transplant all the city’s trees?’

‘Yeah,’ I agreed. I knew we couldn’t really, but I wanted to help any creatures that were unhappy and alone. I wanted to gather them all up and hug them, dogs and cats and trees. Even if Hilary would call me a tree hugger.

We came to the bus stop, and I looked up into the bright hallway of sky between the buildings lining the street. Suddenly, a scatter of birds burst into the air right above us. I watched their fluttering wings until they disappeared.

Then the bus arrived with a squeal of brakes and a sigh of exhaust, and we got on and trundled away.

*

Twenty minutes later, I pushed the button for our stop, and the bus pulled up in front of the JC Lightfoot Arboretum. The tops of the trees peeked above the iron fence, hints of the hidden forest kingdom inside.

‘Come on,’ I said to Dad, pulling on his hand.

And we walked away from the city, through the arched entranceway, and among the trees.

Sunlight slanted over the branches and across the grass and twisting pathways. Fallen leaves lay in thick carpets of red and yellow and brown. Next to the entrance, a chestnut tree stood mostly bare-branched, with a few yellow leaves hanging from it like bright flags.

Dad and I started down a bark-covered path to the left, which led to one of our favourite trees: an enormous beech whose branches curved downward, forming a sheltering canopy. In the summer, its leaves were deep purple-green, but in the fall they turned reddish brown.

Dad and I slipped between two of its hanging arms. The massive silvery trunk rose above us, and the sun shone through the leaves, which glowed copper-bright.

We stood together inside the leafy, shining globe.

Nailed into the beech’s trunk was a sign with its name in English and in Latin:

COPPER BEECH
FAGUS SYLVATICA
F. PURPUREA

All the trees in the arboretum had these signs, so you could learn the name of absolutely any kind of tree. The Latin names sounded like incantations, like saying them aloud might conjure something into being.

‘*Fagus sylvatica*,’ I whispered to the beech. I stared hard at its branches. I wished that, just once, something magic really would happen when I spoke a tree’s name, like fresh leaves unfurling or new twigs branching out.

Dad smiled at the sound of my spell.

‘Do you think it will ever work?’ I asked.

‘You never know. Maybe one day.’

We climbed out from the beech and continued along the path, passing a row of aspens (*Populus tremula*). A breeze swept up, and their dry golden leaves began to babble.

‘It sounds like they’re saying something,’ I said to Dad.

‘They’re telling tree secrets,’ he whispered.

‘What are tree secrets?’

‘Well, we don’t know – that’s why they’re secrets. But if we listen really carefully, maybe we can hear them.’

We stopped and stood listening to the murmur of the leaves. I thought I could *almost* understand what they were whispering about, but every time I came close, the secrets slipped away.

The wind suddenly blustered harder, whirling fallen leaves around us. My hair whipped behind me, my breath caught in my throat, and I danced forward.

‘Race you up the hill!’ I shouted to Dad, and ran up a sloping path to the right. I charged higher and higher, my lungs burning, my feet sending woodchips flying. I could hear Dad puffing behind me, calling, ‘Hey! You had a head start!’

We reached the top at the same time, gasping for breath and laughing. I pulled the smells of just-mown grass and woody bark and mouldering piles of leaves into my lungs.

In front of us, a cluster of vibrant green Siberian firs (*Abies sibirica*) waved their branches in the breeze, as if they were congratulating us on our race to their high-up place. No other trees were planted there, and no other people were around; it was just us and the firs and the sky.

‘This makes me think of an ee cummings poem,’ Dad said. ‘Can you guess which one?’

I shook my head.

He smiled and began:

*‘i thank You God for most this amazing
day: for the leaping greenly spirits of trees’*

‘Oh!’ I said, and joined in:

*‘and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything
which is natural which is infinite which is yes’*

Dad and I grinned at each other.

‘Those,’ he said, pointing at the dancing firs, ‘are definitely the leaping greenly spirits of trees.’

‘Yeah.’ I pointed overhead. ‘And that’s definitely a blue true dream of sky.’

Dad put his arms around me. ‘Definitely.’

Together we turned around and looked out over the trees of the arboretum and beyond them to the buildings and skyscrapers of the city. Dad was quiet for a long time, gazing ahead without looking at me. There was something strange about his silence, but I wasn’t sure what.

I unzipped my backpack and took out my sketchbook and pencil case. Dad also took out his drawing things, and we sat down on a bench nearby. I looked carefully at the firs’ needles, which bristled out all around their branches, and drew them as best I could on my paper. I could smell their scent: spicy, with something sharp and fresh mixed in, like the lemon dish soap my mom used.

When I’d covered a page with sketches, I glanced at Dad. His pencil was still and he was staring into space. In the air around him, I sensed a feeling of heaviness. It made a weight sink inside me, too.

My pencil rolled off my sketchbook and fell to the ground.

‘Dad,’ I whispered, ‘is something wrong?’

He looked at me but didn’t answer right away. Finally, he said, ‘No, my sweet girl.’ He closed his sketchbook and stood up. ‘Shall we call it a day?’

‘But we’ve barely done anything, and I need more sketches for my project.’

‘I know, but the sun’s going to set soon and it’ll be closing time. We’ll have to come back.’

I frowned, but I could see the sun slipping behind the tops of the firs.

We put away our supplies and headed down the hill.





HARRIET DEVONALD

Harriet is lucky enough to live on the south Wales coast, where she's often found scribbling by the sea. She has no doubt that sandy toes and salty skin are key ingredients to her imagination.

Easily inspired, and bursting with creative energy, Harriet has produced numerous forms of writing including poetry, songs and picture books. She has her own Seizure Alert Dog, Winston, who happily listens to every draft, his head resting on her lap and his tail wagging in encouragement.

About Winston the Winner!

Lucy doesn't like dogs. They have claws. They growl. They have sharp teeth – and Lucy knows there's nothing more frightening than that.

Until she has her first epileptic seizure.

Mum thinks she has the answer – a Seizure Alert Dog!

The new dog, Winston, moves in, and he won't leave Lucy alone. He follows her to the bathroom, he follows her to the kitchen and he follows her to her bedroom. But Lucy knows she doesn't need him.

Then, something happens that changes Lucy's mind ...

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WINSTON THE WINNER!

Chapter Four

Stubbornness

Lucy's arms were folded as she watched Mum put a leaflet on the fridge. It was for Support Dogs. There was a photograph of a dog on the leaflet, and it was being cuddled by its owner. Lucy glared at it.

'I'm not getting a dog,' Lucy said.

Mum didn't reply. She just put another leaflet on the fridge. The leaflet explained how Support Dogs helped people with disabilities, people with autism and people with epilepsy. Lucy looked at the word 'epilepsy'. She had that now. She shook the thought away.

'You need to stop leaving those everywhere,' Lucy demanded. She pointed at the posters and leaflets. 'I keep finding them in my bedroom and in the bathroom. They're even on my side of the car!'

Mum turned around to face Lucy. She crossed her arms, too. 'You need to learn more about these amazing dogs.'

'No, I don't!' Lucy said. 'I don't need to learn about them because I'm not going to have one.'

Mum raised an eyebrow, and held out a poster to Lucy.

Lucy pushed it away. 'I'm not having a Seizure Alert Dog.'

Mum turned and put the last poster on the fridge with Lucy's penguin magnet. Lucy frowned at it. That was not what her magnet was for.

Mum faced Lucy with a smile. 'Matt's coming over, isn't he? We could always see what he thinks.'

'No! No! No!' Lucy shouted. She stormed out of the kitchen to her

bedroom. Matt was coming over to make a secret birthday cake for his mum, *not* to talk about stupid dogs.

Lucy collapsed on her bed. Karen was practising her lines for the school play in the next room. Lucy was about to stick her fingers in her ears when she heard the front door slam and the sound of voices downstairs.

Matt was there. Finally, something to be happy about!

By the time Lucy had got downstairs, Mum had got most of the ingredients out of the cupboards. Matt was holding a bag of flour above his head and shaking it. He frowned at it as flour trickled out and landed on his nose.

‘I can’t see where it’s leaking from,’ Matt told Mum. ‘I ... I ... ACHOO!’

Matt’s huge sneeze sent flour scattering everywhere. He looked around him and gave a guilty grin.

‘Bless you!’ Lucy said. She put an apron on and pulled the box of eggs towards her. ‘Have you done these yet?’

‘Nope,’ Matt said. ‘Haven’t started properly because your mum has been telling me about Seizure Alert Dogs.’

‘What?’ Lucy narrowed her eyes at Mum. Mum just smiled back.

‘They’re amazing,’ Matt said. He patted her arm to get her attention and left a white floury handprint on her sleeve. ‘Those dogs are cleverer than any sloth.’

Lucy stared at him. Matt had refused to admit anything was better than a sloth recently. Lucy had only just got him to agree that their friendship was better than two sloths hanging out in a tree.

‘So, are you going to get your own dog?’ he asked, putting too much sugar onto the scales in his excitement.

‘No,’ Lucy said. She smashed an egg open and chucked the eggshell into the bin.

‘We are thinking about it,’ Mum said.

‘I’m not getting one of those dogs!’ Lucy exclaimed. She smashed another egg open on the side of the bowl, but the yolk went everywhere. Mum passed Lucy a tea towel. There was a photograph of a dog on it with the words ‘I sponsor a Support Dog’ underneath it.

Lucy threw it on to the kitchen counter. ‘Stop it!’ she told Mum. ‘I don’t want a dog. I don’t need a dog! I don’t ...’

The feeling came over her. The panicked feeling. The seizure feeling.

Lucy covered her eyes with her hands, protecting herself, hiding herself. Her thoughts darted across her mind again, making no sense. *Clasped. Struck.* Words just seemed to bounce around her brain. *Glued. Caught. Frozen.* It was like she had lost control of her head.

She was trapped in another seizure. Her mouth refused to let her speak. Her ears wouldn't let her hear.

Her legs gave way. Her bottom hit the kitchen floor but she couldn't feel anything. She rocked herself. She was weak. She was scared. She was ...

The seizure faded. The random thoughts stopped. Her mind cleared. She focused on her breathing and tried to bring her panting back to steady breaths. She opened her eyes, forcing herself to feel normal again. Lucy had no idea how long it had lasted.

Lucy took her hands away from her face. She was in Mum's arms on the floor. Matt took one of Lucy's sticky, yolky hands and held it in his. There was a mess of flour and sugar everywhere.

Lucy looked at Matt. Her cheeks burnt pink. He was the first of her friends to have seen her in a seizure. He smiled at her and gave her hand an extra tight squeeze.

'If you had a Seizure Alert Dog it would've licked you before you had that seizure,' Matt told her. 'It would have warned you that you needed to sit down. Instead, you fell to the ground in a mess of cake ingredients!'

Lucy smiled at Matt. She looked at the hand he was holding. It was the one with her scar from the dog bite.

'We're getting a dog,' Mum said. 'And that's final.'

'We're going to get a dog?' Karen squealed, suddenly appearing in the kitchen. She started to dance. 'I'm so excited!!'

'Don't worry,' Mum said to Lucy. 'I'll make sure we tell her that the Seizure Alert Dog is for you.'

Chapter Five

Welcome Winston

Karen squealed as soon as Mum opened the front door. Their new dog, Winston, looked startled, but he soon bounded up to her for a stroke. It was more attention than Lucy had shown him the whole time she'd been at the training centre for Seizure Alert Dogs.

'Oh, he's gorgeous!' Karen said, stroking him madly. Winston stood there, loving the attention. But he kept looking at Lucy. Lucy didn't like it. She had spent her half term at the training centre, surrounded by reminders of her disability, and now she had a reminder at home.

'Dad is going to love you! He'll have no reason for being moody in the morning with you in our house!' Karen told Winston. 'I can't wait to introduce you to my friends! You're such a lovely boy! Isn't he, Lucy?'

Lucy nodded. Winston had a soft, golden coat of fur. His ears flopped around his face, framing his brown eyes. The only time he bared his teeth was when he was smiling. But, he was ... annoying.

They followed Mum to the kitchen. Karen fussed Winston whilst they walked, but he wouldn't leave Lucy's side.

Lucy sat at the table, and Winston got comfortable by her feet. Karen crouched down next to him.

'Winston.' Karen grinned at him. She tickled him behind the ears. 'Our new, beautiful golden retriever! So, how do you warn my little sister that she's going to have a seizure, then?'

'He licks her hand,' Mum said. 'Don't you, Winston? He'll be able to warn her twenty minutes before she has it.'

Mum sat down at the table, but didn't take her eyes off Winston.

Lucy looked at Mum and Karen. The pair were obsessed with the dog! It was like he was a member of the family. They would probably end up preferring him to Lucy.

Lucy kicked her shoes off and they landed with a slap on the floor.

'Go and put those by the door, please,' Mum said.

Lucy stood and picked up her shoes. Winston immediately sat up beside

her. It wasn't far to go, but Winston left Karen's strokes to walk to the front door with Lucy.

'Go away,' Lucy hissed at him. But Winston just wagged his tail and followed her back to the kitchen.

'Wow,' Karen said. She stood up. 'He's so clever and so obedient!'

Lucy frowned. Winston hadn't obeyed any of her commands.

'I'm going to the toilet,' Lucy said. Winston's ears perked up. Lucy turned to him and pointed. 'You're not coming with me.'

He stayed standing by her anyway. He was trained to follow Lucy *wherever* she went because she might have a seizure *anywhere* she went. Lucy sighed. She wanted a break from him.

She stormed down the hallway to their downstairs bathroom. Lucy reached the door before Winston and darted inside. But she wasn't quick enough. Winston managed to stick his head and front legs through the door. Lucy didn't like him, but she didn't want to squash him.

'Fine!' she said. 'But don't you dare look when I pull down my pants.'

And, because Winston was a good dog, he turned away.





KEL DUCKHOUSE

Kel Duckhouse started her writing career as a page and performance poet. She is a working-class girl, born and bred on the estates of east London and has dedicated much of her working life to helping young people from similar backgrounds. Having not seen much of her working-class self in the books she read as a child and as a teacher, she decided to write a story that did just that. When she is not writing, she fights social justice causes, goes on adventures and dyes her hair pink.

Kel is represented by Julia Churchill at AM Heath.

About *Tyrannosaur*

I've only ever wanted to be a boxer,
but Dad never let me.

Then my big bro Denny gave me a pair of red gloves
and I was like,

YES!

This is it.

My time to show e-v-e-r-y-one.

Cos who says boxing ain't for girls anyway?

Losing this fight wasn't an option.

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TYRANNOSAUR

Chapter One

Round Three

My big brother Denny

Whack

is getting the hell beaten out of him.

Thud

If he don't sort it out quick

Oof

he's a goner.

The boxing hall's rammed

with blokes –

teeth bared, faces twisted.

Me and Mum are the only girls here.

I don't mind. I sort of like it.

Den takes every punch.

Stands.

Does nothing.

I get up, lean over the ropes,

'Come on Denny. Move it.'

My voice is lost in the manly murmur -

‘Sit down, Molly.’ Mum
tugs
my shirt.
Some bloke, bumps into me, spitting beer-
flavoured words into the sweaty air.
‘Finish him!’

I want to knock his block off, but
Ding ding ding – end of round three.

My old man crouches
under the ropes in Denny’s corner.
Rubs Denny’s swollen cheek,
shouts something.
Denny nods, spits in a bucket,
gets up lively
like he’s not just taken a beating.

Round four ain’t much better.
Denny *jab, jab, jabs*.
Nothing lands.
The crowd growls.

The other bloke swerves,
catches Denny
crunch crunch crunch
Den’s cheek *wobbles*
across his face.

I wince,
like I've been punched too.

Denny *slumps* against
the ropes.
The bloke launches at him,

Whack

face,

crack

chin,

thud

ribs.

Denny's gloves go to his face.
Has he given up?
'Fight back Denny. Move!'
Mum looks away.
Her heels
tap tap tap
on the ground.

Round five,
Denny smiles at me cheeky,
winks through his swollen eye.
What's he playing at?
He should be half dead,
but he's messing 'round.

The bloke comes forward,
slower this time, goes for Denny,
in his ribs, where he's weak.
Missed.

Denny laughs, drums his glove on his head.
Showboating. Daring him, 'Try again.'
And then,
like a beast,
Denny unloads,
one, two,
 one, two -
a hook here,
 body shot there.
Clawing it back,
landing every punch.

The bloke hangs
 on Denny's shoulder,
his eyes roll, gum shield flashes,
the ref pulls t h e m apart.

Denny pulls back,
launches a **solid**
 SHOT
from what feels like a mile away.
The bloke's body melts under him.
No clowning around.
He is
 done for.

We roar, thump our fists in the air,
as he goes to the canvas.
What a turn around, what a bleedin' legend.
That's my brother up there. My Denny.

One.

Den don't look at the bloke he's just floored.

Two.

He's chatting to the bookie.

Three.

The bloke's legs t-re-m-b-le.

Four.

Mum looks up.

Five.

Lets out a sigh.

Six.

Squeezes my hand.

Seven.

I hold my breath.

Eight.

Nine.

He's only gone and bleedin' won!

The ref pulls Denny's arm in the air.
My brother, the champ. My brother the legend.

I wish right down in my bones
that I was a boxer, just like my Denny.
But it's just tough luck.
Girls Ain't Allowed.





NIZRANA FAROOK

Nizrana was born and raised in Colombo, Sri Lanka – the wild, exotic landscapes of which feature heavily in her stories. She came to writing by a circuitous route, from a bachelor's degree in computer science to a master's in Writing for Young People. She moved to the UK ten years ago and now lives in Watford, Hertfordshire with her husband and two daughters. Nizrana is represented by Joanna Moulton of Skylark Literary.

The Thief of Serendib was shortlisted for the 2017 Joan Aiken Future Classics Prize.

About *The Thief of Serendib*

What if someone had to die for a crime that you committed? Whom would you choose? Your father, or your best friend?

Meet Chaya – the twelve-year-old with a big heart and sticky fingers in the island kingdom of Serendib. Her life of idyllic boredom is shattered one day when she almost gets caught by a guard at the royal palace, as she breaks in and steals the Queen's jewels.

As the daughter of the village headman, discovery means that Chaya's father would be put to death for her crime. But her best friend Neel is arrested as the robber instead, and sentenced to death.

Father or best friend? Chaya is cornered, and faces the most agonising choice of her life.

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THE THIEF OF SERENDIB

Chapter One

Chaya stared at the bronze spear pointing at her neck. ‘Stop right there,’ said the guard.

She took a step back and held up her hands. The linen pouch under her blouse clinked. The chatter of the crowds floated up from the promenade below, where the King had laid a feast for his people.

‘What are you doing up here, girl?’ The guard waved the spear at her. From below them, the melody of the *veenas* drifted up. The musical show was starting.

Chaya shrugged, the pouch pressing against her chest. ‘I’m just looking around.’

Her voice brought two more guards to the top of the stone steps cut into the hill. This was how the Royal Palace was built – a network of buildings at the top of the mountain, every rock and ledge forming courtyards and pools for the royal household while they ruled from above.

‘You’re not allowed here,’ said the guard. ‘You should be down on the grounds, enjoying the food and the festivities.’

Not her. Chaya much preferred breaking into the Queen’s rooms and stealing her jewels. There was a particularly nice blue sapphire in her pouch at that moment.

‘Well?’ The commander jabbed the spear towards her. ‘What have you got to say?’

‘I wanted to get a little closer to the palace. See what it’s like. It looks so pretty from down there.’ She pointed towards the village, and made her face go all wistful.

The guard sighed. 'Fine. Make sure you don't do it again.' He put his spear down. 'Anything past the lion's entrance is strictly out of bounds to the public.'

Chaya looked back and nodded meekly, as if noticing the giant lion statue for the first time. Even though it could be seen from villages miles away – the stone stairway leading into the inner palace complex through the crouching lion's paws.

'Come on now.' The guard gripped her arm, pulling her towards the cobbled walkway sloping downwards. 'I don't want to see you here again.'

The Queen's jewels jangled in her pouch. Sapphires, tourmalines and star rubies, set in heavy, shiny gold. How many jewels did one person need anyway?

Chaya shrugged herself free of the guard and walked down herself. Her arm stung from his fingers pinching into her. She paused near a tamarind tree and pretended to look up at the monkeys on it. Dappled sunshine prickled at her face as she looked at the guard from the corner of her eye.

He had stopped but was watching her. He swore loudly. 'What are you doing now? Get out, girl, before I come and give you a thrashing.'

Maybe she was being greedy. The sensible thing to do was to get out of there as fast as she could. That had been the plan after all. But the Queen's rooms were calling out to her. It was as if she could hear their whisper, right there in the warm sun. The softness of the velvet rugs, the gauzy bed curtains dancing in the breeze, and the promise of more riches within the ebony and teak cabinets.

There was a commotion from above near the Queen's quarters. Sounds of shouting and people running. Wait, had she closed the drawer?

It was time to get out.

Chaya walked down the path as casually as she could. Her heart hammered over the sounds behind her.

She was out of the lion's entrance when she heard the yell.

'Hey, you!' It was the guard.

Chaya speeded up, her bare feet scorching on the cobbles.

'Stop there, girl!'

Chaya looked straight ahead. Her feet slapped harder on the path, and her breath came out in puffs.

There was a scuffle of hurrying feet behind her.

Chaya hitched up her skirt and raced down the walkway. The sound of thundering feet chased her, heavy sandals pounding on cobbles.

She pulled up with a jolt when she saw a row of guards running *towards* her from below, shouting at her to stop. She turned and ran sideways blindly, springing up some steps into the Queen's prayer hall, and threaded through its granite columns.

Spears clattered against columns as the guards clomped after her. She got to the edge and plunged down into the foliage, thrashing through it and down the steps into the formal gardens.

She was close to the promenade at last. The smell of frying sweetmeats told her the food tables were just round the corner. The revellers were oblivious, and *veenas* played and bare-torsoed dancers jumped and twirled to the beat of drums. Chaya ran through the band, clapping her hands over her ears to escape the shrill sounds of the swaying flutes.

'Stop her,' someone screamed. '*Stop!*' The dancers paused, one by one, and some of the music petered out. People gawped, looking behind Chaya towards the guards. 'Stop the girl!'

A man in the crowd lunged at Chaya but she slipped out of his grasp and ran towards the gates of the royal complex. Coconut flower decorations tied along strings came crashing down as she ran through them, wrapping themselves around her like a trap. She tore them off and kept running.

Elephants from the temple stood on the green ahead of her, draped in their mirror-studded regalia, ready for the pageant later. In the middle of them stood the King's Grand Tusker himself, Ananda. He was wearing his special maroon and gold garments, and his tusks were massive and powerful up close.

Chaya skidded to a halt on the grass and looked back. She was boxed in.

She sprinted up and ducked under the mighty bulk of Ananda, the world instantly going dark and dank under him. His mahout gave a shout and grabbed her by the plait, but she broke free and rolled out on the other side. She sprang up to see the mahout turn and yell at the guards thundering towards them, as some of the elephants had started to toss their heads.

'Stop!' The mahout waved his arms. 'The elephants are getting disturbed.'

The guards slowed down and Chaya took her chance. She ran to the boundary and dashed out through the gates.

Skirting the city, she headed out towards the patches of wilderness on the east side of the palace, the wind flying through her hair as she sprinted away.

When she got there, she stopped and leaned against a tree, catching her breath.

She'd lost them.

She shimmied up the tree, hands scratching against the rough bark. She settled herself in one of the high branches and picked out coconut blossoms stuck in her hair. Lifting her pouch over her head, she dropped the jewels into her lap. They sparkled in shards of bright blue, green and pink against the grey of her skirt.

Chaya picked a *jambu* fruit from a branch nearby and crunched into its juicy pink flesh, peering through the leaves at the royal compound in the distance.

It was pandemonium down there. The crowds were scattered and panicked, clusters of people moving in different directions. The King, standing out in his gold-encrusted waistcoat, had come down from the dais and was directing the guards himself. The Queen and her procession of ladies were being guided out of the promenade and up to the palace. The mahouts on the green were trying desperately to calm their confused charges and stop them running amok. In the middle of it all, Ananda lifted up his majestic head and trumpeted loudly into the blue, blue sky.

Chapter Two

After going home for a quick change of clothes, Chaya hastened to the edge of the village. She picked her way through the paddy fields to the carpenter's workshop Neel worked at. Over its waist-high walls she could see him bent over something.

'Hey, Neel,' she said, stepping in to the smell of woodchips and polish.

Neel looked up and smiled, then bent down again to the square of teak he was working on. Stacks of wood leaned against walls, and half-finished furniture was strewn all over. 'You're back early. Thought you'd be at the feast for longer.'

Chaya slipped down to a stool next to him. 'I ... had to leave.' She gulped. 'You should have come.'

She craned her neck over the half-walls. The surrounding area was deserted

as always, only a soft breeze sweeping through the paddy and rustling the underside of the thatched roof.

‘We have so many orders to finish. Master didn’t want me to go.’ Neel worked his chisel into the wood, and brown shavings fell at his feet.

What was happening at the royal palace at the moment? Would they just give up looking for her?

‘Are you all right?’ Neel frowned.

‘Me? Yeah.’ She pointed to the square of wood he was working on. ‘That looks different. All geometric instead of the normal swirly designs you do.’

‘Oh, this is something we’re making for one of the foreign merchants. Their patterns are all like this. I had to use a ruler ... ’

How long would they look for her? They wouldn’t give up easily. Chaya’s head snapped back at a thwacking noise. But it was only a crow hopping along the wall.

Neel put the chisel down. ‘What’s going on?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘You’re all jumpy. What’s happened?’

‘You’re not going to like it.’

‘Tell me anyway.’

‘It’s ... ’ Chaya bit her lip. ‘The usual.’

Neel sighed. ‘And what’s it for this time?’

‘It’s this boy, Vijay. You might know him. He was attacked by a crocodile in the river.’

‘I remember you telling me. What can you do for him though?’ Neel blew on the piece of wood, puffing out a cloud of brown dust.

Chaya rubbed her nose. ‘His family have found a medicine man that can treat him, and he might be able to walk again. They need money for the three-day journey, and to pay the medicine man of course.’

‘OK. But I’ve never seen you nervous about stealing before.’

‘Well ... I might have gone a bit overboard with what I took.’

Neel stared at her. ‘Which is?’

Chaya took out the pouch and spilled the jewels on to the intricate carving Neel was working on, where they lodged in various grooves. The sapphire shone the bluest of blues, but a sparkling pink ruby was a close second, with a silvery star shimmering inside it.

Neel shrank back as if he'd been stung. 'Chaya, *what on earth?* Where did you get those from?'

She picked up the sapphire and held it to the light. 'The Queen.'

Neel looked at the jewels, and back at Chaya. 'Please tell me you're joking.'

'It's fine, I don't think they recognised me.'

'Wait a minute, *someone saw you?*'

'Calm down. I ran away. I'm safe.'

'*Calm down?* This isn't like stealing a few coins here and there. This is the *King* we're talking about.'

'Queen, actually.' Neel glared at her, so she hurried on. 'Don't you want Vijay to get better? And anyway, there's someone else I took them for too.'

'Who?'

'You, Neel.'

'*Me?*'

'Your parents can have the money so you don't have to work. You're thirteen. You should come back to school again.'

Neel sighed. 'I've told you, I'm fine. I don't need any charity.'

'But you could even learn Sanskrit and the sciences from the temple. You could have a better life.'

'A better life?' Neel raised an eyebrow. 'That sounds a lot like *your* life.'

Chaya threw up her hands. 'Fine then. But this could help a lot of people in the village.' She gathered the jewels into the pouch. 'I need to get these to Vijay's family.'

'Wait, Chaya. Think. How's a poor farmer going to sell the Queen's jewels? And you said someone saw you?'

She hoisted the pouch back over her neck. 'Just one of the guards. He chased me down to the promenade. It got a bit ... manic. But I got away.'

'So, they'll be *looking* for you?'

'No need to look so horrified. Yes, maybe. I'll give Vijay's father something small that he can sell on the journey, far away from here. I'm going to go keep the rest at home.'

'The King's men are probably searching the villages right now! Don't go *anywhere* with those things on you. We need to hide them.'

'Hide them? Here?' Chaya's eyes swept the room. High shelves lined the far wall of the workshop, filled with tools, pots of polish and wooden trinkets.

‘Everything’s so open. What about that box you showed me the other day? The one you made with the hidden compartment. You still got it?’

‘Yes. Yes, it’s here somewhere.’ Neel went to the shelves and hunted through them. He brought down a small box carved with a two-headed bird clutching a snake in its claws. He opened the lid and lifted out a drawer, and after some fiddling about unlocked a secret compartment at the bottom of the box.

Chaya emptied the jewels inside, which just about fit. Scooping up some wood dust swept into a pile in the corner, she packed it in tightly with the jewels. Neel snapped everything shut and put the box back on a shelf among a few others like it.

‘It’s all right,’ he said, as if guessing what she was thinking. ‘The master takes these every three months to Galle, and he’s only just been, so they’re safe.’

‘Good. This’ll blow over soon. I can get them back then.’

‘Go home now. I’ll go into the city and see what the talk is. You’ll be safe once you’re home. Your father ...’

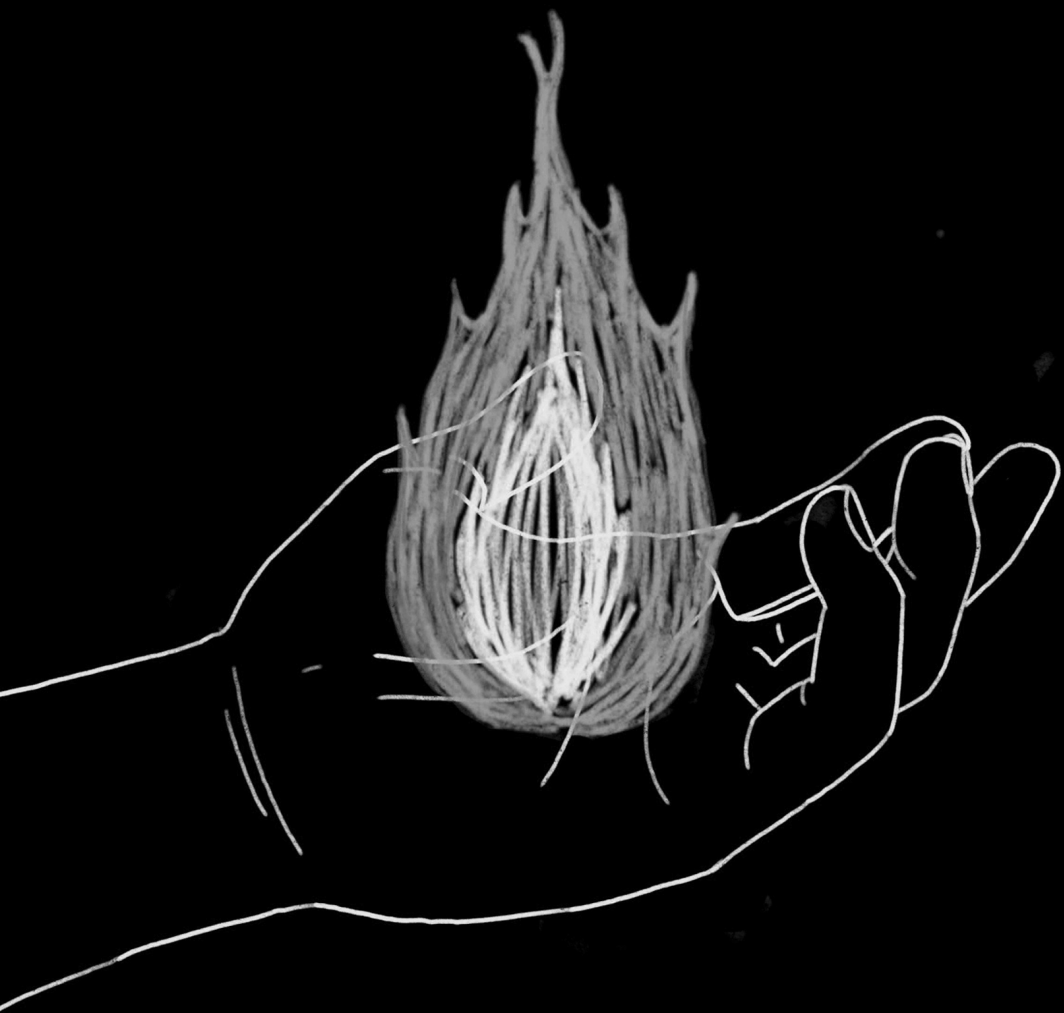
‘What? What about Father?’

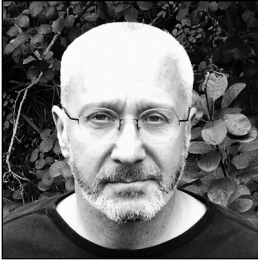
‘Oh, Chaya. If they ever find out you took the jewels your father will be in big trouble.’

‘But Father’s only a minor official to the King. Why would they blame him?’

‘He knows the palace. Layout, access, that kind of thing. They’ll think he set it up. They’ll never believe a girl did this on her own. The King will have him —’ Neel’s eyes darted away from Chaya. ‘Come on. Let’s go now.’

Chaya followed him out, with a backwards glance at the box on the shelf. Neel’s unfinished sentence couldn’t have been any clearer to her.





JAY GIEBUS

Jay grew up in Pennsylvania surrounded by forests and shopping malls. Like all good American boys, he played baseball, pledged allegiance to the flag and wanted to be Batman when he grew up.

When he was twenty-one, Jay moved abroad. After receiving a MA in Irish literature from University College, Cork; he moved to London where he became a teacher of young children. He now lives in Bristol with his wife, three children and two dogs. When Jay isn't writing, he teaches English and Religious Studies at Clifton College.

A first draft of *Fire Boy* was awarded an honorary mention at the 2017 United Agents/Bath Spa Prize.

About *Fire Boy*

Life isn't easy for London's youngest superhero, Aidan Sweeney. He's in trouble at school, his grandmother wants him arrested for setting fires and his evil uncle is out for revenge. Will Aidan ever learn how to control his fiery powers? Can his friends, Sadie and Hussein, help him keep their powers a secret? Will he ever learn to fly? The answers to these questions and more await in *Fire Boy*, an adventure story about friendship, love, rare Amazonian plants and a cat named Lemon.

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FIRE BOY

Q1. You are handed a box marked TOP SECRET with your name on it.

Do you:

- a) Wait for your parents to come home before unwrapping it;
- or
- b) Rip it open?

If you have answered b, proceed to the next question.

Q2. Inside the box you find a jar of sweets and an information booklet. The sweets are labelled NATURE'S OWN and smell of peppermint. The information booklet is forty-eight pages long. Do you:

- a) Read page after boring page from the booklet;
- or
- b) Open the jar?

If you have answered b, proceed to the final question.

Q3. You discover the sweets unleash a chain reaction. It results in you developing EXTRAORDINARY POWERS. Do you:

- a) Overcome your fears, dedicate yourself to a life of public service and become the warrior hero the world so desperately needs?
- or
- b) Run amok, struggle to control your powers, cause havoc at school and upset your family and friends?

If you have answered b once again, read on.

My name is Aidan Sweeney and this is the story of how I became FIRE BOY.

Chapter One

Special delivery

It began with a doorbell.

I was not long in from school. Lemon was curled beside me on the sofa, a white paw tucked under her chin, her tail flung lazily over the cushion. The two of us had the flat to ourselves. Mum wouldn't be home for ages and Granny, my ever-watchful minder, was asleep in my bedroom, snoring like a bear.

That's when the doorbell buzzed.

Lemon yawned and rolled over.

I sat up.

It buzzed again. This time, a voice from the intercom followed it: 'There's a special delivery parcel here for an A Sweeney.'

A Sweeney? I was the only A Sweeney in the building.

The voice spoke again: 'I need you to sign for it.'

I bolted off the sofa, hurdled a stool, sprinted past the kitchen and skidded to a halt. 'I'll be right down!' I yelled into the speaker.

As I waited for the elevator, I fizzed with excitement. A parcel – for me – and it wasn't even my birthday!

And yet ... it was hard not to be suspicious. No one had told me to expect a parcel and I hadn't sent away for anything. So, who could have sent it?

The doors pinged open and I entered. I tried hopping up and down on its floor to make it move faster, but nothing happened. It creaked steadily along, so I made a list instead of who might have sent me a package and why.

Mum.

Unlikely. Mum believed in rewards, not surprises. None of my most recent accomplishments – coming third in a Longest Spit contest or thumping Hussein not once, but twice at FIFA on his own Xbox – fell into her 'Achievement' category.

Dad.

Doubtful. Not only was my father never around, he was not a man for keeping secrets. If he had planned a surprise, he would have dropped so

many hints that I could have told you what was in the delivery box and when it was arriving.

Granny.

Could it be a peace offering for kicking me out of my room, insisting I came straight home from school every afternoon to wait on her hand and foot, and being a miserable brute with no sense of humour?

Not a chance.

It was a trick.

The favourite. Could Mitchell Mulch be hiding in the bushes with his Super Soaker Double-Pump AK-47 Attack Gun? Or might he be waiting with a new weapon from his arsenal of assault toys? Very possibly. This 'delivery person' and the surrounding area must be approached with great caution.

It was my lucky day.

Fingers crossed.

I burst into the lobby and spotted a tall, thin man in cycling shorts outside the glass partition. He had a parcel in one hand and a Deliver-O box strapped to his back. A bicycle leaned against the wall behind him.

My heart did a little thump-thump-thump. This was no trick. This was real.

I rushed to the door and opened it.

'Hi! I'm Aidan Sweeney! We just spoke on the intercom.' I pointed to the box in his hands and reached for it. 'That must be for me.'

But instead of handing the package over, the delivery man pulled it back. '*You're* A Sweeney? I was expecting someone older.' He looked over my head at the elevator. 'What about your mum or dad? Are they upstairs? I need someone to sign for it.'

'I can sign for it.'

He scratched his chin and frowned. 'I don't know ... Do you have any ID?'

'Just this,' I said. Removing one of my trainers, I showed him its heel

where the name *Aidan* was written in large black letters. He held it gingerly, his nose wrinkling slightly, and inspected the writing.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘That will do.’ He handed me a pad.

I signed my name and he gave me the package.

Wrapped in brown paper, it was an odd, egg-shaped lump. Postmarks blotted one corner and rows of blue airmail stickers crowded another. I had never seen its stamps before: one of a scarlet macaw perched in a tree and another of a toucan with a great orange beak. I didn’t recognise the handwriting either – a messy scrawl in a purple biro – but the address was mine: A Sweeney, Alexandria Apartments, London, N1.

When I looked up again, the delivery man was gone. In his place was a girl in a maroon blazer and straw boater.

Sadie was home.

Chapter 2

Ultra Secreto

‘**Y**ou never told me you had family in South America, Aidan.’
‘I don’t.’

‘Then who sent you this?’

Sadie and I were sitting on the sofa. Lemon, the traitor, was stretched across Sadie’s lap, one eye on the brown-paper parcel wedged between us.

Four phrases (in no particular order) that best describe Sadie Laurel-Hewitt, aged twelve:

Tall and willowy with long black hair;

Daughter of television actress Alice Laurel;

Speaks four languages, reads books with titles difficult to pronounce and is unrivalled in games involving planning, word skills or precision;

Fellow resident of Alexandria Apartments, top floor, and day student at Lady Pandora’s School for Girls.

Sadie pointed to the macaw stamp. ‘This was posted in Brazil, yet its identification tags are Spanish, not Portuguese. How curious. Are you going to open it now, or wait until your mum is here?’

Waiting had never crossed my mind. My only worry was Granny. She was still sleeping, but for how much longer? I feared the great She-Bear might stumble out of her bed-cave any minute. If Granny caught sight of this parcel, that would be the last I’d see of it too. Like all the other treasures I was no longer allowed under her watch, it would be padlocked away in her trunk never to be seen again. All I would be left with was a stiff wallop over the head from her walking stick. For now, I was safe. Her snores still thundered from the back bedroom.

I picked up the parcel. ‘Mum would want me to open it now, I’m certain of it.’ Carefully, I tore around the stamps and postmarks – those I wanted to keep. The rest I ripped apart.

Underneath the brown paper was a small box. Wrapped around it like a small cocoon were layers of tape. I picked at the ends, but the Sellotape was wound so tight that I couldn’t unravel it.

‘Do you have any scissors?’

‘Yes,’ Sadie said, ‘though this might be more useful.’ She dipped into her school bag and pulled out a small hunting knife. ‘It’s sharper.’

It certainly was. Sadie removed the blade from its sheath and held it up for me. The tip was curved and sharp like an eagle’s talons.

‘What do you think?’

I paused to admire her hunting knife. ‘I think you Lady Pandora girls know how to pack a school bag.’ I stared down into her open kitbag. ‘What else do you keep in here? A Taser? Grenades?’

‘No. I meant, do you think we should we use the knife to open it? I don’t want to damage your parcel.’

‘Use it! Use it!’ I said.

Sadie offered the handle of her knife to me. ‘Here,’ she said.

‘No,’ I said. ‘You do it.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’ There was only one person in the room who could be trusted to handle a hunting knife, and it wasn’t me.

Sadie shifted over to give herself some cutting room. ‘You had better take Lemon,’ she said.

I didn't need to. Sadie's wiggle woke Lemon. When my sleepy cat saw that knife over her head, she wasted no time somersaulting off the sofa and out the door.

Sadie gripped the parcel. 'Ready?'

'Ready.'

She cut through it in a single go. 'There,' she said. 'That's better.'

Peeling the clumps of tape away, she presented me with a small box. On its lid, two words were stamped in bright red letters: *Ultra Secreto*.

Sadie gasped.

'*Ultra secreto*: that means top secret!' she said. 'Who sent you this?'

That was a very good question. I didn't know anyone who lived overseas or had a job anywhere important. I turned the box over. On its back there was a smaller stamp: *Propiedad del Laboratorio Cambio*.

My heart sank. 'This isn't meant for me.' I flung the parcel on the coffee table. 'It must be a mistake. No one would ever send me anything important.' I threw myself face-first on to the sofa, groaned and punched the cushion. By my standards, I was masking my disappointment well.

Sadie said, 'Don't be like that, Aidan. I have a good feeling about this box. There's something important in here, and you're meant to have it.'

I rolled over. Our eyes met.

'Do you really think so?'

'Yes, I do. Besides, if it isn't for you, we can always turn it in.' Her lips curled wickedly. 'Once we've had a peek.'

I sat up. 'We could, couldn't we?'

Sadie handed me the box. 'This parcel has *your* name on it. Stop worrying about who sent it and see what's inside.'

This was exactly what I wanted to hear. I tore off the least piece of Sellotape holding down its lid. 'Ready?' I asked.

'Ready,' she said. '*Abre la caja!*'

Unsure of what she meant, but eager to join in, I said in my best Spanish, 'Tacos! Nachos! Tapas Bar!'

But before I could remove the lid, the doorbell rang again.

Chapter 3

The Death Star

It was Hussein. 'I want a re-match,' he said. He rattled his FIFA, Gold edition disc at me as he entered. 'You got lucky. It won't happen again.'

'Twice. I got lucky twice,' I said, following him into the sitting room.

Four phrases (in no particular order) that best describe Hussein Aziz, aged twelve:

Fond of crisps, computers, Star Wars action figures, the television game show Mastermind and information pertaining to the moons of Jupiter;

Small, dark-eyed, prone to geekish ways (see above);

Fellow classmate at Caversham School, Year 7, and resident of Alexandria Apartments, 2nd floor;

Poor loser on FIFA, Xbox, Gold edition.

'Hussein!' Sadie said. 'You're just in time for the unveiling.' She told him about the parcel. Hussein, however, did not share her enthusiasm.

'But ... you can't open that,' Hussein said. 'It's against the law. If you open confidential information, they can send you to prison.'

'It's addressed to me, Hussein.'

'You *think* it's addressed to you. *And* it's top secret. Why would anyone in South America send you top secret information? I bet you don't even know anyone in South America, do you?'

I began to regret opening the door for him.

'Who knows what could be inside that box?' he said, backing away from it. 'There might even be a ... weapon of mass destruction in there.'

Sadie sighed and stared up at the ceiling.

'Or worse,' Hussein said.

'What's worse than mass destruction?' I asked.

'There might be a vial inside with a deadly virus that, once opened, could spread until the human race is destroyed.' He grabbed me by the arm. 'I'm serious, Aidan. Call the police. You don't know what might be in that box. It might be booby-trapped. You can't risk it!'

I turned to Sadie, who sat with the hunting knife balanced across her knee, a picture of composure in her straw boater and maroon Lady Pandora's uniform. 'What do you think?'

Sadie pursed her lips. 'Hussein worries too much.'

This was true.

'Deadly virus? A weapon?' Sadie tapped the box twice with the blunt edge of her blade. 'This isn't the Clone Wars, Hussein. We are not going to find the plans to the Death Star in here.'

Hussein wagged his finger at her. 'If you had read the Star Wars Legend series, you would know that the Rebellion Alliance stole and then lost the disc containing the blueprints to the Death Star many times.' Hussein rubbed his chin thoughtfully. 'So, yes, the disc could be in the box, but the question is whether our technology would be capable of reading it. My feeling is that –'

Sadie stood. Her other hand held the knife. 'Aidan, open the box or I'm leaving.'

I hopped over the back of the sofa and landed on the cushion next to her. Sadie sat down.

'It has my name on it, Hussein. I'm opening it. Whatever is in here was meant for me. I'd like you to stay, but I won't be offended if you want to leave.'

I picked up the box and removed its lid.





HELEN HARVEY

Helen grew up in ramshackle and unruly corners of the internet. She led a guild of magical wolf tamers, dodged flames on fan fiction sites, and devoted webpages to pixelated dogs. She therefore grew up knowing that technology gives children superpowers.

After studying English at Oxford, Helen taught creative writing to kids in farms, forests and hedge-mazes. Having completed her MA, Helen now writes for educational publisher, Twinkl.

Helen won the 2017 United Agents Prize, for the Most Promising Writing for Young People.

*About **How to Beat the Queen of Mean***

Online, Emmy is a powerful runemaster with a catlike companion called Cinderfeet. When Emmy's gaming video gets a front-page feature, thousands of devoted fans flock to watch her battle the Mulch Queen herself.

At school, Emmy is friendless and bullied. To Vicky and her gang, Emmy is a weirdo with bad handwriting, horrible fashion sense and no dad.

But if Emmy can take on the Mulch Queen, she can take on Vicky, too. Joining forces with all the gamers in school, Emmy sets out to beat the Queen of Mean, and to prove that she's more than just a geek.

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HOW TO BEAT THE QUEEN OF MEAN

Saviour of Sandallia

Release date: 9 May

Price: £29.99

Playable on: PC and console

On the tropical island of Sandallia, the grim reign of the Mulch Queen is over. Her slime and swamps have become rainforests and beaches once more. The Mulch Queen has been locked beneath the Enigma Tree by a legendary runemaster, never to return.

Or has she?

Without warning, the Enigma Tree splits in two. Out pours a swarm of mulchbeasts that spread the Mulch Queen's all-consuming slime to every corner of the island. Even in the worst days of the Queen's first reign, things never looked this bad.

In this much-anticipated sequel to *Island of Sandallia*, can a saviour be found to unite the island peoples, and destroy the Mulch before it wipes out Sandallia completely?

Features

- new runes to collect
- choice-based dialogue with multiple outcomes
- tougher-than-ever boss fights

More heart-stopping, brain-tangling and slime-smothering than ever before. Five stars. – Game Heaven

Chapter One

Clutching her runebook, Emmentine strides into the cave's gaping jaws. Cinderfeet pads at her heels, whiskers twitching. Around them greenish lights glimmer awake, so that the cave looks like a glow worm turned inside out. The walls drip with slime, as if the rock itself is rotting. But Emmentine and Cinderfeet don't stop.

Beneath the slime are carved symbols: zigzags, swirls, a shape like a tree. The runes are warped and dribbling down the walls, but Emmentine doesn't need to see them to know what they are, and anyway she doesn't have time to look. She has nearly reached the Mulch Queen's lair.

Then the ground quivers and gloops into nothingness. Cinderfeet scabbles at the rock, and Emmentine's purple robes billow, as the pair tumble into a fog of poisonous green. They clatter on to a floor heaving with rot and stench. In front of them towers a four-armed monster in a dress of rotting leaves.

The Mulch Queen has
awoken!

My fingers click frantically on the keyboard. On the screen, Cinderfeet shakes the flaming antennae that fan from her head like a mane. Fireballs burst out. They scorch the Mulch Queen's skin and burn holes in the swampy ground. The swamp hisses and shrinks.

The Mulch Queen opens her mouth to scream, but I click first. Emmentine runs, and Cinderfeet roars. Storm clouds burst from Cinderfeet's lioness jaws, and gather on the cave roof. Rain pours down, quenching the poison tendrils and making the Mulch Queen's slime-skin run. Lightning forks at her face and she wails, flailing her four arms.

Eighty-two damage in one attack, and the Mulch Queen hasn't touched Emmentine or Cinderfeet yet. I can do this.

The Mulch Queen belches out poison and swings all four fists, but I hammer out the key combo. Emmentine strikes with her claws twice. A perfect razorswipe! Layers of the Mulch Queen rip off in shreds, and she

collapses into a tiny brambly figure. Her health drops to nearly nothing, and she rolls herself into a ball to gather strength.

An alert pops up:

Bind the Mulch Queen before
she regains too much health!

I know exactly what to do.

The sludgy outlines of runes glow faintly on the walls:



Emmentine runs to the nearest symbol, holds up her runebook: *flash*. Light gushes from the pages, and the rune fizzes, and rewrites itself clear and shining. Vines of bright flowers burst from the wall, and race over the sludgy ground to grasp the Mulch Queen.

Emmentine darts in another direction, holds up her runebook, *flash*, and more vines burst out. Run, *flash*. The music pounds and races, and I know time is running out. The Mulch Queen trembles. Emmentine runs straight for the last zigzag rune.

‘Do the flashy thing to the lightning bolt,’ says Ryan behind me.

I jump. ‘I know!’ I didn’t hear Ryan get home. And there’s only seconds left.

The Mulch Queen begins to unfold. Her arms fly out, and Emmentine dodges as *thud*, a fist slams the floor behind her. Cinderfeet swipes again. The swamp wobbles. One more rune, one more shooting vine and *snap!*

The Mulch Queen is wrapped in a net of greenery and flowers, like a fly in a web.

The cave’s roof cracks open, and light pours in. In the powerful sunlight, the festering Mulch Queen shrinks to nothingness. The Enigma Tree bursts into leaf, as grass and flowers grow frantically over the rock. But I’m barely watching now.

I stand up so fast my chair tips backwards into Ryan's stomach. I grab the corners of my striped blanket like a flag, and leap around the living room.

'I did it! I did it! I defeated the Mulch Queen without taking any damage. Yes, yes, yes!'

'Why are you jumping, Emmy?' Ryan tips the chair upright and sits on it. 'It wasn't that hard.'

'You don't understand, I think I just did a world record or something. I bound the Mulch Queen and she's the final boss on Island of Sandallia, and I did it in one try, *and* Emmentine and Cinderfeet kept full health the whole way through. And I videoed the whole thing for my gaming channel, and, and, and WOOHOO!' I jump and skip and leap on the sofa and nearly trip on a cushion, but I bounce away in time and land, *bang*, on to the floor beside Ryan.

'So what?' he says. I think there are secret rules telling big brothers they have to be mean to little sisters.

'You couldn't do it,' I tell him. The game credits have finished rolling and the main menu pops up in front of him. 'Not even ~*indigo*chalice*~ could pull off a binding like that. MeowMeow thought it was impossible, but I did it.' They are my two best friends on Sandr, the Island of Sandallia message board.

'Who are Invisible Cabbage and MooMoo?' says Ryan, clicking on NEW GAME. 'Seriously, these people have the weirdest names.'

'It's ~*indigo*chalice*~ and MeowMeow, and they're my friends,' I tell him. 'Obviously.'

'Your online friends, though, right?' says Ryan as the MAKE A RUNEMASTER screen loads, and my stomach goes tight. 'Not real-life friends?' I try to shove him off the chair with my shoulder, but he's too heavy.

'Online friends *are* real friends,' I say.

'What's a runemaster?' he asks. Ryan has this trick of changing the subject just when I'm really annoyed at him. It works though.

'Runemasters have a runebook and they gather these symbols by writing them in the book,' I tell him, trying not to show that he's bothered me. Not showing you're bothered is part of the rules for little sisters. 'Runemasters can also train and control an animuse.' I jump on to the sofa arm behind him. 'See, you don't even know how to play. As if I needed your help.'

'You were about to tank, before I came along,' Ryan says, colouring his runemaster's hair bright pink, then sunset orange, then settling on pitch black. 'How do I get a cat thing?'

'The cat thing is called a felixiad.'

'Oh, a felixiad,' he says, not very seriously. He always talks like this with me, like everything is a big joke. Probably from being a teenager. 'Of course.'

'A felixiad is a type of animuse. They can use magic powers to fight the Mulch.'

'Oh, the Mulch.' He nods, wisely. 'Of course.'

'But they don't all look the same. You can do the quiz if you like, to find your perfect animuse.'

The quiz asks all sorts of questions, like: *Sand or sea? Sun or moon? Blue or red?* When Ryan's animuse pops up, he reels back.

'A merewulf? It looks like a dog with skin disease.'

I press my lips together to choke the giggle down. 'No, look, it's glittery. And those slits are gills, so it can swim underwater,' I say. 'You can change it, if you think it's ugly.'

'Shh, Emmy. Don't call it ugly, you'll hurt its feelings!' Ryan says, putting his hands on either side of the screen, as if he's covering its ears. I laugh. I always try not to laugh at Ryan, for as long as possible, but eventually I can't help it. 'I like my mutant frog puppy. Now how do I get to that slimy woman?'

'The Mulch Queen is the final boss. You have to get to the end of the game before you can fight her. But the sequel is coming out in less than a week, and I can't wait!' I bounce on the sofa arm.

The front door lock scrapes open.

'Hi, kiddos,' says Paul. Clattering sounds follow, and a big bang, like something heavy crashing into a wall. 'Careful with that box,' he says.

'The tattoos for the fayre are here!' shouts Mum.

'What are you two up to?' Paul sticks his bald head round the living room door. 'That game again?' he asks, and winks.

'Come and see these tattoos,' Mum shouts from somewhere down the hall.

'I was actually just showing Emmy how to defeat the Munch Queen,' Ryan tells Paul.

'*Mulch* Queen,' I correct him. 'And I bound her myself, actually. Paul, I did it without Emmentine or Cinderfeet taking any damage. Do you want to see?'

‘Go on.’ Paul ambles to the computer. Ryan jumps up like he’s been burnt and then pulls off his school tie, ruffling his already ruffled brown hair. Ryan gets like this when Paul’s around.

I replay the video of the fight. I get excited all over again, watching Emmentine dash between the Mulch Queen’s fists. My fingers twitch, as Cinderfeet does the double swipe. When the vines flash around the Mulch Queen, Paul punches the air.

‘Yes! Nice one, Emmy. I bet you’re excited to show everyone.’

‘Obviously.’

‘Are you going to show your friends tomorrow at school?’ he says, still grinning.

But I suddenly feel knotted up. ‘Er –’ I look at Ryan for help, but he just drops his eyes to the floor. ‘Maybe,’ I say.

‘Well, you should,’ says Paul, still in that enthusiastic tone, like he doesn’t know he’s said anything wrong, even though my insides are tangled so tight I can’t move. ‘Have you been playing too, Ryan?’

Ryan sticks his hands in his pockets.

‘Just showing Emmy what to do.’ He shrugs. ‘It’s not really my thing. Babyish.’

At that, I feel even more knotted up. I thought Ryan was getting into it.

Mum sticks her head through the door. Her purple hair has gone extra frizzy and wild, which makes her look like a witch. My hair does the same thing, but it just makes me look messy. ‘Are you lot coming to see these tattoos, or what?’

I nod slightly. Ryan scuffs the floor, and we follow Paul into the kitchen.

A huge cardboard box is open on the kitchen table. It’s full of temporary tattoos: dragons, kittens, football logos. Mum is a real tattooist, with a shop and everything. But every year for the Summer Fayre at my school, she runs the face painting and temporary tattoo stall.

I try not to think about school, but the idea spreads in my brain like Mulch slime.

‘I knew they’d arrive in time,’ Mum says, her hands on her hips. ‘Scaremonger.’ She nudges Paul. ‘You said they wouldn’t be here for months.’

‘I don’t think scaremonger is a word,’ Paul says. Paul has been Mum’s boyfriend for nearly two years now, and I hope he keeps being her boyfriend. He was the one who bought Island of Sandallia for me and Ryan.

I suppose that's why Ryan doesn't want to play it.

But I'm glad he bought Island of Sandallia because it's my absolute favourite game. Without Sandallia I wouldn't be on Sandr, and without Sandr I wouldn't make videos or know MeowMeow and ~*indigo*chalice*~. I don't need school friends when I've got them.

'Shall I sort the designs out?' asks Ryan.

'No, I want to sort them,' Mum says. She plunges her tattooed arms into the box and mixes the shiny pictures around. 'That's the best bit.'

'I guess I'm making dinner then,' says Paul, unbuttoning his shirt sleeves.

'Emmy,' says Mum, 'could you print a sign with the prices on, like last year?'

'OK.'

'We'll keep the prices the same, shall we?'

'I could test the tattoos,' Ryan offers, picking up a sheet of rainbows and unicorns. 'Check they're not gummy, like two years ago.'

'I see your game, mister,' says Mum, starting a pile for animal tattoos. 'You just want a freebie.'

'No, I don't even like temporary tattoos,' he says, and throws the sheet down. 'I just thought, we don't want another gummy year.'

Paul sets a pan on the cooker. 'I think you can just relax, Ryan.' He cracks open a tin of tomatoes and pours it in. 'We've got this covered.'

Ryan grunts. He stares at the tattoos for a moment, then turns and vanishes into his bedroom.

I go back to the computer, Mulch still dripping in my head. I try to imagine Cinderfeet roaring a storm to wash out the Mulch slime, but through the rush I hear the Mulch Queen cackling.

There's only one way to stop the Mulch from taking over my brain completely: I have to overwhelm it with good things.

So, I watch the video over again. I watch Cinderfeet roar and swipe. I watch Emmentine run from rune to rune. I watch the flowering vines snap shut.

It's working. Run, swipe, flash, snap. The Mulch shrivels away to nothing.

I upload my video on Sandr, head to the message boards and post a link. MeowMeow and ~*indigo*chalice*~ will drop dead in amazement when they see it. No one has defeated the Mulch Queen without taking any damage before. No one but me.





SOPHIE KIRTLEY

Sophie Kirtley grew up in Northern Ireland, where she spent her childhood climbing on hay bales, rolling down sand dunes and leaping the wild Atlantic waves. Nowadays she lives in Wiltshire with one husband, three children, two cats, three guinea pigs, five fish and an uncountable number of newts.

Sophie has always loved stories: she taught English in secondary schools for many years and has worked in a theatre, a bookshop and a tiny pub where folk tell fairytales by candlelight. Sophie is also a prize-winning, published poet, writing for both adults and children.

Hartboy was shortlisted for the 2017 Joan Aiken Future Classics Prize and for SCBWI The Hook 2017. Her picture book *Moles ...* according to Mike won the 2017 Writing Magazine Picture Book Prize.

About *Hartboy*

It's 7767BC. Deep in the ancient forest a baby is crying, all alone. She's just been born, but already her ma is dead and her pa has gone. Only her big brother, Hartboy, is left to care for her. But Hartboy has just fallen in the river ...

The time is now. In the very same forest Charlie is running; running away from a family at breaking point; running away from tomorrow; running towards the river ... As past and present entwine, Charlie and Hartboy find themselves fighting for survival and learning that friendship is stronger than fear.

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HARTBOY

Chapter One

Hunt

MANDEL FOREST, MIDSUMMER EVE, 9000 SUMMERS AGO
(Each chapter opens with a comic book frame)

Comic book frame: Longshot. A hunting scene in the ancient forest.

In the foreground, a Stone Age child (Hartboy) sits in a hazel tree with his spear trained on a wild boar who grazes in the clearing below.

Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve

I hide on the mossy branch of the hazel tree, my legs dangling into nothing. I wait. The wind rustles the leaves; a wood pigeon coos; branches creak and crack like old bones.

A wordless shout. Far off, from the direction of the Spirit Stone. The Hunters are coming.

I squint into the hazy sunlight. I can see a ripple of trembling trees where the Hunters carve and smash through the forest. The crack-thump-rip of sticks grows louder as they tear their way closer and closer to my hiding place.

The Hunters hack through the bracken and out into the patch of sunshine, right at the foot of my tree.

It's them.

Lamont. Beaky. Nero.

The Hunters.

I don't dare breathe.

Lamont stands, hand on hip, and peers into the forest. Beaky circles the

tree, jabbing at rabbit holes, prodding the undergrowth with a long, sharp stick. Nero growls, black ears pricked, hackles raised, nose to the ground.

My heart thuds hard and loud.

Nero stops. He sniffs and lifts his nose towards me.

Then Nero turns his head sharply away. He can hear something. I can hear it too: there's rustling in the bracken.

Nero looks to Lamont. Lamont lifts a finger to his thin lips. Beaky nods.

Of course. They think the noise is me.

The thing in the undergrowth rustles again.

Lamont signals a countdown with his fingers:

Three.

Two.

One.

With sticks raised the Hunters charge into the bushes.

A young deer bounds out on the opposite side, tail pale amongst the tree shadows. It springs away and is gone.

Nero chases after the deer, barking.

'NERO!' yell Lamont and Beaky, waist-deep in a tangle of brambles.

I see my chance.

I scramble from my tree and I run.

Beaky shouts, 'It's Charlie!'

But I don't look back. I run. Down the hill, through the forest, towards the river. My feet pound the ground and my fists pummel the air. I charge over the wooden bridge and up the steep gravel path on the other side. Each breath is heavy. My chest hurts.

I hear the thump of the Hunters running across the bridge. They're gaining on me!

In the clearing, I tug on tufts of grass to heave myself up to the top.

I reach the Spirit Stone and I lean with my forehead pressed on to the cool grey rock.

'Home,' I say, high-fiving the Spirit Stone.

Slumping down on to the grass, I close my eyes and gasp air into my aching chest.

I won the game.

Nero reaches the Spirit Stone next. He just stands there panting. Lamont and Beaky don't bother running the last bit once they know I've beaten them. Lamont clammers up the mound and flops down next to me.

'Close one, Charlie,' he says. 'That deer put us off.'

'Just you blame the deer,' I say. Lamont does a little half laugh and pokes me in the side. Lamont's dog Nero comes over, long tail wagging, his eyes on the stick in his owner's hand.

'Go get it, Nero.' Lamont tosses the stick down into the clearing. Nero charges all the way back down the hill again.

'Oy!' yells Beaky, still clambering up the mound. 'You nearly got me with that stick, Lamont!' When Beaky finally reaches the Spirit Stone she collapses beside us, breathing hard. 'Next time,' she pants, 'there's absolutely – no way – I'm being – a Hunter – that forest is far,' she swallows, 'far – far too big – to find – anyone – in.'

'Just you blame the forest, Beaky,' I say. We all laugh, even Beaky.

We sit there, saying nothing, looking out over our forest. I look at the river; I follow its twists and bends all the way to the sea. I look at the farmland cut neatly into green rectangles of fields, like slices of cake. I look at our town, how it spreads greyly up from the riverbanks, surrounding our forest, which surrounds this clearing, which surrounds this mound, which surrounds the Spirit Stone. *Home*, I think to myself. And I think about Dad then. And about Mum. And about the baby who'll be born soon.

Chapter Two

Home

MANDEL FOREST, MIDSUMMER EVE, 9000 SUMMERS AGO
Comic book frame: Midshot. Hartboy's home and family.

One low egg-shaped hut, next to the Spirit Stone. The Spirit Stone has eleven rings carved into it. There is an open fire where the boar is cooking. Hartboy is with Pa and Ma, who is heavily pregnant. Hartboy's spear, Ma's spear and Pa's spear are all pronged into the earth nearby. Rings are also carved into the spears as year markers.

Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve

The light has that golden tinge now and shadows are stretched. I really ought to go home. Check on Mum. The baby was due three days ago so it's bound to be here sometime soon. A little tingle creeps up my spine: soon I'll have a little brother or sister and everything will change.

'I'm off,' I say, standing up.

'I am never moving again!' says Beaky, lying there with her long red hair spread out on the grass. Lamont sprinkles a handful of seeds on her face. Beaky sits up and thumps him. I laugh.

'See you tomorrow,' I say.

'... for your birrrthdaaay!' sings Beaky.

'Are we still camping out?' asks Lamont.

'Of course we are,' answers Beaky, before I even have a chance to think about it. Nero wags his tail like he's in agreement.

I pat Nero's soft black head. Then I yell, 'Bye!' as I turn and run back down to the forest.

The air in the forest tastes cool and shadowy. The trees on either side of the path lean in slightly, so it's dark like a tunnel. I can still hear the faint echo of Lamont and Beaky's laughter. A big, clumsy bird flies out of a tree; it's so close to my head I duck; my foot skids out in front of me, and I end up sitting on the path. The bird lands on a branch on the other side of the tree tunnel and stares at me. It's a wood pigeon with feathers the colours of early morning sky: grey and pink and silver.

I look down at the gravel I disturbed when I slipped. One tiny, flat stone catches my eye, not because it's beautiful, but because it's triangular. I press my finger on to its tip; it's as sharp as a spearhead.

I get up and fiddle with the stone as I walk.

'Whooo?' says the wood pigeon, with its head on one side. 'Whooooo? Whooooooooooo?'

'Charlie Merriam,' I reply and the wood pigeon flies off.

'Chollie. Murr. Umm,' says a low voice from high in the tree behind me. A voice I do not know.

I drop the sharp stone and I run. Faster than I've ever run before. Because this time, it's not a game.

Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve, 9000 Summers Ago
I SIT IN HAZEL TREE.

I WAIT.

QUIET QUIET.
SMALL WIND.
LEAVES SWISH.
BRANCHES CREAK.

‘WHOOOOO,’ SPEAK PIGEON VOICE.
‘WHOOOOOOO?’
‘I HARTBOY,’ I SPEAK TO PIGEON
QUIET LIKE BREATH.

PIGEON LOOK ME.
I LOOK PIGEON.
I LOOK SPEAR.
SMALL SMALL PIGEON.
I WAIT.

I HOLD SPEAR TIGHT.
SUN MAKE SMALL SHINE
ON SHARP SHARP SPEARHEAD STONE.

I WAIT.

CRACK CRACK NOISE IN FOREST.

CREATURE?
CREATURE MAKE CRACK CRACK NOISE?

CRACK, CRACK NOISE COME AGAIN.
I HOLD SPEAR TIGHT TIGHT.
CREATURE CLOSE!

CREATURE BIG?
I HOLD SPEAR TIGHT TIGHT TIGHT.

WHERE CREATURE?

CRACK.

I LIFT SPEAR.
I LOOK IN FOREST.

LONG LONG SHADOW WALK IN TREE SHADOWS.
I LOOK LONG LONG SHADOW LEGS.
NOT CREATURE LEGS!
MAN LEGS!
PA?

SHADOW MAKER WALK UNDER HAZEL TREE.
DARK DARK.
I TRY LOOK.
NOT PA.
NOT MAN!
NOT BIG LIKE MAN.
BOY?
GIRL?

‘WHOOOOOO?’ SPEAK PIGEON VOICE.
‘CHOLLIE. MURR. UM,’ SPEAK SHADOW VOICE.

CHOLLIE MURR UM WALK IN SMALL SUNLIGHT.
I LOOK CHOLLIE MURR UM.
CHOLLIE MURR UM HAIR BLACK.
CHOLLIE MURR UM WEAR BLUE DEERSKIN.
BLUE DEERSKIN!

‘CHOLLIE MURR UM?’ I SPEAK.

CHOLLIEMURRUM RUN FAST FAST FAST.

BLUE BLUE CHOLLIEMURRUM GONE.

Mandel Forest, Midsummer Eve

I run and I run and I run. The forest is just a blur of green and the only sound I can hear is the pounding of my heart. I reach the fork, then I run up the path and along the high wooden fences; to my gate, to my garden, to home.

I burst in the back door.

‘Mum!’ I yell.

‘What’s the matter with you, Charlie?’ asks Dad. He’s cooking spaghetti in the kitchen.

I can’t even speak I’m so out of breath.

Mum is in the doorway. ‘Are you OK, love?’

I try to work out in my head how to explain to them what just happened. How to tell them about the voice I heard in the woods. I realise how ridiculous and stupid it sounds.

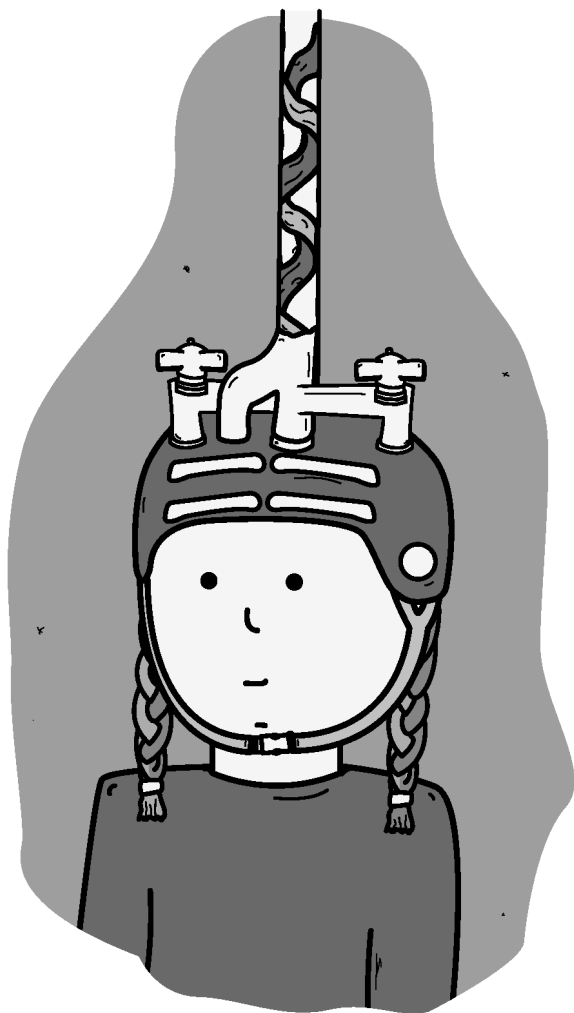
‘I’m fine,’ I finally answer.

‘OK,’ says Mum, drawing out each syllable and raising one eyebrow.

‘Are *you* OK?’ I pant at her. ‘No baby yet?’

We all look at Mum’s utterly massive belly and we laugh.

‘Not quite yet,’ says Mum.





TRISHA LEE

Trisha grew up in Dursley, Gloucestershire where she was constantly getting into trouble for fidgeting and making up stories. These attributes served her well and she ended up with a theatre degree from Dartington College of Arts. Spending several years on the cabaret circuit, she regularly supported John Cooper Clarke and Merseyside poet Adrian Henry. Passionate about creative education, Trisha wrote *Princesses, Dragons and Helicopter Stories*, about an approach to storytelling that she pioneered in the UK. The book is a bestseller and was shortlisted for the UKLA Academic Book of the Year 2016. She has worked with children all over the world, and their voices inspired her to write *The Story Tap*.

About *The Story Tap*

Amelia Appleby lives her life through fantasy, just like her storytelling dad. But he's dead, squashed by an enormous book of bedtime stories.

To keep her safe, Mum enrolls Amelia at the Shaw Academy of Hard Facts, a school where fiction is banned and facts make you dizzy. Amelia hasn't been there long when she discovers the dreadful Story Tap and begins to unravel the truth behind the immaculately behaved children in their grey uniforms.

Caught in a dangerous adventure, Amelia has only the power of story, but is that enough to save everyone when time is running out?

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THE STORY TAP

Chapter One

Squashed

It started with a book.

Bertie Braithwaite's Gargantuan Book of Bedtime Stories.

Probably the largest book in the whole wide world, which unfortunately for Abraham Appleby, hadn't been put away properly on the library shelf.

The following morning, the tragic accident was on the front page of every newspaper in the country.

STORYTELLER SQUASHED

There were other stories beneath it, including:

Triplee Triplets Still Missing

And

Chance Chocolate Announces New Brand

But all Amelia Appleby cared about was the headline.

Her dad was dead.

Chapter Two

The Grey Envelope

‘Die, Die, Die!’ yelled Amelia Appleby, balancing on the branch of a tree, and thrusting her broomstick sword into the heart of an imaginary goblin. She tried not to think about Dad. It had been four long weeks since the funeral, and everyone kept saying things would soon be back to normal.

They weren’t.

They’d never be normal again.

Pushing the thought from her mind, Amelia readied herself to launch into a daring jump through the air, followed by a blood-curdling scream that would protect the council estate from ogres, when the postman walked down the street. He stopped outside her front door and reached into his bag just as a cloud moved in front of the sun.

The sky darkened.

Amelia shivered. Supposing it was another sympathy card and Mum started crying again?

The postman took out a square grey envelope. It didn’t look like a sympathy card. But what was it?

‘I’ve never seen a grey envelope before,’ said Amelia plonking herself down on the branch and dangling her legs over the edge. ‘If brown envelopes contain bills and white envelopes contain sympathy cards, what do grey ones contain?’

‘Change,’ said the postman looking up at her. ‘Always change.’ Without saying another word, he popped the envelope through her letterbox and walked away.

Amelia scrambled up the tree, watching him until he disappeared and wondering what he meant.

She was the image of her father: a splatter of freckles and a tangle of wild red hair that even Mum couldn’t control, no matter how many hair ties she used. Higher and higher Amelia rose, no longer a girl climbing a tree but an explorer hiking into the unknown.

Later, she returned to the ground and flew on her broomstick across the small patch of grass in front of her house chased by a tribe of goblins.

Amelia was about to release a spell from her fingertips when Mum glanced out through the net curtains.

‘In,’ she shouted a few seconds later, holding the door open just wide enough for Amelia to squeeze through. ‘I said, No Stories.’

Mum was still in her dressing gown. Her hair hung limply around her face like faded brown string that had been left too long in the rain. Flecks of sadness flickered across her eyes and these days she was either angry or tearful.

Amelia slipped past her and into the front room without looking up. ‘There’s a letter for you,’ she said, grateful for the distraction.

The envelope lay on the mat, begging to be rescued. It was a perfect square of grey paper, with the address printed in white. Amelia pushed a stray clump of red hair behind her ear and reached down to pick it up.

‘Don’t touch it!’ yelled Mum, grabbing hold of Amelia’s hand and staring at the grey envelope as if it were a snake. ‘I’m not ready to open it.’

Amelia had no idea what she was talking about. How could you not be ready to open an envelope?

‘Is it from the bank?’ she asked.

‘No.’

‘Is it from the doctor?’

‘No.’

‘Is it from Dad’s sister, Mad Aunt Edith?’

‘No.’

‘That’s a shame, I like her. We make up stories together. Oops.’ Amelia bit her lip. The last thing she needed was to make Mum even crosser. ‘What I meant to say is, we used to make up stories together, but not any more. Anyway, she lives too far away. If it’s not from Mad Aunt Edith, then who sent it?’

‘Amelia, leave it. I don’t want to read it. Not yet. It’s for the best.’

Mum had been saying that a lot recently.

A few days after the funeral, she’d locked all Dad’s stories in a wooden chest and moved them to the attic. Then she’d locked the boxroom where he used to write. She put both keys on a chain around her neck and told Amelia that she must never them.

‘It’s for the best,’ she said.

Next, she’d made Amelia promise that she would stop making up stories.

Not in the house,

not in the garden,

not in the street.

NEVER.

Not even a miniature, one-sentence story that accidentally slipped out when Amelia didn't expect it. Certainly not. No way.

'Definitely for the best.'

And a little while after that, she took all of Amelia's storybooks and gave them to a charity shop.

'It really is for the best.'

Ever since Dad died, Mum had invented her own meaning for the word best.

The letter stayed on the mat.

It was still there the next morning, and the next evening and at breakfast the next day.

School time, home time, meal time, bedtime, every time Amelia walked past the front door, the letter was still there. Others came and went, but this one stayed where it fell.

'Are you ready to open it now?' Amelia asked on her way out the door each morning.

'Mum, it's still here,' she said on her way in.

The longer the letter lay on the mat, the more it played on Amelia's mind. Perhaps it was from a long-lost relative, inviting her and Mum to fly to America and audition for a part in a film. Or supposing it was from a zoo who couldn't look after their animals and needed to find them new homes. Or, maybe they'd won a million pounds, and they could spend it on whatever they liked.

After one week and two days, Amelia's imagination could bear it no longer. She'd already pictured herself agreeing to star in a Hollywood movie, and adopting a penguin and buying a castle by the sea.

She had to know who the letter was from.

Arriving home from school, Amelia lingered by the front door gathering

her courage. Taking a deep breath, she picked up the grey envelope, tore it open and thrust it into Mum's hand.

There was a long pause.

Gulp.

Amelia tried to make light of it.

'It might be good news. Maybe it's a map that will lead us to buried treasure, or a letter from the Queen inviting us to tea.'

Mum's face changed as quickly as the sky in spring.

'Stop. Making. Up. Stories. You promised.'

If only Amelia could magic herself back in time, place herself under a speaking curse and hand over the letter without saying a word. If only Mum hadn't made her promise. Amelia hated breaking promises, but it wasn't her fault. She never should have made that promise in the first place. How could the daughter of a storyteller ever stop making up stories?

And now Mum was unfolding the strange grey letter, the letter Amelia had been so curious about, but rather than feeling excited, she was standing in a cloud of dread. This was going to end badly.

Mum's left eye twitched.

Amelia crossed her fingers, just like Dad used to, and sucked on a strand of red hair that had escaped from one of her plaits.

Mum read. *Amelia waited.*

Reading. *Waiting.*

Reading. *Waiting.*

Finally, Mum folded the letter, pressed down on each seam and placed it back in the envelope.

'We need to talk,' she said. Amelia hated those words. 'I should have opened this sooner. I was hoping it would go away. The people who sent it approached me at the funeral. I knew your dad wouldn't approve, but I was upset. It seemed like a good idea. We have to go through with it. I signed a contract.'

'Contract?' What was Mum talking about? The dread swirled around Amelia, turning her mouth dry.

'You're starting a new school.'

'What?' Amelia spat the hair out of her mouth, wishing she'd left the envelope where she'd found it. 'I don't need a new school. I like the one I've got.'

Mum's cheeks turned red, and she avoided Amelia's eyes. 'A school without stories,' she mumbled.

'No! You wouldn't do that to me. You couldn't. What would Dad say?'

Dad wouldn't say anything.

Dad would never say anything again. The realisation rushed into Amelia and smashed around her skull making her dizzy.

'Since Abraham. Since your dad.' Mum hesitated, and the dark silence, the one that always arrived with any mention of Dad, tapped gently at the door. 'Since. Then. I have tried to stop you imitating him. But every day. Every made-up story. Every time you look at me out of those same forget-me-not eyes. Amelia, you're becoming more like him than ever. You even sound like him. I can't let that happen. I can't lose you as well. Your father was becoming fanatical.'

Mum stopped talking, and the silence crept closer.

She was right. Dad had been acting weird in the weeks before his death. Even Amelia had noticed it. He'd seemed distracted and was constantly searching his storybooks and muttering to himself.

'Stories are dangerous,' continued Mum. 'They killed him.'

'A book killed him.'

'A storybook. There's a meeting at the school on Friday. I'll take the day off work. It'll make everything better.'

'No, it won't,' said Amelia. 'How can a school make everything better? I wish Dad were here. He wouldn't let me go to a school where there were no stories. If I were upset, he would tell me a story, not run away from them like you're doing. You're jealous. You never liked how close we were. You never loved stories like we did. Just cos you can't tell them as well as him.'

As soon as the words flew out of her mouth, Amelia wished she could swallow them back.

Mum's eyes narrowed into tiny slits. Her neck went red and bumpy.

'You know how hard it's been,' she said. Her voice croaked with tears. It would have been easier if she'd shouted.

'Please don't do this,' said Amelia. 'I won't make up stories again. I promise.'

Mum shook her head.

'You're going to a new school, and that's the end of it. It's for the best.'

Chapter Three
In Times of Need

Amelia paced up and down the front room, arms crossed, teeth grinding. Mum had no right to send her to a new school. Not now, not with everything that had happened. It wasn't fair.

If only Dad were alive.
He'd know what to do.

All Amelia wanted was to sit in the boxroom where he used to write, curl up in his chair and pretend things were back to normal. She hadn't told Mum she had a key. *It was for the best.* Dad had given it to her when she was pretending to be a princess locked in a tower and he'd never asked for it back.

Maybe now was the time to use it.

Amelia waited for the sound of pans clattering in the kitchen before tiptoeing down the hall. She padded softly up the stairs stretching her legs to cover two steps at a time.

Racing across the corridor, she stepped over the creaky floorboard in front of her bedroom and stopped outside the boxroom. Without making a sound, Amelia eased up the hall carpet pulling it away from the wall. The key was still underneath, exactly where she'd left it.

Pushing the carpet back into place, she put the key in the lock, turned the handle, opened the door and froze.

Mum had been busy since Amelia had seen it last.

The heart of the room had been stolen.

The shelves were empty. Dad's writing desk had been cleared, his stories locked in the attic and the air was thick with the scent of furniture polish mixed with a hint of ancient books that even Mum couldn't scrub from the walls.

The curtains were shut as if they were hiding a secret and light fought its way through them sending grains of sunshine flickering across Dad's empty chair. Amelia stroked her hand across it. She slid herself down into the brown leather seat and let the arms enclose her.

Brushing against the surface of the desk, she felt for the occasional scratch

where Dad had pressed too hard when he was writing and traced her finger around the lonely circle that had been left by his coffee cup.

She'd been circling the stain for a while when something caught her eye. A white triangle of card trapped between the desk and the wall.

Once Amelia noticed it, she couldn't work out why she hadn't seen it before, why Mum hadn't seen it when she was cleaning.

Her hand shook. It was something of Dad's. Something that Mum hadn't cleared.

Glancing at the door, just to make sure Mum didn't burst in, Amelia turned her attention back to the card. Her fingers tightened around it.

GRADUALLY,

CAREFULLY,

SHE WIGGLED IT FREE.

It was an oblong shape, the type Dad used when he wrote the bare bones of a story. His Thinking Pages. Amelia teased the last bit of it from behind the desk.

It was blank.

She crossed her fingers just like Dad did when he was acting brave, hoping there was something written on the other side.

Hardly able to breathe, she flipped it over.

The back was covered in writing. Amelia recognised it immediately. It was the handwritten sign that used to hang above Dad's desk. The one he kept to remind him; his motto.

She closed her eyes, and in her head, she could hear Dad's voice.

He was reading it out loud to her.

IN TIMES OF NEED:

Choose the path where you least want to tread,

For a world of adventure exists within dread.





CATHRYN NORRIS

From the moment a Tintin book flew off the library shelf and into Cathryn's arms, she discovered a thirst for travel and a love for adventure stories. When she isn't exploring new places, she lives in Somerset with her husband, two daughters, a supercilious cat, a paranoid border collie and a Tiger Moth aeroplane.

Cathryn writes both at home and in a peaceful workplace above an art gallery. When she doesn't write, she's a teaching assistant in a primary school, and feels lucky to mentor children in a small writing group.

About *Tiger Moth*

A light-hearted contemporary story where ordinary children have an extraordinary adventure.

Beatrice's rivals give her a hard time at school, but life improves when her nanna buys a share in a 1930s Tiger Moth aeroplane. Bea has flying lessons and becomes an excellent pilot. Inspired by the Dunkirk Spirit, Beatrice and best friend Gabe embark on an adventure, but things spiral out of control when a trip to France doesn't go as planned. The journey takes them into a web of intrigue and deceit. It's a journey where the past becomes real; a journey where Beatrice discovers how strong she can be.

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TIGER MOTH

Chapter One

I had my feet up on the dashboard and a bag of crisps balanced on my skirt. School had been rubbish as usual; I needed cheering up. To make matters worse, my tongue was stinging because I'd licked all the salt and vinegar off my crisps.

'It's not far now Beatrice,' said Nanna Dee, leaning forward and wiping the dirty windscreen with her silk scarf. 'You're in for a treat.'

We were in the middle of nowhere, zooming along the country lanes in her old, banged-out sports car. 'Where are we going, Nanna Dee?' I loved it when she took me out after school and I couldn't wait to hear what my surprise was. It was better than sitting on my own waiting for Mum and Dad to get back from work.

'Is it the cinema?' I asked. 'I really want to see *Zombie Downloaded*.' But I guess neither the film nor lying about my age was Nanna's kind of thing. She just shook her head and smirked because she knew the secret, and I didn't.

It was November, so the sky was already turning dark. Nanna switched on the headlights and the beam flooded the road ahead of us. I closed my eyes and breathed in the smell of old car leather and the scent of stale perfume on her fake fur coat. She'd stuffed it down by my feet and I kept thinking it was a cat or something.

The car bounced over some speed bumps, spoiling my one and only moment of chillaxing. I wished Nanna would drive a bit slower. The springs from the worn-out seat poked into my backside and I wiggled around trying to get comfortable.

Eventually we came to a stop.

‘Get out and open the gate then, Beaswax,’ said Nanna as she pulled on the handbrake. I opened the door, but the car started to roll back.

‘Nanna!’ I frowned at her. ‘You need to get that brake fixed!’

‘Oh grief!’ She thrust her heeled boot down on the foot brake and the car stopped rolling. I stepped out and slammed the door behind me. The place was deserted. A stretch of grass lay to the right, and down the end of a bumpy road were a number of massive garage-like buildings.

‘Are you sure about this?’ I shouted through the closed window. Her orangey lipstick mouth moved, but I couldn’t hear her. I opened the door again. ‘What?’ I said.

‘Pardon, not what darling. And yes. Yes, of course I’m sure. The gate, Honey-Bea, the gate; come along girl.’ She pointed a long red fingernail out in front of her.

‘OK, OK.’ I walked away thinking she was very bossy. The bolt was stiff and my hands were freezing, but eventually I swung the gate open. Nanna Dee drove the car in, and waited for me. I stood on the bottom bar, pushed off with my foot and swung it back. It crashed shut with a metallic thud and I jumped off. ‘What is this place?’ I asked, as I got back into the car and slid into my seat. ‘Some kind of factory?’

‘You’ll see,’ she answered. We drove along and a loud whirring started up from one of the buildings. A few seconds later, a spidery metal plane with shining silver wings appeared.

I stared at her. ‘You brought me to an airport?’

‘An airfield Bea. I knew you’d be excited!’

Excited? Was she having a joke? Nanna clapped her hands together, and the car swerved off the road. With a shriek, she gripped the wheel and spun it into a parking space outside one of the metal buildings. Light streamed out of the huge sliding doors.

I didn’t understand. Planes – seriously? I couldn’t work out why we were there. It was too dark to see them flying.

I was beginning to think this wasn’t a normal trip out.

Nanna undid her seatbelt and leapt from the car with the energy of a five-year-old, her heels click-clacking as she marched across the parking area. A gust of icy wind blew her black cashmere cardigan out behind her; she looked

like a crow. 'Come quickly out of the cold and into the hangar, darling,' she said, as I joined her by the large metal doors.

'Hanger?' I thought of my clothes dangling in the wardrobe.

'Hangar with an "a". It's the name of the building where planes are kept, Honey-Bea.'

'I knew that,' I said, looking away.

I'd never been in a hangar with an 'a' before. It was cold, and the lights were so bright I had to squint at first. Messy workbenches were piled high with tools, tins, wood and pieces of machinery. I was hit by a chemical smell, paint or glue or something. I pinched my nose and breathed through my mouth.

There were four planes in total. A red and white two-seater which looked quite modern; one of those strange open-sided things, that reminded me of a mechanical dragonfly; an ugly black one, stripped down, needing repairing; and a fourth.

The fourth was just an aeroplane but I had to admit it was beautiful.

It had two sets of wings and no roof. It was painted brown and khaki-green on top and yellow underneath. The letters G-ALWS were painted on the side. A wooden propeller was on the nose of the plane and two wheels were attached at the bottom. It was as tall as an ice-cream van and about two cars wide. I put my hand on the wing. 'It's soft!' I said beginning to smile, 'I thought they were made of wood. It looks like wood.'

A tall man, wearing a bandana and dressed in a brown flying suit, popped his head up from the other side of the plane. 'That bit's made of Irish linen,' he said, and, as if to match, he spoke with an Irish accent. 'Want to sit inside?'

I nodded. You bet I did! He came around to our side of the plane, holding some small wooden steps.

'Hello Dusty,' said Nanna, running her fingers through her hair. She's really pretty for a fifty-seven-year-old, what you'd call a glamorous granny.

'Hello Dee,' he winked at her. I reckoned this man must be fifty at least, and definitely too old for flirting. He eventually turned away from her and grinned at me. 'And this must be Beatrice.'

'Hi,' I said. I liked him; he had one of those faces that smiled all over. He showed me how to climb up and where to put my feet so I didn't tear the canvas.

‘So, you’re my new rookie are you?’

‘Rookie?’ What was he on about? I stood on the wing, threw my leg over the side and climbed into the back cockpit. I sunk into the leather seat, and even though I’m tall for my age, I was only just able to see over the top of the door.

‘Sure, my new recruit.’

I didn’t have a clue what he was talking about, but I didn’t care. I was so excited about sitting there.

Nanna was excited as well. ‘Me too!’ she said, and grabbed hold of Dusty’s arm.

He peeled her off and led her to the steps. ‘In you get then.’ He held her hand as she clambered up into the front cockpit.

‘Isn’t she a beauty, Bea?’ said Nanna Dee. ‘She’s a DH82a De Havilland Tiger Moth.’

I knew the plane was old; it was a bit like one of those Spitfires you see at air shows or on the TV. In between my legs was a joystick, and I gave it a wiggle. There were two pedals down by my feet, and I pressed down on them, pretending I was the pilot. ‘Is it from World War Two?’

‘Tiger Moths were used to train pilots, especially during World War Two,’ said Dusty as he watched us. ‘But your mum knows all about that, don’t you Dee?’ He twisted the gold hooped ring hanging from his ear.

‘Oh Dusty, you do flatter me! You know I’m her grandmother!’ said Nanna Dee as she twiddled her blond hair. ‘But yes, I do know all about it. My father flew one.’ The pair exchanged a look. I wondered how Nanna knew Dusty, and why we were there.

I suspected there was more to all this than Nanna was letting on.

Chapter Two

This is War

When I got to school the next day, I couldn’t wait to tell Gabe. He was sitting on the wall outside our class, swinging his legs and letting his heels bang against the bricks. His hair was sticking up at weird angles. He saw me and smiled.

‘Gabe, you’ll never guess what.’

‘What? The school’s closing because of the rubbish teachers?’

I ignored him. ‘Listen. Nanna Dee has bought a share in a Tiger Moth aeroplane.’ I scrambled up on to the wall next to him. ‘She owns half of it.’

‘Which half? The front or the back?’

‘Be serious! I’m not joking. She saw an advert in the paper. My great uncle left her some money in his will, so she used it to buy a plane. I went to see it last night.’

At last I got his attention. He turned to face me, his mouth wide open and his eyes twinkling. ‘Seriously?’ he said. ‘That’s so cool. Can I come and see it?’ He ran his fingers through his hair. ‘What kind of plane is it?’

‘You *have* to come and see it. It’s one of those old-fashioned planes; my great granddad flew one in the war.’ I pulled out the newspaper advert from my rucksack and shoved it in front of him. ‘They were made by a man called Geoffrey De Havilland.’

‘Wow,’ said Gabe.

‘Exactly,’ I said.

‘Are you going to fly in it then, Bea?’

‘I might. I’ll see how Nanna gets on. She’s going up first. On Saturday.’

We both stared at the picture. ‘Isn’t it lush?’ I asked. Gabe turned his head to look at me and smirked.

‘What?’ I said.

‘Beatrice, I’ve never seen you so interested in anything before.’ He tipped his head to one side. ‘Maybe horses. Horses and deciding which way to tie up your hair, like most girls. That’s about all.’ He gave a smirk. I knew he was winding me up.

‘Gabe, that’s sexist. And it’s so not true!’ I smacked his leg and slipped the picture into my bag. ‘I’m interested in loads of things.’ I jumped off the wall, straightened my skirt and dusted off the dirt.

‘Like?’ He raised his eyebrows.

I thought for a while, chewing the inside of my mouth. ‘I like geography and learning about different countries. I want to be a traveller when I grow up. So there.’

‘OK, OK,’ he said with his hands held up in defeat, ‘but you have to admit, you don’t normally like mechanical, engineeringy things do you?’

‘Not normally. But you have to admit, that plane is awesome!’

Gabe nodded. He didn’t have to say anything else.

When we got into class, there was a crowd around the front tables. We chucked our bags on to the nearest desk and rushed over to see what was happening.

I should have guessed: Callum Brooks.

Showing off as usual.

Callum stood there holding up a chunk of rock, like an Olympic winner waving a trophy in the air (except he’d never be an Olympian, he was too much of a slob).

‘It’s volcanic rock from Mount Etna,’ he said, in his stuck-up voice. His squinty brown eyes darted from one face to another. ‘We went there at half term, it’s in Sicily. Sicily is an island off Italy.’ He caught my eye and we glared at each other for a few seconds, his mouth curled up at one end in an ugly sneer.

Most of the class wanted to see what he’d brought in. I could tell he was loving the attention, answering all their questions.

‘Cool!’

‘Can I hold it?’

‘Is it radioactive?’

I didn’t think it was even that great; it was only a dirty old stone. I caught Gabe’s eye. He shook his head and scowled. Since the beginning of primary school we’d been in competition: Callum Brooks, Octavia Hillman-Burgess and William Pritchard – (collectively known as COW) against Gabe and me (Gabriel and Bea = Team GB). But now we were in Year 6, things were getting nasty.

‘Here we go again,’ whispered Gabe. ‘It’s just like when Callum brought in that Roman coin from Bath last term. He thought he was so cool.’

‘Yeah, and it wasn’t that good,’ I said. ‘It was really small.’

I felt warm breath on the back of my neck. I looked over my shoulder. William Pritchard had crept up behind us. He put his mouth close up to our ears and hissed: ‘Yeah, but he went to a posh hotel in Bath, and that’s more than you’ll ever do.’

‘You don’t know anything about where we go.’ I took a step away from him. ‘Just leave us alone.’

‘Yeah, Pritchard,’ said Gabe. ‘Callum’s not the only one who’s visited Bath, I’ve been there too. Just because I didn’t bring back a stupid coin doesn’t mean –’

‘Yeah, but you didn’t go to the Apple Store ...’

‘I drank the healing water from the Roman’s spa fountain.’ The tips of Gabe’s ears went red, but he kept his cool and stared William right in the eye.

‘Yeah, but did you go to the Apple Store Summer Camp and design a robot?’ asked Will.

‘No.’ Gabe’s eyes narrowed.

‘That, Gabriel-la, is where you’re the loser.’





LESLEY PARR

Lesley was born in South Wales, at the bottom of a valley just across from a river and quite near a seaside steelworks. Now she lives in the middle of England (almost as far from the sea as it's possible to get) with her husband and their cat, Angharad, who likes to get in the way when Lesley is writing.

Lesley has worked as a nanny, a shop assistant and a primary school teacher. These days she shares her time between supply teaching and writing. Lesley is strongly influenced by growing up in an industrial town. In her work she explores the beauty that exists in the landscapes of the dark industries of Wales.

About *Hollow*

Britain 1939. War. Evacuation.

London lad Jimmy is evacuated to a South Wales mining village. Forced to live with strangers in a green and quiet place, he feels lost.

Then he finds a human skull hidden in a hollow tree.

Who put it there? For what reason? With younger brother Ronnie and new friend Florence, Jimmy sets out to discover the secrets that lie with the skull.

As Jimmy pieces together the truth, those secrets, as long hidden as the bones, rise to the surface ...

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HOLLOW

Chapter One

A Different Type of Countryside

There isn't as much sky as I thought there'd be. And what I can see is clear and blue, not the never-ending rainclouds we were told we'd get in Wales.

The guard blows his whistle and the train hoots back. I watch it pull away and my heart squeezes a bit and I want to get back on. I don't know why, it's not as if it's going back to London.

We've been through three stations today – from Paddington to Cardiff Central to here. This one's tiny with only one platform. It's like our lives are shrinking. I straighten Ronnie's tag and we join the back of the line.

Dad said we'd be able to see for miles and miles in the countryside. He got us some library books with pictures of fields and hedgerows with little houses dotted around. But this isn't like that.

Massive, looming bulges of land – mountains I suppose – have stolen most of the sky. I turn on the spot. They're all around, as though the village was dropped into the middle of a big, fat cushion. Before now, the closest thing to a mountain I'd ever seen was a sand dune on Camber Sands. And it wasn't green. And it didn't have houses stuck on the side of it.

There's a tug at my sleeve. Ronnie's looking at me, eyes wide and teary. I lean down so he can whisper in my ear.

'This isn't like the pictures,' he says, sniffing.

'I know.'

'But Dad said –'

‘He didn’t know, did he? He didn’t know we were coming here. He just knew it wasn’t a city.’ I look around again. ‘There must be different types of countryside.’

‘Well this is the wrong type.’ Ronnie sticks out his bottom lip.

This is all I need – a sulky little brother. No one will pick us if he looks a proper misery guts.

‘Be quiet and try to look like a nice boy,’ I say, making sure the string of his gas mask box sits properly on his shoulder. ‘Nice and smart.’

I look over his head to the far end of the platform. The smoke’s thinning, but it still stings my eyes and catches in my throat. I love it. It’s a smell of coal and heat and power. The name on the station sign is clear now:

LLANBRYN

Funny word. Too many letters.

Here we are, a wriggling, squiggling line of Stonehill Juniors. Duff’s at the front with his little sister. She’s even younger than Ronnie; too young to understand why she’s here. I can’t see many faces; most are looking at our teacher, Miss Phillips. Some of us seem excited, some curious, but I bet everyone’s nervous. Even the ones pretending not to be. Maybe even Duff.

Ronnie’s crying again. It’s all right for little brothers to cry but big brothers have to be the brave ones. Not that I would cry, anyway. I’m eleven. He watches sadly as a guard puts our suitcases in a pile near the gate at the end of the platform.

‘I want my Dinky van,’ he splutters.

‘You can’t have it. It’s packed. You know what Nan said.’

‘But –’

‘Ronnie, it’s safe,’ I say. ‘Remember how well you wrapped it in your pyjamas? You did a really good job there.’

He nods and blinks back more tears. I know he’s trying to be brave, too.

Next to the guard, Miss Phillips is talking to a man and a woman. The man is tall and has a thick overcoat buttoned over his large stomach, and he’s got the biggest moustache I’ve ever seen. The woman’s all done up in her Sunday best. She’s walking down the line now, giving out custard creams as she counts us. When she gives one to Lillian Baker, Lillian thanks her for having us in their village. Duff’s close enough to pull her plaits but he doesn’t.

He's not usually worried about getting into trouble; perhaps he *is* nervous. I bet Lillian Baker will get picked first. She's got long, dark hair and her socks never fall down and all the grownups say she's pretty.

When the woman hands a custard cream to Ronnie, she stops and wipes away his tears with her hankie. She's got a metal badge pinned to her coat that says *WVS Housewives Service Identification*.

'What's your name?' she asks. Ronnie gulps and says nothing.

Now that she's close, I can smell lavender and peppermints. She looks at me but I look away. She lifts Ronnie's tag and says, 'Ronald, now that's one of my favourite names, that is.'

'We call him Ronnie,' I say, a bit harder than I mean to.

But she keeps on smiling. 'And you're a Travers, too,' she says, eyeing my tag. 'Ronnie's brother is it? So are you a James or a Jimmy?'

'Jimmy.'

'All right then,' she says. She gives me a custard cream and moves back up the line.

'She smells like Nan,' Ronnie murmurs. His lip's wobbling again so I take his hand and give it a squeeze, just like Dad would do.

'Eat your biscuit,' I say.

Miss Phillips claps her hands and calls out to us. We all go quiet.

'These nice people are Mr and Mrs Bevan,' she shouts down the platform. 'They are here to take us up to the institute.'

I wonder what an institute is. It sounds grim.

'Welcome to Llanbryn!' Mr Bevan booms. I'm not surprised he booms. He looks like a boomer.

I glance at the sign again. It doesn't look like it says what *he* just said. Ronnie's trying to copy him, screwing up his face, trying to make his mouth fit around the letters.

'Lll ... clll ... claaa ...'

'Stop it,' I whisper. 'No one will pick us if they think you're simple.'

'Don't worry about your cases,' Mr Bevan says. 'We've got men taking them up for you.'

I feel Ronnie's grip tighten on my hand and I know he's thinking about his Dinky van again. These men – whoever they are – had better be careful with his case. If he loses that van, he won't stop crying till the war ends.

We set off, our gas mask boxes bumping against us, Mrs Bevan and Miss Phillips chatting at the head of the line. Mr Bevan waits as we cross the road outside the station then joins Ronnie and me at the back.

‘Are you ready for your adventure, boys?’ he beams.

What’s he talking about? Adventures happen in jungles or on raging rivers or in the Wild West. Not here. Not in Wales with a whimpering little brother and a custard cream.

Ronnie’s stopped crying so that’s something. He’s twisted the top off his biscuit and is licking the creamy bit.

‘Are we going up there?’ he asks, his eyes darting nervously from Mr Bevan to the mountainside houses.

‘We are.’ Mr Bevan nods.

‘It’s a long way up,’ Ronnie says.

Mr Bevan turns to the houses and tilts his head from side to side. A big grin breaks out on his face; stretching his moustache and making him look like a happy walrus.

‘Not for a big, strong boy like you!’

Ronnie beams.

‘Come on then!’ Mr Bevan ruffles Ronnie’s hair. I smooth it down again. No one will pick us if he looks a proper mess.

We start to climb a wide track. Bushes and trees grow on either side. Ronnie asks if it’s a forest. I catch Mr Bevan’s eye and see his moustache twitch over his smile.

‘Stop asking stupid questions,’ I hiss in Ronnie’s ear.

Then, up ahead, Duff’s little sister drops her custard cream. She stops dead and just stays there until her face turns a greyish shade of blue. I’ve seen her do this lots of times before, when we’ve been out playing, but Mr Bevan looks horrified.

‘What’s she doing?’ he asks. He’s a bit sweaty and not just from the climb. It probably won’t look good if one of their evacuees kicks the bucket before we even get to the *institute*.

‘Holding her breath,’ I answer. ‘She can only do it for so long, then she really starts.’

‘Starts what?’

‘Wait for it.’

I don't know if it's got anything to do with the mountains curving all round us, but her wails are even louder here, not far off an air raid siren. The two women rush over to Duff's sister and Mrs Bevan opens her handbag. She feels around inside, pulls out a chocolate bar and snaps off a piece.

'Dairy Milk,' Ronnie whines. 'I should've dropped *my* biscuit.'

As we move off, Florence Campbell picks up the custard cream and stuffs it in her pocket. I pretend not to see. I don't think Florence can believe her luck – two biscuits in one day. I bet she's never had two biscuits in her whole life.

We keep climbing until we reach another road. We follow it round the corner until an enormous brown brick building comes into view. It's three storeys high, bulky and strong looking.

'Here we are,' Mr Bevan says, standing in the arched doorway. He looks really proud, like he's showing us Buckingham Palace. 'The Llanbryn Miners Institute.'

I look from Mr Bevan to the institute. They match, the way some people do with their dogs.

'Everyone's in the main hall. They can't wait to see you.'

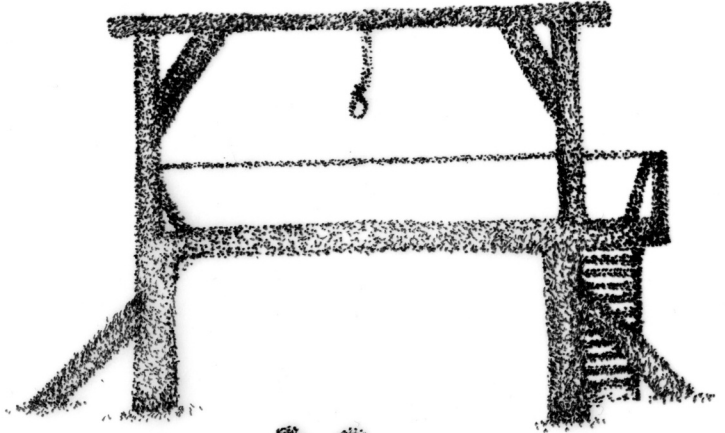
The room is massive, much bigger than our school hall. It's all dark timber, polished up till it shines. It smells of warm wood and dust. There are steps and a raised platform at the far end, a bit like a stage. The room's bursting with people all staring and muttering; surely they can't all want an evacuee? Some must be here to gawp. They sit in rows in front of the stage and, as we walk past them to the raised bit, I can feel the place swallowing us up – my little brother, all the others and me.

We step on to the stage and Ronnie's sticky hand slips into mine.

'Jimmy,' he whispers. 'What if no one picks us?'

I look down at him, at his little cow's lick fringe and big, dopey eyes. 'Don't be daft. Who wouldn't want us?'

I think he believes me. I wish I believed myself.





POOJA PURI

Pooja first tasted publishing success with her short story *Chess* and later graduated from King's College London with a first class degree in English language and literature. Whilst at university she read for a publishing house and has since worked in the education sector. In 2014 she was chosen as a winner of the Ideas Tap Writers' Centre Norwich Inspires competition. Her debut novel, *The Jungle*, was published as the lead title by Black and White's new YA imprint, Ink Road, in March 2017.

About Hattie No-Name and the Queen's Pelican

Hattie, a gutsy pickpocket, lives by her wits on the grimy streets of Tudor London. Everything changes when her best friend, Thomas, is accused of stealing the Queen's Pelican, a most treasured and priceless necklace. Determined to save him from the noose, she soon finds herself amidst an eccentric band of travelling performers. But terrible secrets lurk in the shadows. When Hattie stumbles upon a deadly conspiracy, she must race to save not only her friend, but Queen Elizabeth I herself. The fate of the nation depends on it.

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HATTIE NO-NAME AND THE QUEEN'S PELICAN

Chapter One

Execution Days were good days. As Hattie stood admiring the gathering at Chelmsford Square, she knew that she would have a fine haul of purses. Enough to keep her belly full for the next week. She licked her lips, her palms tingling with a familiar excitement. There was nothing like a death to bring out the crowds and the square was heaving. A knot of hawkers had set up stalls around the edge of the gallows, their voices rising and falling over the din of the crowd.

'Pies! Gooseberry pies!'

'Lucky shillings! Win the love of yer life!'

'Holy stones! Protect yerself from the curse of a witch! Holy stones for a ha-penny!'

'Ale! Sixpence a tankard!'

A group of urchins ran past, a dog yapping at their heels. Street sweepers mingled with gentlemen; butchers with bone-pickers; beggars with merchants; fishwives with ladies. No matter how fine their tastes, even the rich couldn't keep away from a good death.

Hattie threaded her gaze through the crowd, picking out the high from the low. The gentleman strutting in tight-fitting doublets; the women flouncing in skirts which swished across the ground as they walked. They stood out from the common folk like sovereigns on a dung heap. A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. She wondered how many of their girdles she could lighten before the drums began their death song.

She drew out a horn sheath from the pouch on her belt and slipped it on to her thumb. Then she pulled out a small blade and nestled it safely in her

palm. Cutting purses was easy once you knew how. All you needed was a quick hand.

The audience were growing impatient. Boots stamped against the cobbles. Bodies jostled and shoved, fighting for a better view of the scaffold. Nobody noticed her, a thin, clumsy girl, as she tripped or fell between them. No one saw her hand move to their girdles nor did they feel the touch of her blade as it sliced their purse strings. She caught each pouch without a sound, palming its contents to her own before moving on.

A sudden roar erupted from the gathering. Hattie stopped to watch as the accused was brought on to the gallows. She looked young, perhaps only a year or two older than her. Pretty, too.

‘Witch.’

The word started as a low hiss then grew louder, filling the air like a flock of ravens.

‘Witch. Witch. Witch.’

A stone was thrown into the air, narrowly missing the girl’s head. Her eyes widened in panic. For a second, Hattie almost felt sorry for her. Then the girl’s face shifted into an expression of pure hatred.

‘Ye poisonous swag-bellied minnows!’ she screeched. ‘Ye will know no rest! Ye will have no peace!’

A cold finger of fear ran up Hattie’s spine as the curses rained down upon them. She had seen witches executed before. She had watched the mad twitching of their bodies, their limbs shuddering still. But never had she witnessed a spectacle like this. There was a madness about the girl’s look. As if she was possessed by the devil himself.

Almost without thinking, Hattie touched the coins in her pouch. Superstitions were like a web. Once trapped, you’d be left spinning for the rest of your days. Better to trust in something real. Like silver.

‘Death be to yer mammering hasty-witted hearts!’ shrieked the girl, struggling against the executioner as she was dragged to the noose. ‘A plague upon yer black lily-livered souls!’

‘Katherine Teedon.’ The yeoman had to shout to make himself heard. ‘Eighteen years of age. Hereby found guilty of plotting to kill Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth I, through the arts of black magic. May your punishment serve as a warning to all.’

He nodded to the executioner who forced the mask over the girl's face. Hattie could still see her lips moving. As the drums began, the girl twisted her head from side to side. The movement reminded Hattie of the fish writhing when they were brought out of pails on market day. Right before their heads were chopped off.

The executioner placed the noose around the girl's neck. The drumbeat grew faster, the chanting of the spectators rising alongside it.

'Death to the witch! Death to the witch!'

With a last look at the scaffold, Hattie slipped back into the rabble. The moments before an execution were the best time to nip purses; all eyes were on the noose, everybody desperate to remember each horrid detail so that they could share it later.

Around her, the drumbeat swelled. Hattie moved faster, pushing and shoving between the audience. She didn't have long left. Once the spectacle was over, everyone would scatter. It would take only a few minutes before some of them realised they'd been robbed. By then, she would have to be away.

'Scuse me, sir,' said Hattie, stumbling against a well-dressed gentleman. Her blade kissed his purse strings. Before she could tug it clear, the man's hand clamped down across her wrist.

The drumbeat stopped in the same instant. A hush fell across the audience and Hattie knew the witch was dead.

The man looked down at her with an unpleasant smile.

'Stealing, are we?' he hissed. Hattie cried out in pain as he twisted her hand. Her blade fell to the stones and was lost amongst the shuffling of feet. 'You filthy little –'

Hattie didn't wait to hear any more. She tugged her hand free and hurtled through the crowd. Already, the frenzy had started to claim the corpse from the scaffold. Witch or not, the dead girl would fetch a pretty price with the barber-surgeons.

'THIEF!' shouted a voice behind her. 'Alert the watch!'

'Out of my way!' cried Hattie, shoving past the spectators. Her heart thudded in her chest, her breath quick with panic. The punishment for thieving wasn't just a spell in the stocks. She'd lose her hands for sure. Fear gave her speed and she flew out of the audience, coming out on the edge of the square.

‘You, there! Girl!’

She glanced back in time to see a plump, red-faced constable struggling through the crowd towards her. Smirking, she bobbed a curtsey in his direction and sprinted away. Into the warm stink of an alley, where leather-workers sat hunched over belts and shoes, a sharp left into Fish Lane, then out the other side into the teeming huddle of Bow Market.

She looked over her shoulder, but there was no sign of the constable. She grinned in satisfaction. There wasn’t a single officer in London who could keep up with her.

Checking that her pouch was safely secured, she ploughed through the squabble of merchants, ducking between horse-drawn carts and stalls laden with corn and wool.

She moved fast until she’d left the square far behind. At the end of Craggs Street, she paused momentarily to filch a couple of pies. She ate the first as she walked, nibbling at the hot crust, the vegetable filling burning her tongue. The second she stuffed into her pouch for Thomas. He’d be on duty at the Tower and she’d promised to tell him about the execution.

Thomas was an apprentice guardsman. Hattie had known him for years; when her father had been alive, they’d lived next door to each other. It was Thomas who had taught her to whistle with two fingers, Thomas who had shown her the best way to eat a honey cake (from the bottom upwards so you could save the honey till last). In return, she’d taught him how to pick a lock and how to jump across a pile of horse manure so that he could splatter anyone walking past.

Those had been the best times. Hattie’s father had worked as a locksmith; though he’d never brought in much money, it had been enough for the both of them. When he’d died, she’d been forced on to the streets. Thomas’s family had looked after her for a while, then Thomas had become an apprentice at the Tower and they’d moved to a better part of London. Still, the two of them had remained good friends.

Hattie couldn’t help smiling as she thought of her narrow escape with the constable. She could already see Thomas’s eyes growing wide in shock.

‘You need to be careful, Hattie,’ he’d say, tutting like an old woman. ‘One of these days, they’ll bring you to the Tower, and what then, eh?’

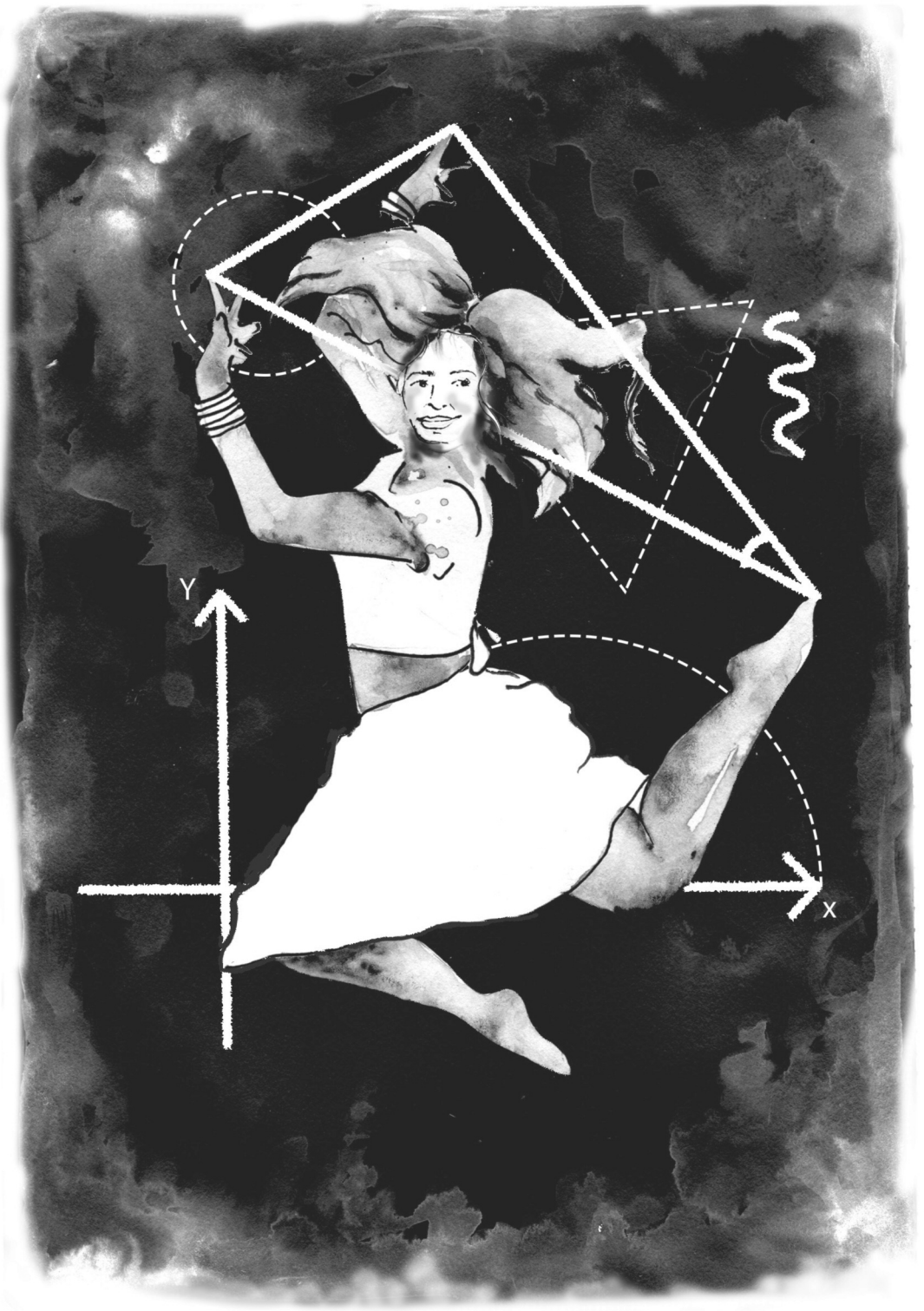
She polished off the last of her pie and crossed into Dunn Street. It was a

fine, sunny afternoon and, in the distance, she could hear the church bell tolling the hour. She'd visit Thomas then head down to Southwark. There were always a few drunken folk milling around the bear pit and she was keen to nip a dozen more purses before—

Out of nowhere, something, a sack maybe, was thrown over her head. A moment later, she felt herself lifted into the air.

'Get off me!' shouted Hattie. She lashed out with her hand and hit something soft. There was a grunt, followed by the creak of wheels.

'For heaven's sake,' said an impatient voice. 'I told you to leave the sack.'





CHITRA SOUNDAR

Chitra Soundar is an Indian-born British writer, storyteller and author of over twenty children's books. As a kid, she danced in a Bollywood movie, performed on stage and disliked maths because it never added up. In the UK, Chitra is published by Walker Books and Otter-Barry Books. Her next two picture books with Lantana Publishing will be out in 2018. She is represented by Abigail Sparrow at SP Agency.

About Tara's Theorem of Friendship

Aswini Tara Iyengar, barely ten, brilliant at maths, besotted with Bollywood dancing, is new to London. All she wants, is to find the One Mutual Friend as per the Theorem of Friendship, and an opportunity to dance on stage without her grandmother Janu, professor of mathematics, finding out.

Tara switches team to maths-hating, animal-crazy Millie Mehta; cheats on maths homework; and picks a fight with the studious lot – and Millie's old friends, so she can dance a Bollywood number on stage. But things go horribly wrong when the music gets mixed up and Grandma Janu turns up in the audience. However, when Tara eventually figures out who the One Mutual Friend is, her new life in London falls into place.

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TARA'S THEOREM OF FRIENDSHIP

Chapter One

The Friendship Theorem

Tara sat up in bed long before her alarm sang the latest Bollywood song. It was the first day of school in a new city, in a new country, without her best friend Farida, for the first time in all her life.

'This time you're going for good?' Farida had asked her when Tara broke the news about moving to London. 'Not just for a holiday?'

'For good' couldn't be a good thing. But would move her far away from Grandma Janu, Appa's mother and a professor of mathematics, whose ambition focussed on making Tara a Cambridge mathematician.

When Tara wanted something badly, she wished on the peacock feather. Often Tara would touch her peacock plume and wish, 'Please get us away from Grandma Janu.' Her wish had come true. But like Amma often said, she had to be careful what she wished for. Grandma Janu lived far away but Tara had to go to a new school with no friends because they had moved.

Tara loved maths; she trusted maths. But she didn't want maths to be her entire life like it had become for Grandma Janu. Tara wanted to become a professional Bollywood dancer and actress one day, just like her mum was when she was little.

Unfortunately, Grandma Janu had banned Tara from watching Bollywood TV or practising Bollywood dancing and, worse, performing on stage when she was in Chennai. In London, since they arrived three months ago, at the start of summer, Tara had used every opportunity to practise her dancing.

Now all Tara needed was a stage performance so she can show off her practice. She was determined to find a way soon.

*

The alarm blasted out the latest song from the movie Pukka Dost, reminding Tara to get ready for school. Farida was her *pukka dost*, her best friend. She had never gone to school without Farida – not even to kindergarten.

‘You’ll find a friend soon,’ Farida had said, last weekend during their video chat. ‘Do you remember the three girls with French plaits from Manickam Street? I go to school with them now. They’re not so bad.’

In Chennai, school had started in June and Farida already had three friends. But Tara didn’t know anyone in the neighbourhood or her new school in London. She needed maths, not luck, to find friends here.

Maths had theorems to predict how numbers worked with each other. Tara planned to use a theorem to find a friend too. And she knew exactly the theorem she needed – the fifth one in the Beginner’s Book of Theorems.

THE FRIENDSHIP THEOREM would show her how to choose a friend.

The Friendship Theorem: *If every pair of people in a class shares exactly ONE MUTUAL FRIEND, then someone is a friend of everyone present.*

If each pair had a person who was a friend with someone, then someone in the class would be connected to all the pairs. The trick would be to find that someone, the ONE MUTUAL FRIEND who connected all of them.

Once Tara figured out who the ONE MUTUAL FRIEND was, she could then become their friend and she would be connected with the rest of the class. But until then, she would be alone in a classroom full of people who already had friends, groups, gangs, secret jokes and secret handshakes. Tara’s stomach churned like Amma’s spice blender.

Theorems can help with calculations, but they were no good for churning stomachs. Only dance can cure her funny tummy.

Tara flicked the remote and her favourite song from the movie Delhi Damaka came on. Tara leapt out of bed in one perfect step for the first routine.

5-6-7-8 -

NACHE-NACHE-MERA DIL. (Dance, dance, my heart).

Tara had made up a dance sequence of her own.

Swing from the bed, move to the left, make a heart with both your hands,

swing your right hand, turn around, make a heart with both your hands, move to the right and jump twice! Repeat!

She had executed that perfectly. The tiny bubbles in her tummy settled down a little.

‘Tara!’ Amma called from downstairs. ‘Get ready for school, princess. You can dance in the evening.’

She still needed to finish the steps to the chorus beats at the end.

5-6-7-8 – Tara waited for the chorus beats.

Tap-tap, move backwards, raise your hands high, do a big sweep, swirl and jump twice.

‘Tara!’ Amma pushed the door open and came in. She should really knock. But if she pointed that out, Amma would say, ‘Deal with it; I didn’t even have a room as a child. I travelled in a makeup trailer with four other girls.’

Amma looked like a Bollywood actress in a Hollywood movie, in her yellow Indian-style kurta on top of skinny jeans.

Tara stopped dancing as the song faded. Amma still stood there with a little smile. ‘Grandma Janu wants to talk to you before you leave for school.’

Tara groaned. She knew what Grandma Janu wanted to talk about. It would be all about academics, maths competitions and winning medals. ‘Medals will get you everywhere,’ Grandma Janu often said. By everywhere though, she meant only Cambridge.

Tara dragged herself to the wardrobe to pull out her uniform. It was going to be one long day.

Chapter Two

Today is the First Day of the Rest of your life.

‘This school uniform is hideous,’ said Tara, coming down the stairs. ‘Who wears this dirty green colour nowadays? This year’s Bollywood colour is burnt orange with a hint of rose.’

Appa looked up from his newspaper. ‘I wore khaki uniform,’ he said. ‘Did me no harm.’

‘It harmed you badly,’ said Tara. His sense of colour competed with his awkward dancing. Sometimes Tara couldn’t believe that he was her dad.

Amma chuckled as she pointed at the TV and asked, ‘Ready for the call with Grandma?’

Tara shrugged. Might as well get it over with.

Amma double-clicked the video icon on the TV and the familiar ring of the video call echoed through the house.

‘Hello Tara, my protege,’ Grandma Janu said. Her face filled the big screen. Why couldn’t they use a regular telephone like normal people? She’d rather not sit straight and watch Grandma Janu’s nose hair twitch.

‘Good morning, Pattima,’ said Tara.

‘Pattima is for old, shuffling women,’ said Grandma Janu. ‘Call me Professor.’

Amma hid in the kitchen and Dad waved to his mother from the breakfast table. ‘Good morning Professor,’ he managed, and she said, ‘Don’t talk with your mouth full, Raghunath.’

Tara fidgeted on the sofa.

‘Tara, my dear,’ started Grandma Janu. ‘Today is the first day of the rest of your life.’

Tara nodded.

‘Focus on your studies. Don’t get distracted.’

By that she meant: *Do maths; don’t even dream about Bollywood dancing.* Tara nodded again.

‘Choose your friends carefully,’ she said. ‘You need to be friends with children who have ambitions and excel in academics.’

Maybe she should tell Grandma about the Friendship Theorem. But she decided against it. The less Grandma knew the better. So, she opted for another big nod.

Dad whispered, ‘Stop nodding and say Yes or No, sweetie.’

Tara nodded to that too.

‘Tara, are you listening to me?’ she asked. ‘Raghunath, stop whispering to her and get ready for work.’

‘Do your best,’ she continued before anyone could get a word in. ‘But if the school there is not good enough, which I doubt it is, Professor Bala will admit you in his boarding school anytime.’

Tara gasped and started to say, ‘No, Grandma ...’

‘Raghunath, I will send you the forms just in case,’ said Grandma Janu. ‘If you ask me, you could have at least chosen a private school with maths coaching. A local school can’t cope with her needs.’

Appa turned to smile, swallowed his toast and said, ‘Sure, mother, send me the forms.’ Tara’s stomach churned even more. How could her own father let her go away?

Professor Bala’s Maths Academy made their students study for sixteen hours a day: maths, maths, maths, some English and some science. But mostly maths. Everyone carried a Book of Theorems and mumbled formulae in their sleep.

The screen bulged with Grandma Janu’s face as she moved closer to the camera. ‘Best of luck, Tara,’ said Grandma. ‘Remember not to have too many distractions. Focus on the academics.’

‘OK Pattima!’ said Tara, deliberately.

‘Bye!’ said Grandma Janu and BOING! The screen swallowed her (sadly not for real) and Tara collapsed on the sofa dramatically. Not even her enemy’s first day of a new school deserved to start like this.

‘She gave me a lecture longer than that when I joined kindergarten,’ said Appa, chuckling.

‘I’m your child, not hers, right?’ said Tara. ‘You can’t send me to that stupid academy.’

‘Language, Tara,’ Amma warned her, as she came out of the kitchen with Tara’s breakfast. ‘Appa will always do what’s best for you.’

‘I want Tara to become a well-rounded person,’ said Appa sitting down next to Tara, bending to tie his shoelaces.

‘You should tell the professor that,’ said Amma.

‘Having said that, I studied in that boarding school for a year and I learnt a lot.’

‘I’m not going back to Chennai,’ said Tara, sitting up. ‘You can’t make me.’

‘We’ll cross the bridge when we come to it.’

‘I don’t even want the bridge to exist,’ said Tara.

‘Have a wonderful first day, sweetie.’ Appa pulled her into a hug and kissed her on the forehead. ‘And I want to hear all about it in the evening.’

‘Time!’ said Amma, pointing at the clock.

‘Remember, today is the first day of the rest of your life,’ said Appa, as he shut the door behind him.

Tara stuck her tongue out at him. But he was gone.

‘Finish your breakfast and let’s get going,’ said Amma.

‘But I don’t want breakfast,’ whispered Tara.

‘Why?’ Amma whispered back.

‘I don’t want to become well rounded,’ said Tara. ‘Bollywood stars are slim and graceful.’

Amma laughed. ‘That’s not what your Appa meant, sweetie,’ she said. ‘Appa wanted you to be a normal kid in a normal school.’

‘Oh!’

‘And dancers should eat well, so they need energy,’ said Amma. ‘Remember, dancing is not about how you look, it’s about how you move.’

Amma sat opposite Tara at the table. ‘Are you nervous?’ she asked.

Tara nodded.

‘I know that a new school in 5th standard is tough.’

‘Year 5, Amma,’ Tara reminded her. ‘They don’t call it 5th standard here.’

‘Yes, Year 5,’ she said. ‘You’ve met Mr Gently already. So it should be a bit easier, OK?’

Just after they had come to London, when Amma had arranged for them to meet her teacher, Mr Mike Gently, and the headteacher and they had shown her around the school.

‘Earth to Tara!’ Amma said, tapping the table.

‘All I need to do is to find the OMF,’ said Tara.

‘What is OMF?’

‘Not what, who,’ said Tara.

‘Who then?’

‘I don’t know,’ Tara said. ‘That’s what I need to find out.’

‘Please find something relaxing to think about,’ said Amma. ‘That usually helps me.’

‘Number 5,’ said Tara. ‘I’m going to think about Number 5.’ Numbers calmed her, just like dancing did.

Amma shook her head as if she could never comprehend how numbers could calm anyone down. ‘Bring your bag down and let’s get going,’ she said. ‘Like Appa and Grandma said, today is the first day of the rest of your life.’

Tara giggled as she ran up the stairs. ‘Not you too!’

Here is a fun fact about 5: it is the only prime number that is the sum of two consecutive prime numbers. $2 + 3 = 5$. And of course, 5 is the only prime number that ends in 5. Obviously! All other numbers that end with 5 are divisible by 5, so they are not prime at all.



LOST PRETTY
#12900
Linda Lougheed
ofpa



KATE WILKINSON

Kate studied English and drama and went to work at BBC Radio 4 in her twenties. Her first job was to write stories for preschool children who tuned into Listening Corner.

She then became a radio producer for many years, recording everything from boiling spaghetti to a poet in a broom cupboard. It was a joy for the most part, but she wanted to get back to writing stories rather than recording them.

The idea for *Edie Winter and the Box of Flits* came to her because in London, where she lives, she spends so much time hanging about on station platforms that she passes the time imagining a parallel world of small people who inhabit the underground.

About Edie Winter and the Box of Flits

Eleven-year-old Edie Winter is lonely. Dumped by her friends as she makes the tricky transition to secondary school, she decides to spend half term helping her dad at the Transport for London Lost Property Office.

Edie is intrigued by a wooden box that was found abandoned on the Bakerloo line. Inside she discovers Impy, a tiny, thumb-sized person with wings.

Impy needs a home for her family and someone to help her find her rebellious brother, Jot, who has gone missing in the underground. Set in contemporary London, *Edie Winter and the Box of Flits* is about being lost and found.

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EDIE WINTER AND THE BOX OF FLITS

Chapter One

12 September. Kensal Green to Elephant and Castle (map of the Bakerloo line). Three umbrellas, one scarf and one wooden box (locked).

Edie noticed the boy first because he had red hair like her own, only his was gelled up into tufted spikes and hers hung down her back in two thick plaits.

A school tie was stuffed into the boy's jacket pocket and his legs were criss-crossed in front of him like oversized scissors. His thumb was skating back and forth across the screen of his phone as the stations on the London underground rattled past the windows behind him.

Edie could tell he had been in secondary school for a couple of years just by the easy way he'd stuffed his tie in his pocket. She looked down at her own school uniform. The jacket was still so big that only the tips of her fingers peeped out of the sleeves.

I might as well have 'Newbie Year Seven' plastered on my forehead, she thought.

The corners of her shirt dug into her neck, and Dad had insisted on looping her school tie into a tight V at the collar.

'Even a storm couldn't dislodge that knot,' he'd said, patting her on the head. 'I looked up how to do it in the Dictionary of Knots.'

If Dad hadn't been sitting there beside her on the train, she would have tugged at that knot until she could pull the tie from her neck and squash it right down to the bottom of her bag.

In another three months she would be twelve. It seemed a long time to wait.

The brakes whistled and screeched as the train arrived at Marylebone station. The carriage doors opened, letting out a breath of warm, fuggy air, and the boy snatched up his rucksack and bounced off, pushing past the passengers who were clustered around the exit.

Eddie could tell that he did this all the time. The London underground didn't faze him. He knew his way around the maze of stations and tracks that snaked right across the city.

So did she.

Years of living with Dad had taught her the names of every line and every station on the whole network. His job at the Transport for London Lost Property Office meant that the tube trains were almost a second home to her. She could even spell Piccadilly without pausing for breath. She wondered if the boy could do that.

PICC-A-DILLY. Two c's, one d and two l's. The doors snapped shut and the train gathered speed as it left the platform.

That was when she saw the box.

It was placed squarely on the seat opposite her, next to where the boy had been sitting. A wooden box about the size of a large shoebox with a lock at the front. Had it belonged to the boy? Eddie couldn't be sure. The boy *had* been sitting beside it, but if it was his, wouldn't he have suddenly remembered it as he stepped on to the platform, and scabbled his way back on to the train to grab it before the tube doors slid shut?

The train rattled on past five more stations.

The box sat there ignored by all the other passengers who were bent over their phones or reading the free newspapers that were left in piles by every station entrance.

Eddie stared at it. If it was a shoebox, why would there be a lock on the front? Maybe there were magic jumping boots inside or a pair of glass slippers?

A woman in a large woollen overcoat sat down beside it and a small dog nosed its way out of the folds of her coat. It sniffed at the box curiously and put its paw out to scratch the lid. Perhaps there were biscuits in there? Shortbread biscuits in different shapes and sizes like you get at Christmas. The dog began to sniff again more energetically.

'Wilfy!'

The woman pulled the dog back into the folds of her coat and moved down the carriage.

Eventually, as the train passed Lambeth North, Edie nudged her dad in the ribs.

‘I think someone’s left that box on the seat.’

Dad looked up from his paper and stared at the seat opposite. The train slowed down and pulled into Elephant and Castle. The carriage began to empty. Elephant and Castle was the end of the line.

‘How long has it been sitting there?’

‘Nine stations,’ said Edie. ‘I counted them.’

‘We’d better take it with us then,’ said Dad. ‘We’ll drop it into the Lost Property Office with these other things.’

He stood up, tucking two forgotten umbrellas under his arm and a red scarf he had found draped on a bench at Kensal Green

‘Can I carry it?’ asked Edie.

‘I suppose so,’ said Dad.

Edie picked up the box and wrapped her arms around it. It was lighter than she had expected. Too light for boots or biscuits. Perhaps it had a hamster inside with a little wheel for exercise, or a gold sovereign wrapped in a velvet bag?

‘Hurry up,’ said Dad.

*

Benedict was waiting at the reception desk. He was nineteen and new to the Lost Property Office team. His hair flopped over his eyes and he wore skinny black jeans and T-shirts with slogans on. Today his T-shirt read: *Always Be Yourself Unless You Can Be A Unicorn.*

He jumped up as Edie and Mr Winter came through the door.

‘Ta-dah!’ he said, as if giving them a welcome fanfare.

‘Just a few more things to register, Benedict,’ said Dad, handing over his trawl of missing things.

Edie clung to the box. ‘Dad, can I look inside?’

She rattled the lid, but it was stuck fast.

‘No time, Edie. Benedict will sort it out.’

‘I can catalogue it,’ said Edie, ‘I know what to do.’

‘No, Edie. It’s late and you have homework to do,’ said Dad. ‘Locked or not, the box doesn’t belong to us. Someone will remember that they’ve left it on the train and probably pick it up tomorrow.’

She lifted it up to hand it over to Benedict. He had already begun to write out a label in big loopy writing: *One wooden box. Locked (no key). Found abandoned on carriage seat. Bakerloo line.*

‘Come on, Edie. Rush hour, remember,’ said Dad, walking towards the door.

Edie wasn’t listening.

As she handed the box over to Benedict, she could have sworn that she felt something fluttering inside.

Chapter Two

25 October. Finsbury Park to Baker Street (map of Circle and Victoria lines).

It was the first day of the autumn half term and Mr Winter had agreed to let Edie help out in the office for the week. She was restless, and her feet were itchy from sitting at a table all morning. She drummed them up and down on the floor and jabbed another sticky barcode label on a damp umbrella.

Edie wanted to know what had happened to the box.

She hadn’t been back to the Lost Property Office for six weeks and she was waiting for Benedict to come in for his shift. Rain dripped from the gutters outside the window, and the lights of the railway signals on the tracks below glistened like jelly sweets as they turned from red to green.

‘Ughh!’ Edie said. She rubbed at the glue on her fingers.

Benedict was very late, and as she waited for him, thoughts about secondary school crowded into her head.

She hated school.

A bluebottle buzzed furiously at the window, zigzagging back and forth as it tried to find its way out. Edie watched it for while as it whirred and fizzed. A small scribble of bad temper.

Edie had the same buzzing feeling inside, as if she, too, wanted to escape.

She stood up to open the window, gently flapping her hand at the fly until it caught a gust of air and zoomed away.

The phone rang and Mr Winter answered it.

‘Yup ... right ... oh dear ... that’s nasty.’

He put the phone down.

‘Poor Benedict. Tripped up and hurt his wrist. He won’t be in until later.’

Eddie felt cross and impatient. Why today of all days was Benedict going to be late?

Mr Winter was busy sorting through mobile phones. The day’s haul of lost property sacks had already slipped down the blue post chutes that ran from the ground floor down to the basement like a helter-skelter. The sacks were now lined up on the trolley beside him. Eddie had an idea.

‘Dad? Can I go and look in the room down the end?’

She loved the storeroom at the end of the corridor. It was where all the oddball, one-off things were stored, and it smelt of barley sugar and old biscuits. If the box hadn’t been claimed by anyone, it was sure to be there.

‘All right, but don’t spend hours,’ said Mr Winter. ‘Look for all the items marked ‘unclaimed’ and stack ’em in a pile ready for the charity shop. Load of old tat, most of it.’

As Eddie walked down the corridor she tried again not to think about school. In the week before half term, her two best friends from primary school had laughed at her new uniform with her baggy jumper and oversized shoes and talked in horrible, scratchy whispers. They’d never made fun of her before. Now they were all in Year Seven, it seemed to matter what you looked like.

‘Why are you still SO small?’ Ness had asked one lunchtime. She was already almost a head taller than Eddie.

‘Did you think getting big shoes would make you grow?’ asked Linny in a strange, sing-song voice. She leant over to Ness to show her a Snapchat picture of a ring of girls laughing and making faces.

Eddie opened her mouth to speak but nothing came out. She felt as if someone had pushed her hard and she was falling backwards off a wall that she had sat on for years. She fiddled with the end of one of her plaits.

‘I can still run the fastest,’ she said.

Ness and Linny looked at her as if she was their annoying younger sister.

‘Not in those shoes you can’t!’ Linny said.

And then they ignored her. They didn't even ask her what she was going to do over half term.

The corridor narrowed and Edie stopped in front of the last door.

She turned the key in the lock and pushed it open, breathing in the familiar, biscuity smell. The florescent strip lights buzzed into life, picking up specks of dust. There were no windows in the storeroom as the walls were covered with shelves that reached from floor to ceiling.

Edie walked along the first shelf, looking for the box, and pulling out any items that were marked with the large red 'unclaimed' labels. The pile grew – first a child's Pokémon rucksack, then a Mickey Mouse moneybox, an Arsenal football flag and an egg whisk.

She quickly scanned the other shelves, hoping to see a corner of wood, but there was nothing.

Edie became distracted by new arrivals. She pressed the alarm button on a penguin-shaped clock to make its wings flap, and plucked at the strings of a purple electric guitar. She was just about to pick up a strange medieval-looking sword, when she heard a tapping sound – sharp and insistent. It was an annoying tap, like a twig against a windowpane on a gusty night.

Edie stopped to listen.

There it was again – tap, tap, tap.

It was coming from somewhere high up.

She dragged a chair across the floor and levered herself up until the top of her head was level with the top shelf. She ran her hands along the surface, feeling her way. Her right hand rested on the soft brown felt of a cowboy hat. She pulled it towards her and spun it to the floor like a Frisbee.

Moving further along, her fingers caught in the oily feathers of a large bird.

'Agh!' she yelled, snatching her hand away as if she had burnt it.

The bird didn't move. Gingerly she felt for the bird's feet. They were firmly glued to a wooden plinth. The bird was stuffed.

She stopped again to listen. The tapping was just up to her right.

Climbing down, she moved the chair along and tried again. Just along from the stuffed bird, her fingers rested on the corners of a wooden box.

She felt certain it was *the* box. Her box. The one she had found on the Bakerloo line. The boy's spiked red hair fluttered across her memory.

Eddie scabbled at it and dragged it towards her. She felt sweat prickling on her forehead as she slid it off the shelf and into her arms.

It felt the same. She could see Benedict's wobbly handwriting on the brown label that was tied to its handle.

She was right. Benedict *had* put it here for safekeeping.

She saw that there was a small pane of glass on each side that she hadn't noticed before. The tapping noise was coming from one of the panes.

Eddie felt scared and excited at the same time. She hadn't been mistaken about that fluttering feeling when she handed over the box to Benedict. There *was* something alive in there. Perhaps it *was* a hamster gnawing and scraping at the wooden sides?

If it was something alive, it would be very hungry.

Gripping the box by the handle to keep it steady, she stepped back down from her chair and sat on it.

The tapping became louder and more frantic.

Eddie held the box up until the pane of glass was level with her face. At first all she could see was a faint yellow glow. It was blurry, as if someone had smeared the glass with grease, but her eyes slowly adjusted.

A tiny creature was beating its fists against the glass. It was about the size of Eddie's thumb. Its hair looked like the fluff on a dandelion and it had wings that were whirring furiously. The creature stopped banging and started to wave wildly at Eddie.

Then, clear as a tiny bell, words began to form.

'I want to come out RIGHT THIS MINUTE!'





DAMARIS YOUNG

Damaris grew up in Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. The *Dream Eater* emerged from her love of African mythology, and the way natural phenomenon can be personified as good or evil. She likes writing fantasy adventure stories and her favourite book is *Beyond the Deepwoods* by Chris Riddell and Paul Stewart. Damaris doesn't like flying but loves to see new places, so she dreams of one day travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway. She lives in Bristol, with her boyfriend and their two dogs, Daisy and Jack.

About The Dream Eater

Twelve-year-old Amaya lives with her toddling brother Kaleb and Granny Uma, near a bamboo forest that is dark and deep. When Kaleb is taken by a dream-eating creature called Baqu, Amaya has three days to rescue her brother before Kaleb's dreams are eaten up and the memory of him disappears. Attaching her axe to her belt, Amaya sets off into the forest, along with her pet goat Titan and the woodcutter's daughter, Mally, who has her own reasons for seeking out Baqu.

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THE DREAM EATER

Chapter One

The Switching Hour

I dived down into the dark part of the water. Like the otters had taught me, I twist-turned into the murky depths. Into the swish and sway of liverwort and lake weed, the green fronds whisper-soft against my skin.

I searched for a rock with my feet. With my toes, I clamped on limpet-tight, while I unlatched the harvesting knife from my weighted belt and got to work.

One, two, three mussels, quick-sliced from their rock nests. I put the shellfish in the bag attached to my belt. Before my lungs started to sting, I shot up towards the surface, where I spat out lake water with its grit and fishy taste and pulled clean air into my lungs.

I squinted upwards to read the sun. It had fallen towards the west, but it was still hot enough to lick the water from my skin. I swam closer to the shoreline and reached down to the bottom of the lake until my toes dug into mud. The bag of freshwater mussels grew heavy as I walked out of the water.

My pet goat greeted me with a wriggled tail. He head-butted me hard enough to almost tip me back into the lake.

'Careful, Titan!' I scolded.

He'd kept himself busy, while I'd been harvesting mussels. Green moss poked out of the corner of his beard. He must have climbed the boulders that lined the lake, to get the plants that grow in the crevices. There wasn't much else to eat.

I looked up at the sky and searched for clouds. Even a whisper of haze could be enough to mean the rains were here at last, but there was nothing but the great and empty blue.

‘The clouds are probably lost,’ I murmured to Titan. ‘Maybe tomorrow, the rains will come and find us.’

Nearby, a spadefoot croaked. The toads liked the cool of the evening; I heard the impatience in its voice.

I’d hung my tunic on an acacia tree to dry. I pulled it on and tied it around my waist with twine. My curly hair dripped water, so I shook my head until I felt dizzy.

I looked for the sun. It was lower to the horizon than I’d first read.

The spadefoot croaked again. Louder this time. Then more toads joined in, until the rattle of their song almost shook the earth under my feet.

It would soon be the Switching Hour, where day traded places with the night.

A panic-flutter woke up in my stomach.

‘Let’s go home, Titan!’ I called out with a fierceness that I knew Titan understood. We were running out of time.

I ran down the trail, the fish bucket bump-bumping against my legs. Through the long grass, I pushed. It grew as high as my shoulder, and I stomped my feet to scare away the grass snakes. I followed the trail until I got to the pastures, where two goats grazed.

Zeus, the colour of milk. Hera, the colour of honey.

I whistled with two fingers in my mouth; shrill as the shriek of an egret.

The goats trotted over. Titan danced around the two older goats, just out of range of Zeus’s horns.

‘We have to hurry!’ I said. I threaded twine through their leather collars and pulled them into a walk.

Faster! I willed them, but goats are stubborn creatures and will only go as fast as they want. I tugged on the twine and tried to get them both into a trot.

The Switching Hour had begun. The sun was setting behind the bamboo forest when I caught sight of smoke curling upwards from behind a thicket of acacia trees, their thorny branches black against the sky, where I could already see the first pinpricks of stars.

It was almost dark now. The rising tide of night had washed away the day.

Granny Uma was waiting for me by the cottage door.

'You're late, Amaya!' she said, her voice scratched with worry. She grabbed the harness rope out of my hand and pushed me towards the open door.

Chapter 2

Lock the Door

While Granny Uma locked Zeus and Hera in the goat shed, I snuck Titan into the cottage. He went straight to the rug near the hearth and curled up. He snuffled and closed his eyes.

I tweaked his tail.

'Lazy goat,' I muttered.

I dropped the fish bucket on to the table with a thump.

A chuckling noise sounded from under the table. I peeked underneath. Kaleb sat plump and upright on the kitchen floor, gnawing on a rind of pumpkin skin. He dropped it as soon as he saw me looking and he stretched upwards, clenching and unclenching his hands.

I bent down and picked him up. I pretended to groan with the weight of him.

'You're getting fat on pumpkin, small brother. Soon, you'll turn into a pumpkin yourself!' I squeezed him tight, and he laughed.

He had a whooping laugh, full of belly sound. He smelt of trampled grass, and soil from the garden.

I wiped the mud from his hands.

'You need a bath,' I said. Kaleb wriggled out of my arms.

The cottage door closed with enough force to shake the dust from the thatch. I squared my shoulders and prepared for one of Granny Uma's angry silences.

It was my responsibility to latch the windows up each night. Locking the outside out. It didn't take long. Our cottage was only one room, with four windows. One set in each thick stone wall. Once the windows were secured, I went and stood next to Granny Uma, ready for the door locking routine.

Granny Uma locked the door. Then I checked it. Then she checked it again, pushing on the bolt to make sure it was secured with the metal clasp.

It was something that we'd done, ever since I was old enough to reach the bolt myself. It always felt silly to keep checking it, when I knew it was locked.

I stifled a yawn. Granny Uma looked at me with dagger-sharp eyes. Her hair had untidied from her braids.

'You're lucky to be on this side of the door, Amaya.'

'I'm sorry.' I tried to say it with heart.

'It's not enough to be sorry, Amaya. You know the dangers. You're twelve summers old.' Granny Uma's voice splintered into an almost-sob that hurt more than words could. 'What if you hadn't made it back in time?'

The floor was all I could look at. Beaten earth polished to a shine by our bare feet.

'Do you think it's a game, staying out as late as you want?' she asked.

I mumbled, 'I was fishing. I forgot to read the sun.' I didn't look up. I knew she wouldn't care about the fish or the mussels. It wasn't a good enough excuse. Getting caught outside after the Switching Hour was a death sentence. Once the Switching Hour was over, the night-creatures roamed.

Granny Uma clicked her tongue.

'Help me with supper,' she said. 'And don't waste time bringing the goats home if you're late. Your life is far more precious than a goat's.'

I glanced at Titan, curled up close to the fire. He looked like a muddy snowball, his white fur all dirty. When Hera rejected him for being birthed sickly small, I had loved him and raised him up strong.

'Hurry, Amaya!' Granny Uma called over from the kitchen table.

From the fishing bucket, I grabbed the bream and laid it out on the wooden board on the table. Selecting the filleting knife, I carved the fish open in one smooth movement.

The insides of the bream spilled out. I slopped the pink and white worm-like entrails into the chum bucket. The knife was sharp, and I chopped off the dead-eyed head with one satisfying slice. I quickly closed the wooden top of the bucket, so that the smell wouldn't fill the room. Tomorrow, I would mix it into the composting heap.

I cut the bream into thumb-sized chunks that would cook easily in the stew. Afterwards, I wiped the knife carefully with the washcloth before putting it back in the high-up wood block, away from Kaleb's grabbing hands.

Fish scales glittered like pearl dust under my fingernails. I waggled them at Kaleb, but he tried to bite my fingers.

‘Bite on your pumpkin, you nippy pup!’ I said. All of his tiny teeth had shoved their way out of his gums, and he was biting everything he could grab on to. Titan had learnt to stay out of his way.

‘Where’s that fish, Amaya? The stew is bubbling,’ Granny Uma said. She dipped a ladle into the iron pot hanging over the fire and slurped a taste. She tutted. ‘Needs more garlic.’

While Granny Uma crushed up another clove, I carried the fish over to the pot and tossed them in with the vegetables. The chunks disappeared under the stew-skin with a gloop.

I looked for Kaleb. He’d clambered up on the stool, stretching for the stew ladle.

‘Come here, pumpkin boy!’ I picked him up and lugged him over to the fireside, where I sat down on the hearth rug and leant against Titan’s warm side, the rumble of his snoring against my back.

Kaleb tried to get my bracelet off my wrist. I unhooked it and dangled it above him. He laughed, reaching up to try and catch it.

I’d made the bracelet with wool dyed blue, green and black. The colours of the sky, the grasslands and the forest, where the night-creatures lived.

The chair creaked as Granny Uma sat down. She passed me a bowl of stew. I spoon-fed Kaleb first and laughed at his gawping mouth.

‘You’ve got the belly of a goat!’ I told him. Granny Uma smiled for the first time since I’d got home. The firelight smoothed out the crags in her face. She looked like Mama.

Mama had gone to the bamboo forest to collect firewood almost a whole year ago. Granny Uma had cried as if Mama was really gone. But I don’t believe that. I knew in my bones that she’s alive. She’ll come back home.

My mama is brave. Braver than me.

Granny Uma caught me watching her. ‘How are the lake levels?’ she asked.

‘Lower than yesterday,’ I replied. I knew the well had started to draw silt along with the water; it wouldn’t be long until it dried up unless the rains appeared soon.

Granny Uma clicked her tongue loudly. She didn’t say anything more

about it, but I knew she was worried, I could see it in the way her mouth went taut as a fishing line.

We finished the stew, using crumbling sorghum bread to soak it up.

With his stomach full, Kaleb fell asleep on my lap. My arm ached with holding up his head, but I didn't want to wake him by moving.

I looked down at his face. His hair was black, like mine, and grew in tight spirals. His eyelashes were long and dark, making shadows on his cheek. His skin glowed like honey. He pursed his lips, as though he was dreaming of milk.

'Time for bed Amaya,' Granny Uma said softly, so as not to wake Kaleb.

I carried him to his wooden cot and put him down. I placed my hand gently on his chest and felt the rise and fall of his sleeping breath.

By the time I'd wrapped myself up in wool blankets and settled down to sleep, Granny Uma was snoring louder than Titan.

Chapter 3

Don't Let the Outside In

I awoke with a start.

My hair and pillow were sweat dampened. I felt it drip, spider-like down my skin. I caught snatches of dreams before they disappeared like mist. Dark hair and darker eyes.

Mama. I'd dreamt of the forest and Mama.

But it wasn't a dream that'd woken me.

It'd been something from outside my dreams.

I sat up and removed the blankets that had become entangled in my legs. I always kicked out fiercely when I have nightmares. Sometimes Granny Uma shakes me awake.

But not tonight. Her snores could still be heard from the other bed.

I listened, breathing quietly.

All I heard was the usual night noises. The skitter of a mouse across the roof beams, and the cricket hum from outside. The churring call of a nightjar sounded from the acacia thicket. *Had that been what had woken me?*

I eased out of bed and tiptoed over to Kaleb's crib. I peered in. Kaleb was asleep, his arms and legs sprawled across the mattress.

I turned to go back to bed.

Then I heard it.

A sound from outside the cottage door.

I stood frozen and listened over my hammering heartbeat.

Something was crying. But it wasn't the sound of an animal.

'A baby!' I whispered in the dark.

I stepped silently across the room, feeling every lump and bump of the beaten earth under my bare feet.

The baby cried out again.

Granny Uma stirred in her sleep. She mumbled and turned over, but she didn't wake.

I reached the cottage door and stopped.

The crying grew louder, as if it *knew* I was nearby. My chest squeezed at the hiccup of misery in its small voice. I thought of Kaleb. When he cried, I always ran to him and picked him up. I kissed the hurt away and wiped his tears.

But it was the rule. Never open the door after the Switching Hour!

The baby cried louder.

Maybe I could just open it and peek out?

I reached for the bolt. The metal was cold.

The crying sounded desperate now. A screaming infant noise.

Never let the outside in! I remembered Granny Uma's warning.

With my hand on the latch, I paused.

I leaned my head against the wood of the door.

My heart beat *thud, thud, thud* in my ear.

No baby cry.

But something else, a different sound. A scratch and scritch against the grain of the door. Nails against wood.

Claws.





OLDER READERS





ELENA ANDERSEN

Elena is Danish born and bred and, if prompted, will talk your ear off about Scandinavian myths and legends. She has spent time living in New Zealand and England, getting her high school and university degrees there. Growing up, her time was divided between martial arts, archery, horse riding, scuba diving and ignoring her schoolwork. Now, her time is divided between writing, making cosplays (she's cool like that) and ignoring real-life responsibilities. The *Vætte Child* is Elena's first novel.

About *The Vætte Child*

Danish teenager Tristan hasn't been close to his twin sister, Aida, for years and knows nothing of the secret double life she lives. But that changes when the school gym burns down and Tristan gets caught in the middle of it. Now he is attached to an ancient grave gift, and with help from his sister and her friends, must find where it belongs before the gift's owner decides to bring havoc upon the world. On their journey, they meet bog elves, nisser and dunkelmen, creatures Tristan only thought existed in fairytales.

But this isn't a fairytale. They have unleashed an evil even older than the Vikings and time is not on their side.

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THE VÆTTE CHILD

Chapter 1

My Sister, the Pyromaniac

It all started the day my twin sister set fire to the school gym. Well, *technically* it wasn't her fault. But I didn't know that yet.

Hi. My name is Tristan Pedersen. I'm fourteen years old, from Odense, Denmark. I play hockey, support my local football club and spend more time playing video games than on my homework. Just your average, everyday teenager, living an ordinary life.

Sounds boring? It was. And it was awesome. Then that changed.

Do you have any siblings? Do they annoy you sometimes?

Have they ever burned down a gym, almost got you poisoned, eaten and burned alive, and then risen an ancient evil, determined to exterminate the human race?

No? Well, I win. My twin sister, Aida, managed that, all during one summer holiday.

Hope your siblings seem better in comparison.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. Let's start over:

It all began with a mind-wreckingly boring maths class in June ...

*

'And as you can see, when the value of A changes, we can determine what X ...'

The numbers and letters danced around on the whiteboard, blending together with the specks of dust, clouding my vision.

Why were we even attempting to learn maths at the end of the school year? Another week and the classroom would be empty. Did our potato-faced teacher honestly think anyone cared by now?

‘On the contrary, to determine the value of B, we must first determine the answer, X ...’

I blinked the spots out of my eyes. Beside me, Magnus was busy taking notes. Across from him, Atif was throwing paper aeroplanes at Simone.

I turned my head towards the window, immediately recognising the person running across the field in a real hurry.

It wasn’t hard to pinpoint the black ponytail or the grey tank top and camouflage jeans combo.

What was Aida doing outside? Why was she running towards the gym?

I kept looking. She reached the gym’s backdoor and pulled it open. Weren’t the doors locked at this hour?

Aida disappeared, closing the door behind her.

Well. That was interesting. What was Aida’s deal?

Maybe I should tell someone. Or check on her myself. See what the hell she was up to. At least make sure she didn’t get into any trouble. She had a knack for that.

No. We were fourteen. Not children any more. Aida wasn’t my responsibility.

Whatever she was up to, it wasn’t my problem.

Besides, it wasn’t like she would want my help anyway.

I turned back to face potato-head, only to realise the whole class was staring at me, potato-head included. He raised a brow, holding out the marker.

‘So, Tristan. You want to come up and solve this or would you rather stay inside the *no doubt* thrilling daydream of yours?’

Well. That didn’t exactly sound like a question.

I rose from my chair and walked up to grab the marker pen from potato-head. He smirked at me, probably thinking I had no idea how to solve his problem.

I looked at the writing on the board:

$$6x - (37-13x) = 21x - (2x-37)$$

OK then. He was right about that.

Hesitantly I brought the pen to the whiteboard, praying to any maths gods out there that they would take mercy on me.

Amazingly, my prayers were answered. I was saved by the bell.

Well, almost. The fire alarm saved me.

‘Calm down!’ Potato-head shouted over the sudden panic. ‘It’s probably just a drill. Find your partners and walk towards the field in a peaceful, orderly line, and leave your bags behind.’

No one was paying him any attention. Bags got slung over shoulders, people grabbed their jackets and books (well, Magnus grabbed his books. Most people weren’t too fussed about saving their homework from a potential fire) and we all headed out the door in groups, chatting along the way.

‘Neat,’ Atif said, as we went downstairs and joined the rest of the school on the playground outside. ‘I totally needed a break too! Perfect timing!’

A girl from a grade above us snorted at his comment.

‘You guys realise it’s not a drill, right?’ she said. ‘Baldy Paul was in our class talking about the exam choices and he had no idea what was happening either.’

‘There’s a real fire?’ Atif shouted, making several people turn to look at him.

‘Yup,’ the girl said. ‘Probably someone smoking in the bathroom or something stupid like that though.’

‘Bet it was Nina from 8A,’ Atif said. ‘Never trust a girl with a nose ring.’

‘I think she heard that,’ Magnus muttered, nodding across the hall of students where Nina was glaring our way. Atif ducked to hide behind me.

We all spilt out the school’s doors, and on to the handball field, about six hundred odd students aged seven to sixteen all gathering around their homeroom teachers.

I glanced over at class 8A, trying to pick out a black ponytail. One of the girls caught my eye and poked her friend in the side, pointing me out.

My stomach rolled uncomfortably.

‘Attention!’ Baldy Paul, the principal, called through his microphone. ‘Attention, everyone! Has somebody seen Aida Pedersen from 8A?’

As one, my classmates turned around to look at me.

I felt my body go numb.

Our teacher made her way over to me, closely followed by the principal.

‘Tristan?’ she asked. ‘Have you seen your sister?’

‘You better spit it out, kid. Where is she?’ Baldy Paul grumbled at me.

Anger bubbled in my stomach. This was just typical. Typical of Aida to skip class at exactly the wrong time, typical that everyone assumed that somehow I was responsible.

I opened my mouth – either to say that I hadn’t seen her or that I knew exactly where she was, I wasn’t sure.

I didn’t have to decide.

A rumble went through the ground, through the air, like thunder, even though the sky was clear. Everybody stopped chattering and looked around in confusion.

Then a crash sounded, so loud people covered their ears. A massive grey dust cloud rose from the gym across the grounds where everyone had gathered.

The roof of the gym had caved in.

We all stared in stunned silence, watching the dust cloud clear, making way for the black smoke, as enormous flames licked out the now open roof.

Then, one by one, the windows along the building shattered, spraying glass far enough that the closest bystanders had to run to avoid it.

That’s when the panic hit. People screamed and *ran*. Baldy Paul led the panicked group, rushing to get the gates open, while students around him started to climb over the fence.

I fought to escape the grab of the crowd. My heart was pounding wildly.

‘Tristan!’ Atif shouted from somewhere, ‘What the hell are you doing?’

‘Aida’s in there.’ It was meant to be a shout. It came out as a whisper.

‘*Tristan no!*’ Magnus shouted, but my feet were already moving.

Aida was in there. My stupid, careless, *moronic* sister had somehow managed to start a fire in the gym, and now she was trapped in there.

I didn’t bother with the doors, just jumped through one of the already broken windows. As I grabbed the windowsill with my right hand, the broken glass cut the skin, making my hand bleed. I hissed in pain, but couldn’t focus on it.

The fire seemed to have started right in the middle of the huge room – the same place where part of the roof had caved in. Roof tiles and big pieces of plaster had shattered and spread out over the floor, all of them on fire, like hundreds of bonfires.

The grey smoke made it impossible to see too far ahead. I pulled my jumper up over my nose to have some protection from the thick smoke. Blinking tears away from my eyes, I made my way through the gym.

‘AIDA! WHERE ARE YOU?’

I staggered past some plaster blocks, through the smoke. I could hear something. Someone? Through the roaring fire, it was hard to make out.

‘Aida?’ I yelled again, but my voice was already rough from the smoke.

Then I heard it more clearly. A scream.

‘Aida!’ I stumbled through the middle of the place, careful to avoid the parts that were still on fire. My eyes stung, and I could barely breathe. But I had to go on. I continued stumbling through the smoke, through the rubble, tripping with every step.

‘AIDA!’

Maybe she wasn’t in here. Maybe she had escaped.

Maybe I should too.

That’s when I spotted it. A black figure in the smoke.

‘Aida?’ My voice had turned croaky. She wouldn’t be able to hear me.

I carried on, making my way to her. Flames were gaining up on me on both sides. But I was getting closer. The form was taking shape. Just a little more ...

‘AIDA!’ I put in my last bit of effort, and pushed through, jumping past the fire.

The shadow seemed to be getting bigger.

Getting closer.

Then it screamed again, a pained and angry, not entirely human, scream.

Not my sister’s scream.

Everything started shaking, and a push of black smoke hit my face so hard I had to close my eyes and cover my head with my arm. When I looked up again, the figure was gone.

No, not gone. It was above me, soaring in the air. With one more piercing scream, it flew upwards, out the giant hole in the roof.

I was hallucinating. That had to be it. The smoke – it was the smoke, making my brain go crazy.

I needed to get out of there.

As I turned, a wooden pillar fell over, blocking my way, making me

stumble back. The fire welcomed it with delight, and in no time my exit was blocked.

Panic gripped my body.

No. No, no, no, no! I had to get out. I had to.

In my panic I felt my foot get caught on something and I fell, banging my head on the concrete floor. I swore and tried to pull at my leg. It was stuck.

I reached out to grab what had caught my foot, not realising I grabbed it with the hand I had cut on the broken window.

I swore as my wound brushed against something cold. Something ice cold, here, in the middle of a roaring fire. When I touched it, a sharp light flashed before my eyes, and the pain in my hand shot all the way through my body. I gasped for air. My ears were ringing.

Then, just as suddenly, the light, the pain, the ringing, all disappeared. I could move my foot again.

I didn't have time to wonder what had happened. I got to my feet and hurried on through the fire. The flames and smoke seemed to have cleared out. There was an open path straight to the main exit. Why hadn't I seen that before?

I ran as fast as I could, kicked open the door and stumbled outside. I continued until I was far enough away from the fire that it felt safe to collapse against a tree.

A coughing attack hit me, and I spat out mouthful after mouthful of grey spit globs.

I was covered in soot, my shoes were ruined, my hair felt singed. In my hand, I was still clutching the thing my foot had gotten caught on.

I held it up in front of my eyes. It was a cylinder, a bronze tube with a wooden knob on each end. It shone brightly in the sunlight, not dulled by soot like I was.

I turned it in my hand. Something had been engraved on its surface. Little symbols. Runes, maybe? I couldn't tell.

'CWRAHA!'

I looked up. In the tree above sat a black bird, eyeing me suspiciously.

'Hey there,' I said, my voice dry and croaking. 'How are you?'

The bird jumped down to a branch closer to me. I stared at it. From a distance, I had thought it was a crow, but now I realised it was much, much too large.

Though I hadn't seen one in the wild before, I recognised the bird well enough.

A raven.

'Cwraha!' it repeated, flapping its wings.

Several more ravens flew down, perching on different branches. I hadn't realised how many there were.

I knew we had ravens in Denmark, but I hadn't ever seen one on Fyn Island, certainly not in Odense. I didn't think they even came into cities.

'BAH!' I yelled, jumping up and down waving my arms.

The ravens continued to stare at me, unfazed.

'If you had been pigeons in the park that would have terrified you.' I mumbled in frustration.

'Grahahahaha!' The first raven cawed, waving its wings up and down. It sounded like it was laughing at me.

I looked down at the cylinder in my hand. Something about it made my stomach roll. I wasn't sure I wanted to have anything to do with it.

Aiming, I threw the cylinder as hard as I could, back into the fire. As soon as I did, the ravens went berserk. They took flight as one, cawing wildly. One of them grabbed my hood, dragging it over my eyes.

'Let go! Let go, you stupid birdbrain!' I punched after the bird and received several sharp hacks into my fingers for my efforts.

The raven released me and took to the sky. I looked up, just in time to see it join the rest of its group.

Well, this had all been entirely pointless. Aida was safe somewhere far away, completely unaware that I had almost died to save her life.

I wandered home, dejected and covered in soot.

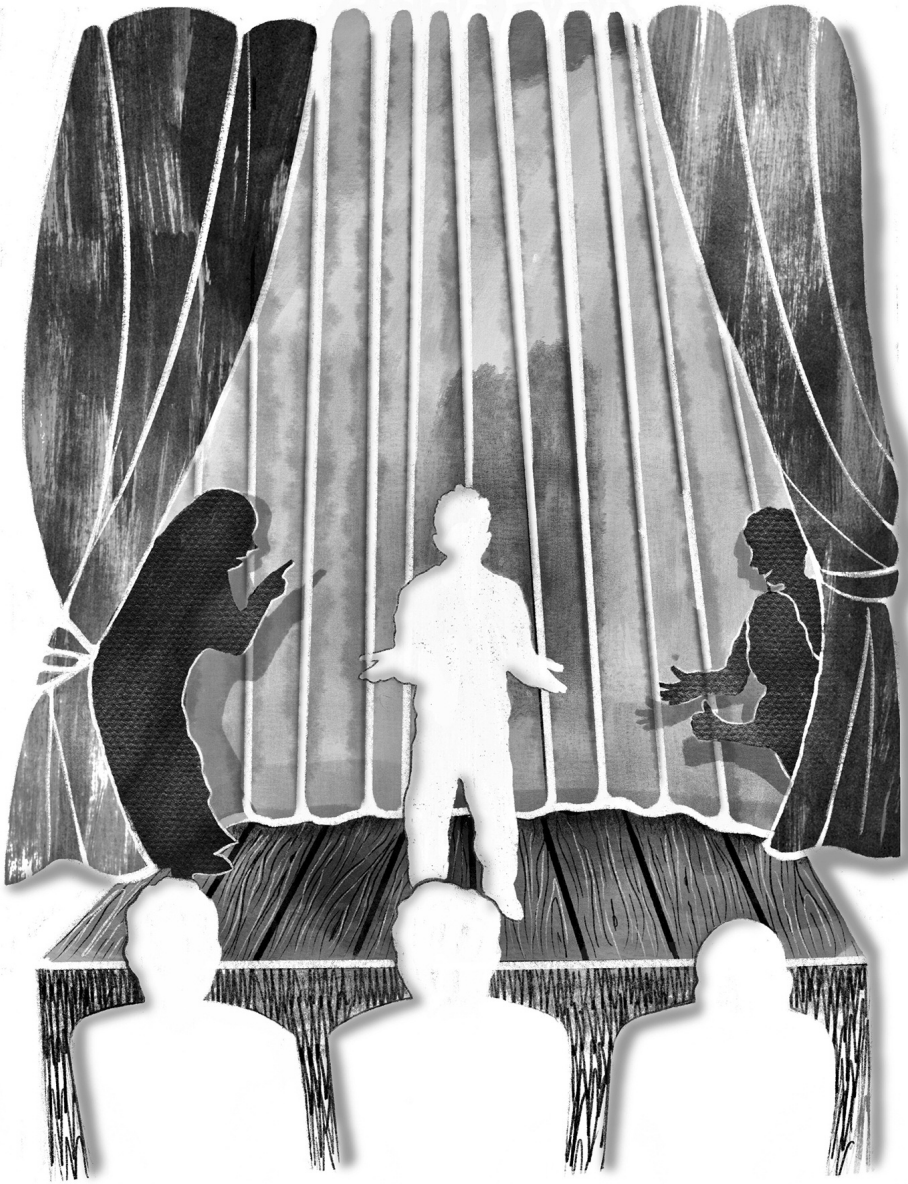
No one was at home when I got in. I went to my room and threw myself on my bed. Something hard stabbed me in the back. Hadn't I had enough pain for today? Now my room was against me too?

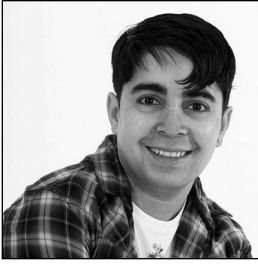
I reached under the covers, my hand grabbing hold of what had hurt me. A shiver ran down my spine.

No way. There was just no way. It couldn't be ...

I pulled it out. The runes were still glowing the same way they had in the fire.

Somehow, somehow, the bronze cylinder had followed me home.





AHMER BASHIR

Within a mile from Bradford City Hall, where political upheavals such as the Salman Rushdie book burning have been photographed, Ahmer discovered his love for books and storytelling inside a toy room in Ward K2, St Luke's Hospital.

Ahmer graduated with a Major Script Prize in Southampton and taught screenwriting at college before setting up a writing circle near Titus Salt's Mill.

Ahmer's live storytelling has been sponsored by Wakefield Literature Festival and Leeds Pride. He first penned Nayil in *A Letter to Mummyjee*.

Ahmer writes meaningful children's stories that reflect diversity in Britain.

About *Diary of the Halal Kid*

Fourteen-year-old Nayil Firdous wants to be in the school play. Mummyjee won't let him act or chill out with friends after school. Nayil worries he'll never have a 'proper friend'.

Mrs Bird, the drama teacher, sets him a challenge to note people's behaviour in a diary.

Naanajee dies. Mummyjee goes to Pakistan.

It's the holy month of Ramadan. Nayil is grieving. But when Tommy turns up at school, and sends his heart racing, Nayil finds himself improvising every day to new situations for his 'proper friend'.

Maybe Mummyjee will never find out he's acting?

DIARY OF THE HALAL KID

Chapter One

I have no friends. Not at home, not at school. But I take a deep breath to dance like I don't care.

I am the wind.

I am the sea.

I float my arms as sailing wings.

The music stops.

Everyone stops. We are listening to our breathing over distant echoes from other classrooms, sweating our buttons off.

They're ignoring me.

This is Studio 2. At the end of every drama lesson we do a dance exercise. Then we sit on the benches in the spectator area, so Mrs Bird can do her 'Picture this scene in your mind' moment.

Dinesh and Lisa sit beside the dickhead. Backstabbers smile at me as if they are saying, *Give us the dirt on Lisa and Dinesh.*

The lights go off.

I sit on a bench at the back.

On my own

Talking to a backstabber hurts you later.

When Mrs Bird draws the long curtain over the tinted window, it becomes so dark you can't see your fingers. Dinesh used to say it gave him the creeps.

We all look the same in the dark, worrying that we are nothing without friends. Dad would say, 'We are breathing shadows worrying about what we can't have. We make ourselves real by talking.'

*

They won't talk to me.

Allah, please can you get my friends to forget what I said? Just do that thing you did, when you created the universe. Say, 'Be' and wipe it from history, innit?

'We are actors when we behave for others,' Mrs Bird says, softly, moving from left to right, without any sound from her shoes. 'Think about a moment when you have acted to please someone. How did you decide what you did? How were you feeling?'

I'm done thinking about it. It's given me a headache.

Someone taps their shoe on the ground.

A sniff.

A cough.

A bench creaks.

A giggle.

More giggles.

Why is it that lads act silly when Kyle sits with Lisa? Lisa won't want me in her GCSE group next year. Drama is ruined. For ever.

'We are beautiful human beings,' says Mrs Bird gently.

This is the moment after the silence.

'We perform considerate behaviours. This Easter, I want you to make notes about behaviours. Observe those around you ...'

The bell erupts so loudly, bums jolt benches. Ringing vibrates inside my ears. Fluorescent lights buzz on yellow.

Shoes scrape as everyone files towards the stairs.

'9AQ have a great Easter! Kyle and Nayil stay behind,' shouts Mrs Bird.

I sit back down.

Dinesh picks up his school bag from the bench. He walks down the steps. Doesn't look in my direction.

I get this sinking feeling inside. I want to shout at him, but I watch him step through the double doors and out of sight.

Mrs Bird comes closer. Her hair is an afro these days.

'Now then, Mr O'Brien and Mr Firdous?' says Mrs Bird.

Facing the wall, Kyle grips his strap and adjust his bag higher on his shoulder.

Mrs Bird closes the door, leaving Lisa standing outside.

‘What do I always say about swearing?’ asks Mrs Bird.

‘Swearing is only tolerated when it’s not personal,’ I say.

Kyle looks sharply.

I walk down the steps off the spectator gallery.

‘I thought I had lovely boys in 9AQ. I’m disappointed.’

‘Sorry Miss.’

‘Not to me Nayil.’

Allah blessed Kyle with chocolate brown hair. If he smiled more, people might notice his dimples. ‘Kyle, I’m sorry,’ I say.

‘I’m not.’

That look Kyle gets in his eyes when you piss him off, it’s like he wants to chop you up with a meat cleaver. It wouldn’t surprise me if he becomes a mass murderer.

‘I didn’t start it –’

‘He called me a dickhead. He’s an immature twat!’

That word hurts me even more than the other one he called me earlier.

‘Kyle! I want to hear an apology, so we can all start our holidays. Or do you want to tell Mrs Calderdale why detention is deserved?’ Mrs Bird folds her arms.

Kyle O’Brien’s lower lip always shakes when he’s angry. He pulls it inwards towards his teeth. Right now, his mouth stretches sideways into a smile.

‘All right, I’m sorry.’

I reach forward to shake hands.

He doesn’t take my hand. The door flies open. In the corridor, he puts his arm around Lisa and takes her away, glancing back to see if I’m pissed off.

Dickhead.

‘Miss. I’m not putting drama down as a GCSE choice. What’s the point? I’m not doing drama. Dat’s dat.’ I walk back up the stairs to get my bag. I feel so tired, I sit down.

Running shoes. Scraping, sliding shoes.

A girl screams. Boys laugh.

Doors slam.

I watch Mrs Bird, putting all her files into her box. Her face is bright pink. She looks like I’ve ripped a hole out of her.

‘Sorry Miss.’

‘It’s not like you to swear,’ she says.

‘He called me a stupid Paki, Miss.’

She sounds tired, ‘Why didn’t you come to me?’

‘Because ... Miss, what did you mean ... all people are acting?’

Mrs Bird puts her bag on her shoulder and lifts the box. ‘We’ll chat after the holidays.’

‘D’you mean what you said?’

She stops. ‘Always.’

‘I’m tired of acting for other people,’ I tell her.

Sighing, she puts her box on the table by the door. And comes up the spectator gallery to sit near me, wafting sweet, flowery perfume which my brother used to talk about. She tucks her cream skirt neatly underneath her legs.

All is quiet.

‘It’s not like you to fall out with anyone.’

‘I haven’t done nothing Miss.’

‘That’s a double negative. What does it mean when you put two negatives together?’

‘It means I’ve done something. Is it fair Lisa doesn’t want me in her drama group?’

‘Actually, I think it is a responsible decision. Don’t you? Kyle is her boyfriend.’

What does she know?

‘There’s plenty of people in the class,’ she says, smiling.

I can’t tell her Dinesh is sucking up to Kyle by doing his homework. Or that people don’t call me names when I’m around Lisa. And now they will!

My eyes heat up. ‘To be fair, I don’t need anyone.’

My skinny, long hands. Why can’t they be fatter like all the boys?

‘Nayil. We align our understanding with others ... by explaining,’ she says.

‘I did. But Lisa asked me again today. Lisa says, go up to Kyle and smack him.’

Mrs Bird’s smile disappears.

‘I told her to go spin on it.’

Mrs Bird frowns. 'Why would Lisa say that?'

'Lisa wants me to play a jealous ex-boyfriend. She says if we fight, she stays popular. She loves being famous, you know.'

'I'm sure it's a misunderstanding.'

'Dad says Muslims can have bad thoughts in our heads, but we can't act on them.'

'Your dad is wise.'

That word that Kyle called me ... immature ... I need to act all grown up and dat.

I speak softer now. 'Muslims can call a dickhead a dickhead, but we have to make up with the dickhead by the end of the day. Or we go to hell. I'm not going to hell for no one Miss. Not for Lisa. Not for Kyle. That's why I said sorry. But he doesn't want to be friends with me. Because he's a dickhead, Miss.'

I totally sounded grown up.

'Don't worry. You'll have lots of girlfriends.'

'My mum says Muslims can't have girlfriends. You meet a girl. Then you marry her. And dat's dat.'

She laughs, straightening my hair with her fingertips, smiling at me like a mum should. 'Life's more complicated. That's why you're learning drama.'

'Kyle's using Lisa and Dinesh. And Lisa is using me.'

'Do you think you're feeling ... slightly jealous?'

'Jealous of *who*? Kyle can have her.'

'You're a lovely boy. Someone will come along and sweep you off your feet.'

I don't know why, but I want to tell her. All of it.

'Can you keep a secret Miss?'

She looks at her watch. 'Well ... yes?'

'Promise Miss?'

'I promise.'

'Lisa and I were just acting.'

I'm watching her to see if she gets all shocked and dat.

'Acting what?' she asks, smiling wider.

'Lisa said my role was to be the best boyfriend this school has ever known. Every person's body speaks a language, you know. An actor gives proper attention where it's deserved, she said. She did a course at Stage 84. My mum

won't let me do anything except mosque, that's why I was rubbish. We did lots of different exercises, the copycat Mezzzy-whatsit.'

'Meisner technique?'

'Th's'im Miss. I had to focus on Lisa like she said. We used that room under the stage which you said no one can use unless there's a show. We did lots of stuff in there.'

'You did *what* in my dressing room?'

'We practised until we sounded genuine. Every time people saw us making lovey-dovey talk, we'd already done two dinner-hours of rehearsing.'

Her eyebrows are tilted like they're about to take off. 'Why were you rehearsing?'

'Lisa was in trouble Miss. We had to make people think our relationship was beautiful to keep the guys away.'

She goes all still. 'What guys?'

'Boys followed her home. She was scared. Lisa's mum wanted to transfer her to another school.'

'Goodness. I didn't know.'

'I saw them Miss. It was Ash and Lanky.'

She moves to the edge of her seat to face me. 'Did you report it?'

'Wasn't up to me, was it? Lisa said no. I walked right up to them and I told them to go do one.'

'You should have told me,' she says, frowning.

'I'm not scared of being beaten up Miss, they don't know my mum. She smacks me all the time. I'm used to it.'

'Nayil!' she says.

Sometimes I forget white people don't understand Pakistanis. 'Winding you up Miss...' my face heats up. I didn't want Lisa to transfer. So, it was no big deal pretending to be her boyfriend.'

She tilts her head and does that voice when she wants to prove you're lying. 'Don't you think this will hurt Lisa? You had a beautiful relationship.'

'Swear to God Miss, Lisa knows. She said I shouldn't mind doing a good deed because that's what Muslims do, innit? Muslims and good deeds, are like bread and margarine. We can't eat bread without margarine because it's dry, you can't eat margarine without bread, because it's yuk. If you put dry and yuk together, you get love.'

Mrs Bird laughs.

I've always liked Mrs Bird. She laughs more than the other teachers. In Year 7, Dinesh used to go all nervous and shrink away when Mrs Bird came near him. I don't know why. She's never once looked scary.

'I ought to write that down, because it's good, Nayil.'

'Lisa wanted to be Meg Ryan in You've Got Mail. She wanted our first kiss to be perfect. Said I had to move in like Tom Hanks It's an awesome movie Miss, but it's boring. I was sick in her mouth. It was spag. It came from the bottom of my throat all sticky and that. We laughed her heads off and bogeys flew out of her nose. Then I was proper sick, Miss, But, the next day we did it in front of the whole school ... snogging. On the fifth table in the fifth row of the dining hall, which can be seen from from the balcony and through the windows. Maximum exposure.'

The lines on Mrs Bird's forehead disappear. Her jaw widens before words come out, 'So ... Lisa wasn't your girlfriend?'

'Now you get me.'

'I remember when you kissed,' she says, one side of her face smiling.

'Acting works Miss. We got well famous. People wanted to sit next to us. Bringing us gifts. We just acted it on the spot. What's that thing we call it? Improwhyzingit.'

'Improvisation?'

'That's it. That's what we did.'

'How far would you have continued pretending if Kyle hadn't kissed Lisa?'

I sigh. 'Lisa's the only one who understands me, Miss. That's all I know.'

'Why were you angry?'

'Kyle swore at me.'

'Is that all it was?'

'Lisa's telling me if we fight, it will help us become best friends. How does it make sense?'

'Let it settle over the holidays. My goodness. Playing a role all year? To protect Lisa? Our very own Dylan O'Brien.'

Everyone knows Mrs Bird fancies Dylan O'Brien from Teen Wolf, she mentions him every day.

'We believe in the supernatural. My mum thinks our relatives are possessed by djinns. She's always burning these smelly sticks as soon as they're

gone. Our mosque teacher says our feet should touch the ground and our heads should think like the angels. Angels have wings of light you know. They're well hot. And I'm getting hot, have you seen my muscles? I work out Miss. Ever since I got famous, I use my brother's weights every night. I'd totally be a werewolf.'

Mrs Bird mumbles, 'Drama ... rivalry...love.' She stares at the far wall where the spotlights shine at the stage from.

'Do you know what, Nayil?' she says, grabbing my hand, she pulls me up. 'You have given me an idea. What a wonderful boy you are.'

She runs down the steps.

'Idea, Miss?'

'How to get the funding for the school play,' she says, picking up her giant velvet teacher bag, with the sewn flowers.

'I thought it was cancelled?' I ask.

She stops in front of me. 'We have seven hundred students at this school who believe you are a Romeo. Do you understand, Nayil? Drama is in your heart. It requires good craft to fool everyone. I want the same dedication in your homework.'

'I always do my homework Miss,' I say.

I know it's not true.

'Pay special attention.'

'Meaning what, Miss?'

'Try to spot secrets through people's behaviours. Every day, make notes about how people affect people.'

'You mean like a diary? I used to keep a diary, Miss.'

'Why did you stop?'

Yes. Why did I?

'Homework!' She smiles, 'Do you promise?'

'Yes Miss.'

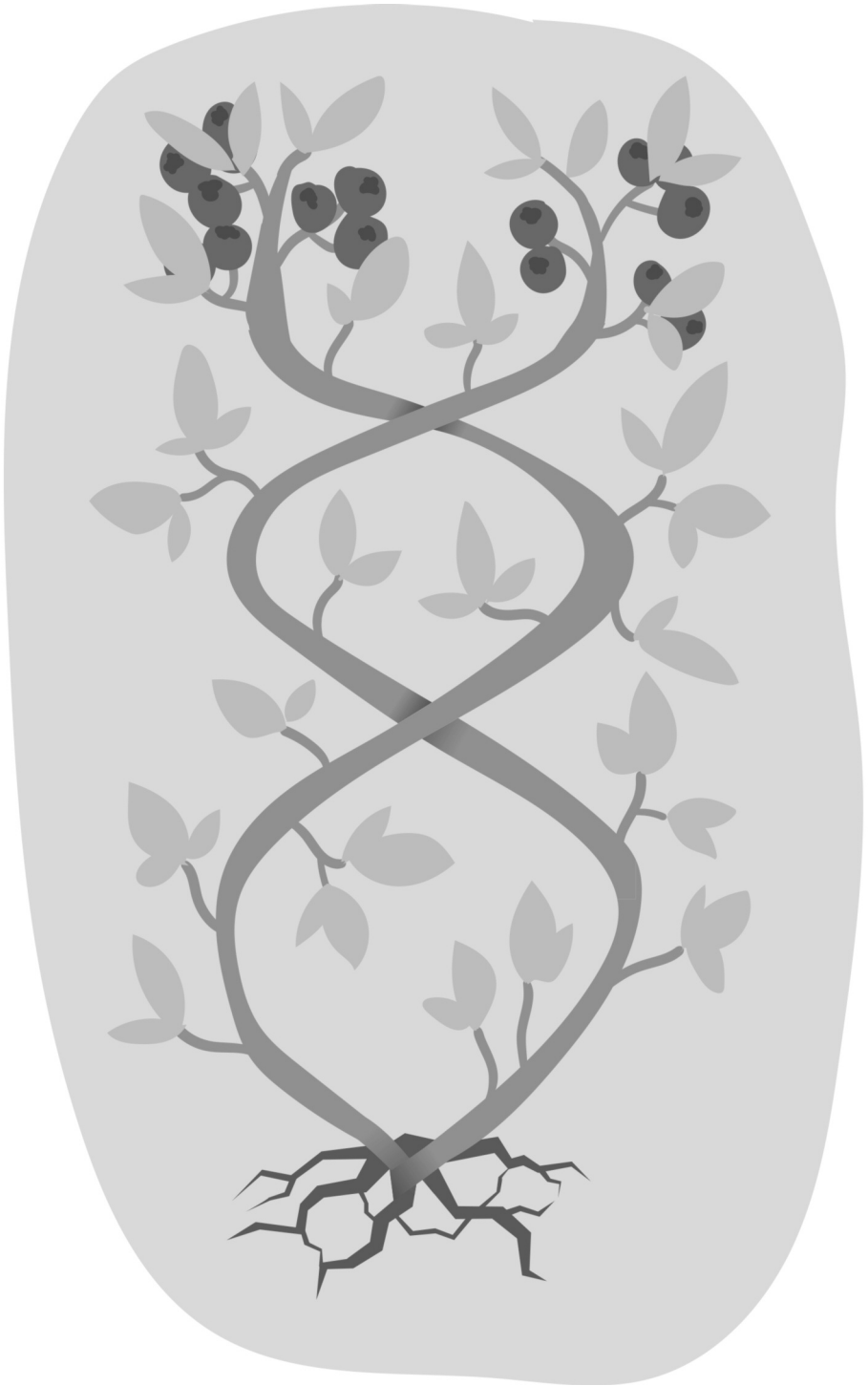
I'm gonna keep that promise.

'Have a lovely Easter.'

'You too Miss.'

I follow her, so I can watch her running down the corridor with her ankle-length cardigan flowing behind her like a cape.

There goes the proper teacher of this school.





JM BRISCOE

JM Briscoe has always been fascinated by reading and storytelling. Some of her favourite authors growing up included: Dr Seuss, Beatrix Potter, Philip Pullman, JK Rowling and Neil Gaiman. She spent most of her childhood exploring the Shotley Peninsula in search of fairies and leprechauns. Since then, her interests have expanded to all things science fiction, with her most recent adventure taking her inside the immense stone walls of a cold war bunker. She holds a bachelor's degree in creative writing and a master's degree in Writing for Young People, both awarded by Bath Spa University.

About November Child

November has never known life above the surface. She shares her underground home with Father, his many androids and the eleven other children that were born there. But November has always been a curious child, and soon discovers the cracks in their illusory existence. When the children are forced 'Topside', November must rely on her keen instincts and knowledge of the old world to journey through the volatile, post-nuclear terrain and save what's left of her family.

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NOVEMBER CHILD

It's no use going back to yesterday, because I was a different person then.

– Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*

Something they never told her about ice: it actually burns. November felt it over every inch of her body, stabbing into her flesh like blades of electricity. She felt stunned. Paralysed.

And there was nothing she could do about it.

The gunshots were muffled, but November could still hear them. She had no idea whether she was up or down, left or right, backwards or forwards. Her chest convulsed as the water fought its way inside her. Like sand pouring into her lungs, scraping against her throat as it went.

You can give in now, his voice whispered. *You can come home.*

The blue light faded, and the darkness turned thick and black, like the inkpots in Father's office. Even now, she could still remember breaking one, and how the blackness had spread across Father's desk like liquid shadow.

She could see it ... She could see home.

The office. The canteen. The projection room. The library. The garden. The workshop.

And then she heard the music, as loud and clear as if she were actually there. Its melody wrapped around her still, freezing body, sending a ripple of warmth through her bones. The voice was so gentle, so familiar, as it sung about sweet things. Beautiful things. Rainbows and birds and blue skies.

Things she had always wanted to see ... and now never would.

Chapter One

The Centre of the Earth

November raced down the stairs, cursing her short legs for not being able to take the steps two at a time. She'd never been particularly tall – but she was fast. The fastest, really. And this came in handy when being chased by a hundred-pound eleven-year-old, who had clearly been a rhinoceros in a previous life.

She leapt from the bottom step, propelling herself across the open canteen and weaving between the round tables. She hurled chairs and trays of leftovers behind her, but it would take a lot more than that to slow January down.

They thundered towards the play area, their stomps echoing across the entire canteen. A stretch of yellow and black tape blocked the entrance, but November tore straight through it. She couldn't stop now. Not when he was right on her heels.

Most of the play equipment had already disappeared – something about Father wanting to 'renovate'. But even with the extra room, there were only so many places she could run. She sprinted towards the jungle gym. She was just small enough to squeeze inside, and January would never be able to reach her through the metal bars. It was perfect.

But he was too close behind.

She leapt on to the climbing mesh and clambered upwards. January reached for her ankle, but she kicked him away. When she reached the very top, she glanced over her shoulder.

There he was, flushed and panting, right behind her.

She darted across the bridge, past the tunnel, until there was nowhere left to run. Her feet shuffled backwards, reaching the very edge of the jungle gym, her heels hanging over what the other kids called *Devil's Drop*.

She took a breath.

'Give them back,' January said, his chest heaving as he stood across from her, blocking the only escape. He was a full head taller than her, and much wider.

'I don't have them.'

He looked down at her pockets. 'Give them back, or I'm telling,' he warned, taking a step closer.

‘He won’t believe you,’ she snapped back. ‘You’re his least favourite.’ Even as the words came out of her mouth, she knew she didn’t mean them. Not really. But she wouldn’t back down – not to January.

‘Take that back!’ he yelled, his nostrils flaring.

‘N–’

January’s hands slammed against her shoulders. She reached out for a railing, a piece of rope – *anything* – but it was too late.

She hit the floor with a sickening *crack* and the blueberries burst in her pocket, seeping through her trousers and up into her blouse. Pain splintered through her left arm. She wanted to cry out, to shout every ugly name she could think of, but her chest was too tight. All she could do was lie there.

She heard January swear under his breath. Within a few seconds, he was kneeling on the floor beside her. His dark, wide eyes scanned over her injuries.

Of course, when he realised the stains were just berry juice and not blood, he laughed. ‘Serves you right.’

‘What’s going on here?’ Father’s voice bellowed from the doorway.

*

Growing up with eleven other children meant that scrapes and bruises were as regular as meal times. Still, it was best to avoid them – especially if they were coming from someone twice the size of you.

‘January’s a creep,’ November said when she and Father were sitting in the infirmary. This was her least favourite place in Orsa Nova. Many of the rooms throughout the bunker were cramped and colourless, but the infirmary was especially bleak. Cold white walls with charts pinned over the cracking paint, and metal instruments scattered across every surface. Just being there felt like punishment.

But it wasn’t. November still had that to look forward to.

Her arm was broken in three places. It had stopped hurting; the anaesthetic had seen to that. But it didn’t *look* like her arm any more. It was the wrong shape. She swallowed the sickly bile at the back of her throat and looked away as Father set the bones. At least this part was painless.

The Bone Serum was the part she was dreading. A fresh batch bubbled in the corner of the room, and the chemical stench burned her nostrils.

November tried again. ‘He isn’t like the others.’

Father injected her with the serum. He put the syringe down and dabbed some cream on the spot the needle had entered. ‘None of you are like each other,’ he said. ‘Not really. You were created to be diverse and unique. January can be insensitive.’ He shrugged, as if there was nothing that could be done about it. ‘Still, he cares for you. They all do. You may not share blood, but you’re family nonetheless.’ Then he smiled at her. ‘Just like we are.’

‘I hate him,’ she muttered.

Then the Bone Serum kicked in. A tight cramp spread through her arm as the serum overpowered the anaesthetic and her bones began to repair. November gritted her teeth. It wasn’t the first time she’d had Bone Serum, and she knew the pain wouldn’t last long, but that didn’t make it any easier.

‘Hate is a powerful word,’ Father said, his voice hardening. His purple eye narrowed, and the lenses in his bronze eye switched, zooming in on her face.

November looked down at her shoes.

‘Just as love is a powerful word. Never use either unless you truly mean it.’

‘I love *you*,’ she mumbled, still not looking at him. The pain was lessening now.

To her relief, Father laughed. ‘I know.’ Then he kissed her forehead. ‘Now, before these childish scraps become any more serious, I’m restricting all contact between you and January. You won’t be allowed to sit near each other, or work together in any of your classes.’

She rolled her eyes. As if they’d *want* to.

Father frowned. ‘You may have to face real enemies one day, November. Making enemies of each other is foolish.’ He stared at her in silence until she finally nodded. ‘Good – and one more thing: April will be looking after your beetroot. She’s more than capable of overseeing two patches in the garden. Quite the green thumb, that one.’

November blinked at him, trying to understand what he was saying.

‘You’ll still be able to attend class, but there will be no more –’

‘You’re *banning* me?’ Her voice went all high and squeaky.

Father didn’t even flinch. ‘From working in the garden, yes. Until the end of the year. You can’t go around stealing other people’s things, November.’

‘But they weren’t for me!’

Father’s eyes, both purple and mechanical, focused harder on her face. ‘Who were the berries for?’

It only took her a second. 'You.'

Each year, all the children were given a patch in Father's garden and assigned different seeds. And blueberries were Father's favourite. Everyone knew that. There was always some argument over who should get to grow them. If it had been someone like August, or even March, November probably wouldn't have taken them. But this year, it was January.

It was the perfect excuse.

'Me?' Father raised his eyebrows.

'They're your favourite.'

His expression softened. 'Wait a moment.' He rolled across the room in his chair. On reaching his desk, he pulled out a small square box from one of the drawers, before gliding back to her. He popped the lid open to reveal dozens of blueberries, plump and fresh.

'Sally's taken it upon herself to stash these around my offices.' He held the box towards her and winked. 'She thinks I don't eat enough.'

November reached into the box and pulled out three blueberries. 'Thank you,' she said quietly, guilt stirring in her stomach.

'You're welcome. Now, off you go.'

She stood, carefully lifting her arm and flexing her fingers. It felt as good as new.

'And November?' Father called when she was at the door. 'No more stealing. Is that understood?'

She nodded.

'Good girl.'

When she opened the door, she spotted January sitting on one of the wooden benches along the corridor, arms folded and brows furrowed. His ink-black hair was still damp from their chase, but the rosy tint had disappeared from his otherwise brown skin. His dark eyes glared at her as she stepped out.

'Move along, November,' she heard Father call from behind, the sternness returning to his voice. 'January, come in, please.'

The children didn't break eye contact until January stepped inside the infirmary and the door closed between them. It was only then that November stuck out her tongue.

She wondered what *his* punishment would be. Their usual penalties were

things like skipping dessert or missing out on movie night. This felt different – but why? She and January had always fought, ever since they could walk and talk. He hated it when she challenged him. Everyone thought it was an age thing, seeing as he was the eldest and she was the second youngest. But November knew it was simply a January thing. A short fuse and a whole lot of muscle equalled trouble for anyone brave enough to stand up to him.

To be fair, it wasn't *always* November who got injured. Sometimes she would get January back just as good. It simply required a little more stealth. Like the time she put wire across the bottom of a doorway, or the time she stuffed nettles into his pillowcase. Had it not been for the blisters on her palms, she probably would have got away with that one.

November looked down at the blueberries in her hand. She wasn't sure what made her feel worse: how quickly Father had believed her, or how effortless it was to lie to him. She'd lied before, of course. Who hadn't? But pretending to sleepwalk when caught out of bed, or claiming to have watered the radishes, even after they turned to mulch, was nothing compared to this. Those were little lies – unimportant lies.

This was something else entirely.

She looked at her other hand, pushing the sleeve back to reveal the tiny puncture wounds decorating her fingers. The bite was still red and blotchy, but it didn't hurt any more.

'November.'

She spun round. Sally was standing right in front of her.

'We missed you at the library session today.'

November's cheeks burned. 'Yeah, sorry ... Something happened.'

She straightened up and tried to flatten down her hair. Sally was always so poised and elegant, with her welcoming expression and gentle voice. Her milky skin was flawless, and her round eyes were almost the same colour as the berries in November's hand. Every part of her was smooth and sleek and perfectly in place. And there November stood: pink-faced with ratty hair and berry juice staining her blouse.

She tried to smile when Sally squeezed her shoulder. Sometimes it was difficult to remember that Sally wasn't real. She looked more like the rest of them than Father did. And yet, when it came down to it, she was nothing more than wires and programming.

'I have just the thing to cheer you up.' She pulled out a patterned book from behind her back. 'The Wonderful Wizard of Oz. I think you'll enjoy this one.'

'Thanks, Sally.' November reached out to take the book.

'What's that on your hand?'

She froze. The bite marks.

'Just scratches.' It was unsettling how easily the lies continued to roll off her tongue. 'January pushed me off the jungle gym.' At least that part was true.

Sally nodded, her face expressionless. 'Well, here you go.'

November took the book from her. 'I'll read it before next week.'

Sally smiled her white toothy smile. 'Wonderful. I look forward to hearing your thoughts. Now, please excuse me. I must retire to the docking station.'

And then she walked away, her ponytail swooshing from side to side as she went. She disappeared around the corner and November counted exactly twenty seconds, before heading straight for the stairs.

She had no idea what she was going to say to April or December, or if she'd even tell them at all. Luckily, she didn't meet anyone else along the way.

When she reached the girls' dormitory, she pressed her ear against the door. It was almost dinnertime and everyone would be gathering in the canteen. But she had to make sure. No one else could know about this yet.

She glanced down the corridor one last time – one final check – before stepping inside. At least she'd managed to move the creature from the garden before Father banned her.





EMMA ELSON

Growing up in Shakespeare's Stratford upon Avon filled Emma's mind with tales of the theatre and the magical world, and she began writing her own stories aged just seven. Now grown up, Emma still holds on to childlike magic and wants all her stories to fuel the adventurous side of her readers.

When she's not scribbling in her notebook, Emma loves to snuggle up with a good book, or sing her heart out in the kitchen when no one's listening. She spends most of her time flitting around the world, often exploring countries that might spark a new adventure.

About *Under the Velvet Seats*

It's 1940 and the blitz is in full blaze over Coventry. Bobbie feels trapped more than ever. Dad's dead, she's stuck in a mindless job, and her dreams of the theatre are slowly being squashed by everyone around her. As she struggles to act 'normal' in a country torn by war, Bobbie can't stop thinking about the audition she found in one of her theatre articles.

She's determined to go, but when she discovers something in the ruins of an old cinema, and the biggest downpour of bombs makes it to the city, Bobbie is suddenly left with no home, no mum and a new responsibility. There's trouble around every corner as Bobbie struggles to make a new life for herself. Can she manage it? Or was everyone else right all along?

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UNDER THE VELVET SEATS

Chapter One

The Telegram

Dear Mrs Alice Goodwin **STOP**

It is with greatest sympathies and regret **STOP** That we inform you that on the 3rd September 1940 your husband Private Frederic Goodwin lost his life in battle **STOP** He fought with valour until the end

STOP

Mum read the telegram in our pokey living room. Her voice was steady, but her hands shook, crinkling the paper she held. When she had finished, the grandfather clock continued to tick softly, making our silence almost deafening. I stood and listened to the quiet, my breaths deep, falling in time with the incessant ticking.

My eyes locked on to the mantelpiece above the fire, on the photographs of our lives. There was the holiday at the beach in Brighton, the bicycle rides through Devon, and my favourite photograph of all; a picture of all three of us. We're in our best clothes, the ones we usually save for church, and we're huddled together outside the main doors of the Shakespeare Memorial Theatre. We all have grins across our faces. Mum has one because she has an excuse to wear her favourite pearl necklace, Dad's grinning because he has the chance to eat Sherbet Lemons without being told he had had enough, and me? I'm smiling the biggest because it's my birthday and we're at the theatre.

It was the last photograph we took together. Dad made sure to develop it

before he left for the RAF, and Mum found a frame to put it in. We both made a habit of kissing our forefinger and placing it on Dad's cheek before we went to sleep.

Now I kissed my fingertip one last time and said goodnight to our old lives.

Chapter Two

Auditions

It was November before I rediscovered the stage again. Mum and I had spent three months wallowing in self-pity, refusing visitors and only accepting tokens of care from our neighbours. But now I was tired of moping and wishing that Dad was alive. I kept hearing his voice in my head saying, 'Chin up, Bobbie Bud, no use crying over spilt milk.'

It wasn't spilt milk this time, but the idea was the same.

I sat on the floor of my bedroom with a pile of magazine clippings and posters in front of me, and a confused best friend behind me, trying in vain to tease my hair into a style.

Flora stuck a kirby grip into the back of my thick brown hair and I winced.

'Stop moving, Bobbie.' She leant over my shoulder, picked up one of the clippings she was using as a reference and squinted at Katharine Hepburn's perfectly polished face. 'This is ridiculous. There must be magical pixies living in that hair style. There's not a single human being who can pull that off.'

I took the clipping from her. 'It can't be that hard.'

'Do it yourself then.'

'I can't reach the back of my head, can I?'

'Oh, bother you.' She shoved another kirby grip into my hair. Flora was not easily deterred when it came to perfecting the look of the stars. I smiled a little as she busied herself again.

'Don't move now.'

I turned my attention back to the pile of clippings and sighed as I read another article about the latest opening shows in the West End. They were all

I thought about. Standing up there as the crowd cheered and clapped was my idea of bliss. Yet, living in Coventry, a pokey, little city in the centre of England, my hopes of getting there stopped at the local theatre group. And what with this horrible war, even the theatre group looked likely to disappear. The only props available for our most recent show, *A Christmas Carol*, were made from whatever was left over from building the latest school Anderson Shelter.

I turned the page over and looked at the auditions listings, a weekly section in *West End Now* magazine. Even though all the auditions were for London, and never needed child actors, I'd spent years hoping that one day I'd find the perfect audition for myself.

And suddenly, I did.

It glowed on the page in big, bold text, the words blasting up from the paper and into my head. I double blinked, certain I was reading it wrong.

I wasn't.

It was perfect.

It was meant to be.

I squealed and leapt from the floor, clutching the page as tight as possible.

I'd startled Flora; she had her hand to her heart and her eyes were wide.

'What did you do that for?'

I thrust the page under her nose. 'Look, look, look!'

'I'm looking, I'm looking ... what am I looking at?'

'The listing, Flora. Look at what it says.'

She snatched the page from my hand, rolled her eyes in a fond sort of way, and read:

Young ladies! Your time has come. Searching now; ALICE! The Shakespeare Memorial Theatre is hosting an open call audition for young girls between twelve and sixteen to play the part of Alice in *Alice in Wonderland*. Auditions run from 20th November.

We didn't say anything for a moment. Our mouths gaped open in awe and our cheeks were flushed pink with excitement. I suddenly felt the need to sit down, and perched myself on the edge of my bed. 'I've finally got a chance. I could do that audition.'

‘It’s certainly perfect.’

I sighed in bliss. ‘To perform on the Shakespearean stage ... how magical. I’d be perfect for the role. I’m fourteen, and look, I’m not too tall. I already know all the lines from the book, and my hair would look great with a white hairband in it!’ I thought back to the photograph on the mantelpiece, our last theatre visit. My last happy moment. I could recreate it, couldn’t I?

‘What about your mum though?’

‘What about her?’

‘Would she let you go?’

I slumped. ‘Oh.’

It was true that since Dad’s death Mum had done everything in her ability to stop me from setting foot out of the house. She rarely let me go into the city centre alone, always insisting she had shopping to do as well, even though she always bought her groceries from the shop at the end of our road. I bit my lip as I imagined asking for permission.

Flora sat next to me on the bed. ‘She wants you close, doesn’t she?’

I sighed. ‘For how long though?’

Flora placed a comforting hand on my shoulder. ‘It’s only been three months, hasn’t it? I’m sure she’ll relax soon enough.’

I doubted it. She was different now: all pinched and quiet, all rules and chores. Mum used to sing, laugh and act out my theatre group lines with me. My dreams of performing were once hers too, now they were nothing but nonsense to her. We used to be a whole family of theatre nuts. What were we now?

There was a knock at my door, and Flora and I both jumped. Mum walked in without waiting for an answer and crossed her arms over her floral apron. There was a nasty frown on her face. ‘Roberta Goodwin and Flora Ainsley, you’re making far too much noise. I’ve told you before, if you’re going to be in the house, keep it down.’

‘Sorry,’ we chorused.

‘It’s time for you to go now I think, Flora. Bobbie has chores to do and she’s been delaying them long enough.’

Flora hopped off the bed obediently and gave me a hug. ‘Will you still be at theatre group tonight?’

I nodded. ‘Wouldn’t miss it.’

‘See you, Mrs Goodwin. Thanks for letting me come over.’

Mum’s face softened. ‘Anytime dear.’ She liked Flora possibly more than me now. She was obedient and quiet – the opposite of me. With her perfect, blond hair, blue eyes and demure character. I was reckless with messy brown hair and bold, daring eyes and a too curious attitude.

Flora disappeared, and we heard the front door shut behind her. Mum picked up a handful of article clippings off the floor. There was an awkward silence.

‘What have you been reading?’

I shrugged. ‘Just articles.’

‘Anything interesting?’

I opened my mouth about to tell her about the audition listing but changed my mind. ‘Just a few about the theatre and the war. There’s going to be a showing of a pantomime in Covent Garden for the soldiers this Christmas.’

Mum simply nodded.

I pressed harder. ‘I think it’s a splendid idea. Don’t you?’

She dropped the articles back on the floor. ‘Your chores need doing. There’s a mountain of washing in the back garden that needs sorting. Hurry up.’ She left me and went back downstairs. I felt numb. How could she have been so quick to shut down a conversation about the theatre? It was as though even the thought of it terrified her. She knew I wanted to act, and she knew that would mean I would move away from her.

I sulked my way downstairs, avoiding eye contact with the smiling faces in the photo frames that decorated the walls. Despite the grins, I felt as though Dad was judging us both. Neither of us were doing what we wanted. ‘I’m trying, Dad,’ I whispered. I wasn’t giving up on Mum yet.

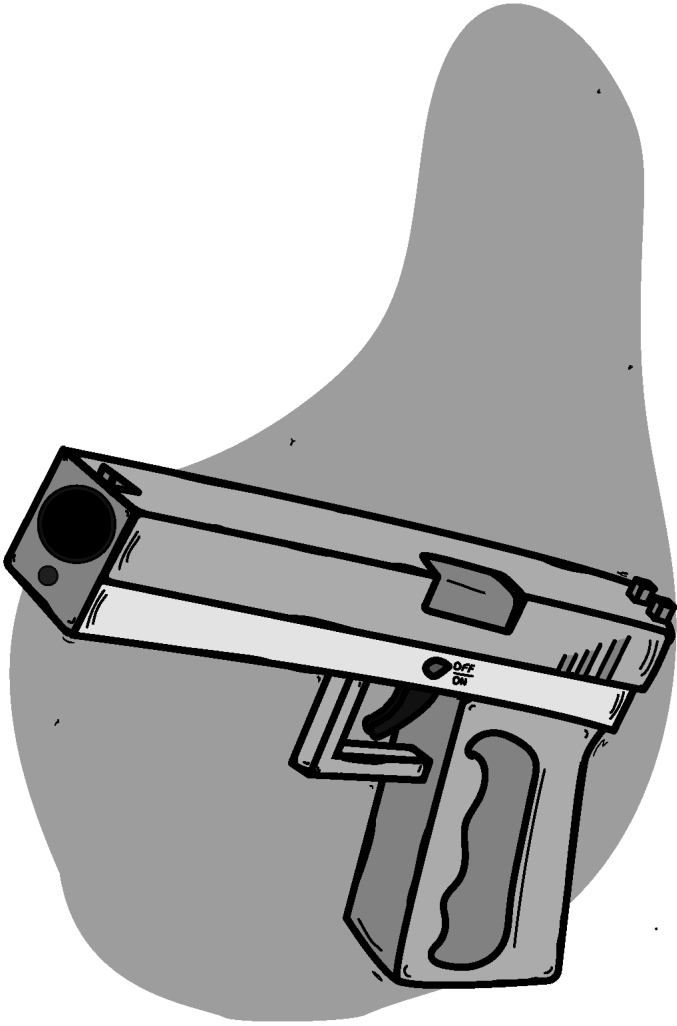
I walked through the kitchen, ignoring Mum, and headed outside into our tiny garden. I grabbed the washing basket by the back door as I went. In our garden, the clothes swung lazily in the winter breeze and our allotment was nearly ready for harvest. Mum was proud of the allotment; England was being encouraged to dig for victory, and she was certain her carrots would win the war for us. I snapped off the clothes pegs, screwed up the clothes and threw them into the basket, not caring if they creased.

A sudden low rumble shook my body and I craned my neck upwards to

the cloudy sky. A plane was coming closer and closer. An allied one? I held my breath as the wings came into view. A Spitfire. I sighed in relief and listened to the roaring engine swoop over my head towards the city. The noise was so loud I clapped my hands over my ears, and my body buzzed with excitement. It was over as soon as it came, and reality, in the form of a clean bedsheet flapping in the wind, slapped me in the face.

How I wished the roar of the engine was of a cheering crowd instead.

I thought about the audition as I resumed pulling the washing off the line. Would Mum let me go? And even if she did, would she let me out for rehearsals every night if I got the part? I was meant to be growing up now, putting the stage behind me and focusing on my work. The horizon of family life bloomed up ahead like a nasty pimple on the end of my nose. The idea of that life made me feel nauseous. I picked up the washing basket, leant it against my hip, and went back into the kitchen. I dumped the basket on the table and slumped into a kitchen chair, my mind filled with the theatre.





REBECCA FISHWICK

Rebecca was born in Kent and studied classics at university. She taught English in Thailand for a while, where she decided that she had better get on with the business of becoming a writer and so applied to the MA at Bath Spa. She's now back in Kent, working on her big book about the Trojan War, and working in the city.

About Short Fall

Harry's life is over. His father has been arrested, and life as he knows it is spiralling to an end. Travelling back to school after days of police raids and interrogations, he runs into his best friend, Jasper, on the train. But Harry hasn't left home empty-handed. He has his father's handgun, along with a whole lot of stolen cash. Returning to school in the middle of the night, Harry and Jasper find themselves the cause of an accident that flings them out into the world, and off on the run.

Harry doesn't want to face up to his actions. He doesn't want to get caught. But that would make him just like his dad. Wouldn't it?

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SHORT FALL

Chapter One

The Gun

I'd found the gun months before the police went through our house, so I knew where to look for it when they arrived.

I wasn't even meant to be home. No one had told me my dad had been arrested, but I guess they didn't have time. They arrested him at work, and Lydia was only just getting the call when I walked in the door. I'd come down to London with my school. We were putting on Part One of Henry IV at the Drury Lane theatre. I was meant to be playing Hal.

Lydia, my stepmum, barely even acknowledged me as I came in, but I heard what she was saying, and as soon as I caught the word 'arrested' I went upstairs to get the gun.

It was in my dad's desk. It wasn't even hidden, really, just slipped under a book. It had a clip in it, but I didn't know how many bullets. It was an old Beretta, with a silver muzzle. Beside it was a wad of cash. I took that, too.

I was on the stairs when the bell rang. It was immediately followed by hammering on the door. The police didn't even trust us to open it. I ran downstairs and out the back, almost colliding with Lydia. She had this look on her face I'll never forget. Jaw set, eyes hard and determined. I was glad I wasn't a police officer.

While Lydia was answering the door, I was vaulting over the fence to next door's garden (they were in Gibraltar, anyway) and hiding it among their hydrangeas. I hid the money with the gun, and climbed back over before they

had time to get into the house and see me through the windows. It's amazing how quickly you can move when you really need to.

The bust lasted hours. What I remember most about it was the police traipsing all through the house with their shoes on, even though it was raining outside and the garden was turned to slush. Lydia was in a frenzy. Pacing around, yammering down the phone and intermittently crying and tearing her hands through her hair.

Little Imogen, my sister, had no idea what was going on. I found her upstairs, just watching the police tear apart her bedroom and all her stuffed toys and dolls and things like they were sifting through trash.

And, all right, maybe I didn't really have any right to be angry about it, but I was. None of them said anything about getting Imogen out of the way so she wouldn't see. None of them even felt sorry for her. And it wasn't 'til I saw her just standing there that I went and scooped her up and took her downstairs and got her some ice-cream. The police were in the kitchen, too. One of them was actually swabbing the microwave, as if a murder had happened there.

I was meant to be at the theatre three hours before the performance, but I didn't go. The police were still there and I didn't want to leave the gun under the neighbours' hydrangeas, or risk getting it while they were still there. My phone was going like crazy. I put it on silent, and slipped it into my pocket.

When the police left, Lydia told me to put Imogen to bed. I found her upstairs, talking to her cat, Rameses. He was a sphynx cat, meaning bald. They were sitting in the lap of her giant Winnie the Pooh teddy, and she was murmuring confidentially to him. He was staring up at her like he understood every word.

He gave a soft mew when I came in, and Imogen looked round.

'Hey, Harry.'

'Hey, Immy.'

'What time is it?'

'Bedtime.' I sounded like a parent.

'When's Daddy coming home?'

I looked at her carefully, wondering how much she knew and how much she'd worked out from the police searching the house from ceiling to floorboards. She watched me with intelligent hazel eyes.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Soon, I hope.'

That wasn't really a lie. There's such a thing as bail.

'OK,' she said. She heaved a great sigh, and looked down regretfully at Rameses, like she was forty-seven years old and weary of the world. 'I guess I'll go to bed, then.'

I went outside afterwards, and got the gun. I counted the money in my room. It came to forty grand. I sent a text to my friend Jasper, who was playing Falstaff in the production I'd missed. It was the lamest excuse I'd ever sent.

Sorry I wasn't there tonight. Something came up. Family issues.

I put the gun and the money under my pillow, and felt like James Bond gone rogue. I didn't sleep.

*

I went back to school a couple of days later, after the police had had enough of my company.

I'd thought I'd stick around a bit for moral support, at least. But Lydia had decided to go to her family in Dubai and she was taking Imogen with her. She told me she'd be back for the trial. At least, she'd told my shoes.

So, I was on the train to Glasgow, which was as full as I'd ever seen it. I hadn't been able to book a seat and every hour or so I got turfed out of wherever I'd found to sit down.

I wanted to read or something, but I didn't have a book. Instead, I wondered who was going to pay my school fees now and, if nobody was paying them, how long it would be before someone noticed and kicked me out. I didn't want to have to go to Hong Kong to live with my mum. She'd probably just send me back, anyway.

So, I was just glaring out of the window as the lush green countryside went by. If you'd seen my face you might have thought I was thinking of pouring cement over the whole thing.

Actually, I was thinking about the gun. The gun that was sitting in my suitcase in the luggage rack, several feet away from me. I could see in my mind's eye the exact place where it was, nestled between two pairs of jeans. Probably just bringing it on the train counted as terrorism. And that made

me think of the interrogation I'd already had, which had lasted eight hours and was probably against my human rights. They'd threatened to arrest *me* several times for 'perverting the course of justice' because I wouldn't tell them anything.

'I don't think you're telling us the whole truth, Harry.'

That's what they called me – Harry, not 'Mr Latimer'. Probably an attempt to make me feel like a little kid, even though they'd suggested – in a way they probably thought was suave and subtle – that I could be tried as an adult, despite being still only seventeen.

We were pulling out of Carlisle when a shadow fell over me. There was a free seat beside me, and if the guy was about to tell me he'd booked the window, then he'd better be ready to fight me for it.

'Harry Latimer, where the hell have you been?'

I knew that voice. I looked round and up. Jasper Knightley was standing in the aisle. The sun was setting behind him and he was bathed in a wash of red light. He was looking down at me in absolute astonishment, as if he'd found me under his kitchen sink.

'Oh,' I said, too surprised to even seem surprised. 'It's you.'

He swung his duffle bag up into the rack and ducked into the seat beside me, somehow managing to fill more space than he actually occupied, which was a little trick of his.

'You've not been arrested, have you?' he asked, pulling down the foldaway table that someone had tucked a newspaper into, glancing at the front page. I knew Jasper wasn't the least bit interested in the news – or anything more recent than the Romans – but he can't ignore something that's there.

I felt people turn to look at us and the silent prickle of them listening in.

At the question, I think something in my face twitched. 'Uh, no ... Why would you think that?'

'Because one time when I called your phone, a police officer answered.'

Oh, yeah. They had taken my phone at one point. They'd probably been through all my messages. I hoped they got a good laugh from it.

'Oh. Well, we're ...' I struggled for a lie. But what was I going to say? '*We're having a bit of policing done?*' I tried again. 'I ...'

'Yes?'

'I can't talk about it on the train.'

His eyes lit up with undisguised interest.

'Really?' he asked, with a relish I felt was rather insensitive. 'How fascinating. Well, you have to tell me now.'

'I can't.'

'You could say it quietly.'

'No.'

'You could write it down.'

'Shut up.'

'You could say it in Latin.'

'What? No, I couldn't!'

'Try.'

I sighed. 'Fine. Uh ... *Pater mea* ...'

'*Meus*,' Jasper corrected.

'You don't even know what I was going to say.'

'"Father" is masculine. Or at least mine is.'

'You know what? Forget it.'

'No, no,' he said, folding up the newspaper and tossing it on to an empty seat across the aisle. 'Tell me.'

I shook my head. 'I can't. I don't know how.'

'Is your dad dead?'

'No.'

'Is he dying?'

'Stop guessing.'

'Are *you* dying?'

'No, shut up.'

'But are -'

'Why don't you tell me how the play went?' I suggested, fixing him with the sternest look I could manage.

Jasper frowned. 'What play?'

I stared at him. '*The* play. Henry IV. The play we were both meant to be in.'

'Oh,' he said, laughing. '*That* play. It's weird how you forget these things. Yeah, it went all right.'

'Did it?' I asked. I didn't really believe him, and I sort of didn't want to believe him. I was meant to have played the main role, after all.

‘Yep. My greatest performance yet, I think. I might retire now, actually.’

‘Who played Hal?’ I asked.

‘I did,’ Jasper said, looking as satisfied with himself as if they’d actually crowned him prince.

‘What? Then who played Falstaff?’

‘Freddy Simpson.’

‘Oh. I guess that makes sense.’ Freddy Simpson was giant, loud and laughed more than he spoke. ‘Then who played ...?’

‘Oli Green.’

‘What? Really? I thought he was only meant to be doing the lights.’

Jasper shrugged. ‘I’ll admit, he could have been better,’ he said. ‘But he didn’t have a very big part, and Freddy was in his element.’

I looked around the carriage. ‘Why are you coming back alone? Where is everyone else?’

‘Oh, they got an earlier train,’ he said. ‘Don’t you remember we were meant to leave this morning?’

I racked my memory. I’d lost track of the days since my dad’s arrest. We were supposed to go to the Globe the day after the production and there was another day in London after that. It had been three days – no, four, since it was the evening – since I’d left them. I’d messaged my drama teacher only once, claiming my little sister had pneumonia. I don’t know where I’d got that idea.

‘Why didn’t you go with them?’ I asked.

‘I did. But I got off the train and came back.’

‘Why?’

‘To look for you.’

‘For me?’

‘Yes. Would it kill you to answer your phone once in a while?’

I started reaching into my pocket, but drew my hand back. ‘I haven’t really thought about it,’ I said. This was kind of true, in that I *had* thought about it occasionally, but only as a vague and not very urgent idea, and then I’d forget about it again. ‘And I haven’t really had time.’ This was a little less true.

Jasper was looking very closely at me. His brown eyes were very dark, so dark they were almost flat black at times, and the intensity of his look was a little unnerving.

I cleared my throat. 'So, if you came back for me, how come you got on at Carlisle?'

'Where? Oh. Right. The place where ... Well.' He cleared his throat in turn, looking uneasy. 'I'm not that great at this whole rail travel thing.'

'OK ...'

'So, I meant to go back, but I didn't know how.'

'Couldn't you have asked someone?'

'I wanted to appear competent.'

'It didn't work.'

'Perhaps not,' he said. He'd slid down his seat as we'd been talking, so that our faces were more or less on a level. Now he straightened up. 'But,' he added, regaining his old composure, 'don't think I won't get the whole story out of you. I've had quite a week because of you.'

I couldn't help scoffing a little. 'Huh. Tell me about it.'

The train pulled to a stop.

'Where are we?' Jasper asked, peering out of the window. The sun had set and the station platform was dark.

'Carstairs,' I said, without looking out of the window.

'Where the hell is Carstairs?'

'Where we are.'

'Are you sure we're on the right train?' he asked.

'Yes.'

'Are we in Scotland?'

'Yes.'

'Oh,' he said, sitting back. 'Can't be long now, then.'

He was wrong.





ELISABETH HEWER GRIFFITHS

Elisabeth was born in Bristol and raised on stories (and cake). She grew up loving writing in all its forms, and jumped at the chance to study on Bath Spa's MA in Writing for Young People as soon as she finished her journalism undergraduate degree at Cardiff University. Fictional worlds have always fascinated her more than the real one. She writes poetry as well as prose, and her debut poetry collection, *Wishing For Birds*, was published by Platypus Press in 2015. *Cliff Edge* received an Honourable Mention in the 2017 United Agents/Bath Spa Prize.

About *Cliff Edge*

The island of Eddisfarne in the North Sea is not the sort of place bad things happen. Its seventeen thousand inhabitants live their lives knowing the worst thing likely to happen at night is a tree falling across the road.

But then a young girl is brutally murdered and everything changes.

Cecelia Morton, seventeen-year-old daughter of the chief of police, finds herself caught in the middle of the investigation when she befriends the victim's withdrawn older brother, Adam.

Can she defeat her own demons long enough to help Adam with his?

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CLIFF EDGE

Chapter One

It's the dream again. I mean, obviously. It's a winter Monday. Of course it's the dream.

Here's me in the dream, salt-lipped, feet planted, my hair whipping into my face. I'm seventeen, not twelve like I was when it really happened. My body's the body I have now, long-legged and honed to a sharp point. Back then I was small and scrawny, nothing growing together the way it ought to.

There's panic twisting inside my gut and my arms are outstretched but I'm not moving. Not moving. Not moving as my mother, right in front of me, staggers backwards and disappears over the edge of the cliff.

A lot of people wake up at that point in dreams. Not me. I don't wake up until after, when I've scrambled to the edge of the cliff and looked down at the waves crashing on to the rocks. There's a ragged foam circle where my mother hit the water and a spill of red hair under the skin of the waves.

My heart thuds in triple-time, and the red rises and breaks through. I realise too late that I'm staring down at the wicked, long face of a water horse. Its eyes are glowing in the low light and its mouth is opening, wider and wider and wider, and it's screaming with my mother's voice —

And then I'm awake, heart hammering, feeling sick to my stomach. Same as always.

A glance at the clock tells me it's 5.08am. When I look outside to find it still pitch black, my eyes catch my reflection in the window. My face seems horribly pale against the dark of my hair and bedsheets. I shudder and press my hand against my forehead. I'm cold and clammy, covered in sweat.

I need to get moving.

Getting dressed takes no time at all. My running kit is where it always is: strewn over the chair in the corner. The neon pink stripes on the leggings are the only splash of colour in my plain and neutral bedroom.

I slip downstairs, past Sasha's bare room, and glance at Dad's door as I go past. It's open, his bed empty, the duvet thrown back and his sheets rumpled. The surprise is enough to make me pause, but I shake it off. He never asks where I go at night, so why should I bother?

Once I'm outside, I take off at a sprint straight away, up the stairs from our house on to the pavement and then down the harbour wall. It juts out into the North Sea, stern and unyielding. Down the stone in the dark I go, past sleepy seagulls and iron railings, so fast my breath starts to hurt my throat.

It's about a two-hundred-metre sprint and I hit the stone wall at the end hard enough to knock the little breath I have left out of me. I slump down on to my elbows and let my joints grind into the rough stone. It hurts, but it's a useful sort of hurt. The sort of hurt that helps me pull myself together.

Still puffing, I let my head loll down. It's unbearably grim out here. November sucks, and November on Eddisfarne sucks most of all. All I've got to look at is the dim circle lit up by the lamps around me and then the utter black of the open ocean. The emptiness makes me shiver, and I'm not sure whether it's with fear or longing.

I'm just about to turn to head back down the wall when a flashing light on the cliff road opposite catches my attention. I blink in surprise. Police, out at this time of night?

I put that together with my dad's empty bed and feel a frisson of anticipation. That feeling you get when you know something's happened, or about to happen, that's going to cause a lot of talk. Police on Eddisfarne rarely get called out in the night, and if they do go, they don't go with their lights on – and even then they don't get the chief of police out of bed. Crime's usually someone nicking a sheep, after all, or drunk crofters' kids up Bister way.

A cold wind licks up the back of my neck, goose bumps prickle up my thighs, and in the middle of all that sudden tension my phone goes off.

I jump and fumble in the pocket of my hoody for it. The ringing's shockingly loud and the surprise is making me clumsy. I finally get it to my ear, heart thudding, and I have to jam it tight against the side of my head to hear over the waves.

‘Cecelia?’

My dad’s on the other end. He sounds frantic.

‘Yeah?’ I’m still a little breathless from being startled, but I do my best to hide it.

‘Listen, I’m at the station. There’s been – something’s happened. I need you to bring me some stuff from home, can you do that?’

Normally I’d drag my feet, but I just want to know what’s going on.

‘Yeah, sure. What’s happened?’

‘Great.’ Dad doesn’t acknowledge my question. ‘I need a fresh set of clothes, please, and there’s a file in my office.’ Five years ago, before Mum fell, there would have been a ‘love’ in the middle of that sentence. ‘It’s a big red lever arch one, says “August, Firstow Camp” on the side. Can you get it?’

My nose wrinkles at the thought of ploughing through the mess in Dad’s office, but I keep my voice sugar-sweet and reply, ‘Clothes and file, OK. Can I use the car?’

‘No, I’ve got it. Can you run?’

‘I suppose.’

‘Great. Wear your reflective jacket, OK? It’s too dark.’

‘Yeah, OK,’ I lie, and end the call. It’s pre-emptive. Dad doesn’t like saying goodbye on the phone and I’m sick of him hanging up on me.

With my phone back in my pocket, I take a couple of deep breaths. That sensation of something being about to get itself started is still there. I hug my arms around my stomach and tell myself to calm down. It could be nothing. A burglary, or someone’s grandma getting herself lost around Harquoy or one of the outlying towns. A drama that’ll be over and done with before it’s really started.

I don’t feel like it is, though.

‘Steel yourself,’ I tell a passing seagull, and take off back down the wall.

*

I get to the police station on foot, all Dad’s stuff shoved into a rucksack. The file turned out to be a bit too big for the bag, but I sorted the problem.

‘Jesus, Cecelia,’ says Dad when I trot into the harshly lit reception and offer him the file, ‘What did you do to it?’

So, it's a bit squashed round the edges, but whatever. 'It's here, isn't it?'

I shoot Dad my sulkiest look and begin to rummage around in the rucksack for his clothes. I'm a little puffed from the run, but I took it at a sensible speed instead of my mad dash down the harbour wall earlier. The five K to the station is easy if you pace it right.

The station's busier than I've ever seen it. Through the glass doors behind the reception desk I can see Harquoy's officers bustling about, shouting across each other and frantically tapping at computers or piling up files. All the movement makes the tiny force seem huge. That shiver from earlier makes another pass through me, travelling right from my toes to the top of my head. Whatever's happened, it's something big.

'Where's your jacket?'

I glance up at Dad. He's examining my mostly black running gear with a face like thunder.

'Oh, I left it outside.'

His eyes narrow. He knows I'm lying. But he says absolutely nothing, and it sets my teeth on edge. I can't get him to fight me about anything these days, not even if I run five kilometres along unlit roads in clothes dark enough to make me invisible to oncoming cars. I think sometimes I could stab him and he'd just pat my head and go to work.

'Well, thanks for bringing these. I appreciate it.' He takes the clothes and turns away.

I can't believe it.

'Um, Dad?'

'Yeah?'

'Aren't you going to tell me what's going on?'

He doesn't even turn back to me properly. He just shakes his head, his attention already on an officer coming towards him. It's like I'm barely there. I could be anyone, some random member of the public, rather than his daughter.

'We can't talk about it yet, sorry.'

It doesn't matter how many times he's closed me out over the last five years, it still stings. The feeling of rejection makes me as defensive as ever, so I put on my haughtiest look.

'Whatever,' I say, tipping my chin up. I've always been told this expression

makes me look much more like my mother and, as Dad's got more distant over the years, I've got less ashamed of using that against him like a weapon.

'Will you be all right getting home?' He looks over and his face changes when he sees the way I'm looking at him. But he doesn't say anything. Of course he doesn't say anything. My hurt hardens into anger.

I can't be bothered with this any more. Not this dodgy brown carpet or the unflattering lights or my distant, disinterested father. I spin on my heel and march towards the door.

'See you whenever,' I toss over my shoulder at him, and bash my way through the double doors out into the night. I'd hesitate just outside to see if he calls me back, but there isn't any point. He'll watch me leave and then he'll go back to the police officers that he prefers to me.

'Oi, Cee, that you?'

I know that voice well, and its owner's face appears in the flash of a lighter seconds later. Ryan Samuels. *That* boy. We've got a history, me and Ryan, and it's the kind of history that puts us on edge around each other. He ended things officially back in January this year and I'm not sure I've forgiven him yet for the reason he did it.

Hardly in the mood to bring up old relationship drama, I'm about to wave and run off when I realise that Ryan probably knows exactly what's going on. They hired him as the station receptionist when he left school last year. He'll be easy to get it out of, too. He might have ended things, but I know he isn't over me.

So I stop.

'It might be me,' I tell him, pushing my weight on to one hip and tossing my hair, 'but only if you ask nicely.'

'Easy there, little tiger.'

I step further into the shadows, closer to him. The air around him is acrid with smoke.

'Little's a strong word from someone who's barely an inch taller than me.'

Like this I can see him properly. His smug, self-satisfied smile and the polished gleam of his blond hair are catching the light emanating from the station, and he looks good enough to remind me why I went for him in the first place.

Focus, Cece, I tell myself. I tilt my head and blink slowly at him, reusing the tricks that hooked him before.

‘Come on then,’ I wheedle, ‘What’s going on in there?’

I’m slightly surprised when I don’t get a superior smirk and some teasing comeback about how he knows more than me. That’s the way it used to play out. Instead Ryan frowns and tosses his cigarette to the ground, stubbing it out under the ball of his foot.

‘It’s bad. I don’t think anybody can believe it’s happened.’

I lean in. ‘Tell me.’

‘There’s been a murder.’

I rock backwards, astonished, but that isn’t the end of it. Ryan catches my wrist, his expression more serious than I’ve ever seen.

‘It’s really bad, Cee. It’s this little girl – they found her out in the peat up Fawick way. Face down in the mud with the back of her head caved in. Someone hit her hard. I mean really hard.’

It takes me a second to process that. I stand there, my mind racing, my breathing speeding up, not even caring that he’s still got his hand wrapped around my wrist.

‘A kid,’ I repeat at last. My voice is shakier than I’d like, my bravado temporarily vanished. ‘A girl.’





RF HUXLEY

Rachel Huxley grew up in Canada, where her best friend was the daughter of a refugee. Following a transatlantic move, she spent fifteen years as a lawyer. She's now settled in England, in a village within a city, with her partner, the grandson of a refugee. She spends her time watching YouTube, painting graffiti and getting handcuffed – all in the name of research. She has a BA in English literature and an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University.

About *Through the Valley*

I'm leavin' Kingdom.

I'm headed away from the Anointed, away from men who invoke the name o' the Lord like He's their own personal mascot.

Away from men who wanna turn Caleb into a killer.

Sixteen-year-old mixed-race Ziah wants to save her white half-brother Caleb from the extremists who have destroyed their lives in small-town America. Ziah drives north, in the hope of finding them a new life in Canada as refugees.

But America is at war with itself, Canada is a long way from home – and Caleb's only four years old. Will Ziah get them to safety before a secret unravels everything?

And will it be worth the price?

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THROUGH THE VALLEY

Chapter One

The militia are right behind us, tight on our tail, flags whippin' in the wind. Momma hunches over the steerin' wheel an' pulls over, way over, clean outta their way. The black pick-up sweeps past an' Caleb shouts, 'Ziah! Look! New militia!'

I don't answer.

There's more 'n' more Anointed militia in Kingdom lately. Means every time you step outta the house, you wonder if today's the day you're not gonna make it home again.

We crawl into town, wipers slappin' away at the rain. Caleb jigs in his seat, singin', 'The animals went in two by two,' an' the radio proclaims the war to be one long march o' glory for the Anointed:

'God is making our nation great again! After heavy fighting, the Anointed have overcome the northern infidels and consolidated their hold ...'

Momma shoots me a look an' I snap the radio off. We got no way o' knowin' what's true an' what's not – same as for internet an' TV news – but I got no desire to fuel Caleb's adoration o' the Anointed.

Rain thunders on the roof o' the pick-up as Momma turns into the square. The rain's that heavy, I've not got much hope o' spottin' a dog, but Samuel's been missin' a few days now. Every moment I get, I'm searchin'. Even now, on our way to church.

But there's no sign o' him.

'Long one side o' the square, there's the general store, where we line up now the Anointed have started rationin' stuff an', beside it, Malt Whymode's BBQ emporium an' ice-cream parlour, cos somehow ice-cream is not one o' the things they ration. All closed today, it bein' the Sabbath.

Pastor Eli's courthouse an' the jail, they got their doors shut against the rain, but they're always open for business – rain, shine, Sabbath, noon or night. I breathe a quick prayer for those the Anointed got inside, a plea that no one I love ever ends up behind those doors.

An endless row o' black militia pick-ups squat in the rain outside church, the cars an' pick-ups o' the congregation squeezed 'round 'em. Momma parks up, at the far end o' a row, an' unclips Caleb from his seat, 'C'mon baby, we don't wanna be late, do we?'

What we want doesn't really come into it – you don't worship at church, you risk a knock at the door an' a close acquaintance with the inside o' the jail.

Momma helps Caleb outta the cab, takin' care to place herself between him an' the militia vehicles. Over his head, she mouths to me, 'Be careful now' – *careful* is how our coffee an' cream family gotta live, always – an' then we run into church thru the slicin' rain. The whole way, Caleb gazes back over his shoulder at the militia pick-ups.

In the foyer, there's a sea o' militia in black uniforms, an' the smell o' boot polish an' sweat hangs heavy in the damp air. My wet skirt clings to my legs. Mrs Addison is on welcomin' duty this mornin'. She's makin' sure everyone knows it too – *Oh Commander this* an' *Oh Commander that* is all you can hear over the shufflin' militia. Me an' Momma, we get Caleb pinned safe between us. I ruffle his blond hair, try to get rid o' the worst o' the rain. He pays me no mind – blue eyes shinin', he gazes at the militia.

An' then there is one body. One body pressed up hard against me. A hot hand on my waist. I bow my head an' I keep it bowed. If I call out the militia, on the threshold o' the sanctuary? That's askin' to be made an example of. So, I bow my head. Behind me, a low laugh. Another body moves in hard. I peel my body away, inch towards Momma, but the bodies behind press me tight. A cudgel digs into my hip. Two hands paw at my waist, workin' their way inside my blouse. Fingers on my skin. Panic flutters in my throat.

'Pardon me, pardon me.' Someone knocks away the hands, 'Thank you kindly, so kind.' Mr Neel slides Abigail in beside me an' positions himself between us an' the militia behind me, 'I can assure you, it does not often rain like this here.' Mr Neel wipes rain from his glasses, then holds out his hand to the militia, 'Welcome.'

I wanna weep with gratitude. Militia are no friends to us, but they hold a special kind o' hell for the Neels. After her momma got killed in Anointed crossfire, Abigail took all o' her Abigail an' she tidied it away someplace, deep inside. Mr Neel got lost. Then he got so scared o' bein' lost that everythin' got found, smartened up an' put in its place. He doesn't speak much, an' certainly not to militia. Abigail gives me a small smile 'fore lookin' back at the floor.

*

The sanctuary is full. Facin' us, high on the main wall, Jesus hangs on the cross. Rows o' militia are tight packed behind us civilians, meanin' we all worship under their hungry gaze – hungry not jest for your body, but for your errors. A skirt too short, a laugh at the wrong moment? The correction o' the Lord will be visited upon you – or not, dependin'. Dependin' if the militia got better sport elsewhere. So, I rise an' I sing an' I pray when directed – but I keep my heart an' my faith to myself.

We sit, as one, as the last notes o' the hymn hang in the air. Pastor Eli steps to the pulpit, 'Brethren, the Lord has richly blessed us with children. Let us pray for the teachers of their Sunday classes, that they may train and instruct them to be valiant soldiers of the faith.'

My chest tightens. A couple o' rows ahead sit the blond buzzcuts an' square shoulders o' Jacob Heap an' his son Adam. Jacob Heap's in his black Anointed uniform – so's we don't forget we got the Anointed executioner worshippin' with us. Adam – Caleb's Sunday School teacher – he's in the dark grey o' the senior Anointed Youth.

Pastor Eli raises his hands in prayer. We bow our heads. My mind an' my heart search for Jesus, but I keep stumblin' up against those words. *Teachers. Soldiers.* Keepin' my head bowed, I open my eyes an' seek out Caleb. He's got his eyes screwed shut an' Momma clutches one o' his hands in both o' hers. I shut my eyes again. *Jesus, watch over Caleb, keep him safe.*

The organ plays a bouncy lil' tune an' Caleb races down the aisle to the front, where Adam Heap's waitin' for the boys. Mrs Addison takes the girls out back – they don't run, they walk.

Head bowed, Momma grips her empty hands tight together.

Then it's over for another week. Mr Neel an' Abigail stand to let Momma out, so's she can go fetch Caleb from Sunday School. Momma an' Mr Neel nod to one another as she passes, then Mr Neel falls into step behind me an' Abigail.

The foyer is full o' black uniforms, noisy with catcalls an' guffaws. I fold my arms across my body, Abigail hesitates beside me. Then Mr Neel's shakin' hands with every militia we pass, sayin', 'Thank you for your service, soldier.' Each pauses to look important, some o' 'em even salute. An' their hands stay offa our bodies – we get safe outside, where the sunshine is burnin' off the rain.

Mr Neel wipes his hand across his forehead. A patch o' sweat blooms in his armpit an' his hand trembles. I thank him, he nods at me. Then clears his throat. Then nods at me, again, takes Abigail's elbow an' leads her to the safety o' their car.

As I head over to our pick-up, I keep a lookout for Samuel an' that fool lopsided run he does. But there's nothin', 'cept a swarm o' militia, their backs to me, just off to the side o' the church. They got somethin' in there, thank the Lord, somethin' that keeps their attention offa me. I creep towards our pick-up, wishin' I had Samuel by my side for a bit o' courage, when the militia give a huge cheer an' there's a flash o' yellow fur.

Samuel.

Chapter Two

My brain pins me to the spot, stock still in the parkin' lot, the sun beatin' down. No female, no Negro female, willingly puts herself in the path o' the Anointed. It was jest a flash o' yellow – it might not be Samuel – what if I go over an' it's *not* Samuel? Might as well offer myself up to 'em on a platter. I remember the foyer, the fingers inside my blouse. My head is talkin' powerful sense.

Samuel's jest a dog.

All the while my head's tellin' me this, my heart's watchin' the militia. They got somethin' in there, they do – those at the back stand on tiptoe, strainin' to get a look at what they caught. An' then the crowd ripples, militia bendin' an' twistin', one after the other, tryin' to catch a hold o' somethin'.

Another flash o' yellow.

Samuel.

I run.

My heart shoots straight for Samuel, straight as an arrow, but militia pick-ups block my way. I gotta jink round 'em, this way an' that, an' it makes me slow. Samuel writhes thru the militia's legs. Hands grab at him, but he slithers an' slides – they can't get a grip on him – he's free!

An' then.

One o' the militia, a big man right at the back, he knocks Samuel flat with one swipe o' his boot. Samuel disappears, swamped an' strugglin', as the big militia wrestles with him. It takes a few seconds, an' then the big militia stands, Samuel pinned under his arm, his hand clamped round Samuel's muzzle. Hollerin' an' stampin', the crowd parts to let 'em thru. There's a space, right in the centre – a rope – an' then Samuel's swallowed up by the crowd.

Wild, I look around. I gotta save Samuel. But how? More folk are spillin' outta church now. Some make for their cars, fast, like they happen not to notice the militia are up to somethin'. Some are plain delighted to go join in the militia's game – Adam Heap strolls right on over to 'em, half like he owns the whole town an' half like he's got somethin' to prove.

There's a shout from the crowd, a cheer. I scurry forward, taggin' along behind Adam. Cos everyone's lookin' at Samuel, not me, I git myself up where I can see. Samuel's tied to a streetlight, cowerin' in the centre o' the crowd. My heart crawls towards him, but my head runs in circles, tryin' to find a way out.

'Disco time.'

It's the big militia, who captured Samuel. He draws his handgun an' steps back a few paces. The crowd surges backwards to give him space. Guns drawn, a couple o' other militia step forward. Then the big militia motions at Adam with his handgun, 'You the executioner's kid?'

Adam nods.

The big militia snorts, 'Let's see if you can shoot like your dad.'

'*Like* my pa, you say?' Adam draws his gun with a flourish, 'I shoot *better* 'n my pa.'

If Jacob Heap were here, no way would Adam be makin' so free with his reputation, tho' Adam himself does have reason to brag – he can shoot. It was a hard-bought skill, Jacob Heap not bein' an instructor who spares the rod,

but now – bein’ able to shoot a tethered dog? That way glory lies, if you’re Adam Heap.

Adam lines up with the rest o’ the shooters, ’longside a skinny militia. Tho’ I cannot reach Samuel from where I stand, my heart crouches in the dirt, arms wrapped round him, as if my love can shield him from harm.

Bang!

My world stops dead.

Samuel barks. Sputterin’, I breathe again.

‘Dance, dog, dance!’ someone yells. They shoot at his paws – *bang, bang* – make him jump an’ skitter. Someone starts clappin’ out a beat, an’ the shots keep time. Samuel barks in terror, yankin’ on the rope, dancin’, his ears back, the whites o’ his eyes rollin’.

My heart drags itself back towards me. What can I do? Throw myself in front o’ their guns? That’s a one-way ticket to a hole in the ground. I can do nothin’. Nothin’. I turn, blindly pushin’ thru the crowd, desperate now to get away.

Samuel screams.

Someone yells, ‘Dead dogs don’t dance!’

I whirl round.

Samuel’s down, his front leg out at an angle. Blood trickles from a wound in his shoulder. He whimpers, lil’ hiccupin’ whimpers, an’ I twist an’ shove my way back thru the crowd towards him.

The big militia leads one o’ the shooters, the skinny one, out into the centre o’ the circle. He spins him ’round an’ slaps his hands over his eyes, ‘Cos you shoot like a blind man.’

Laughin’ an’ jostlin’, a space opens up behind Samuel as the crowd get themselves outta range o’ the blindfolded shooter.

He raises his gun.

I hold my breath.

His shot pings offa the streetlight, *thank you, Lord.*

The big one spins him again. Another shot. Samuel yelps, shakin’ his head. Blood sprays from his ear. I beat my way to the front o’ the crowd. I gotta save him.

The crowd laughs an’ Adam steps forward, ‘Lemme show you how it’s done.’ He cocks his gun.

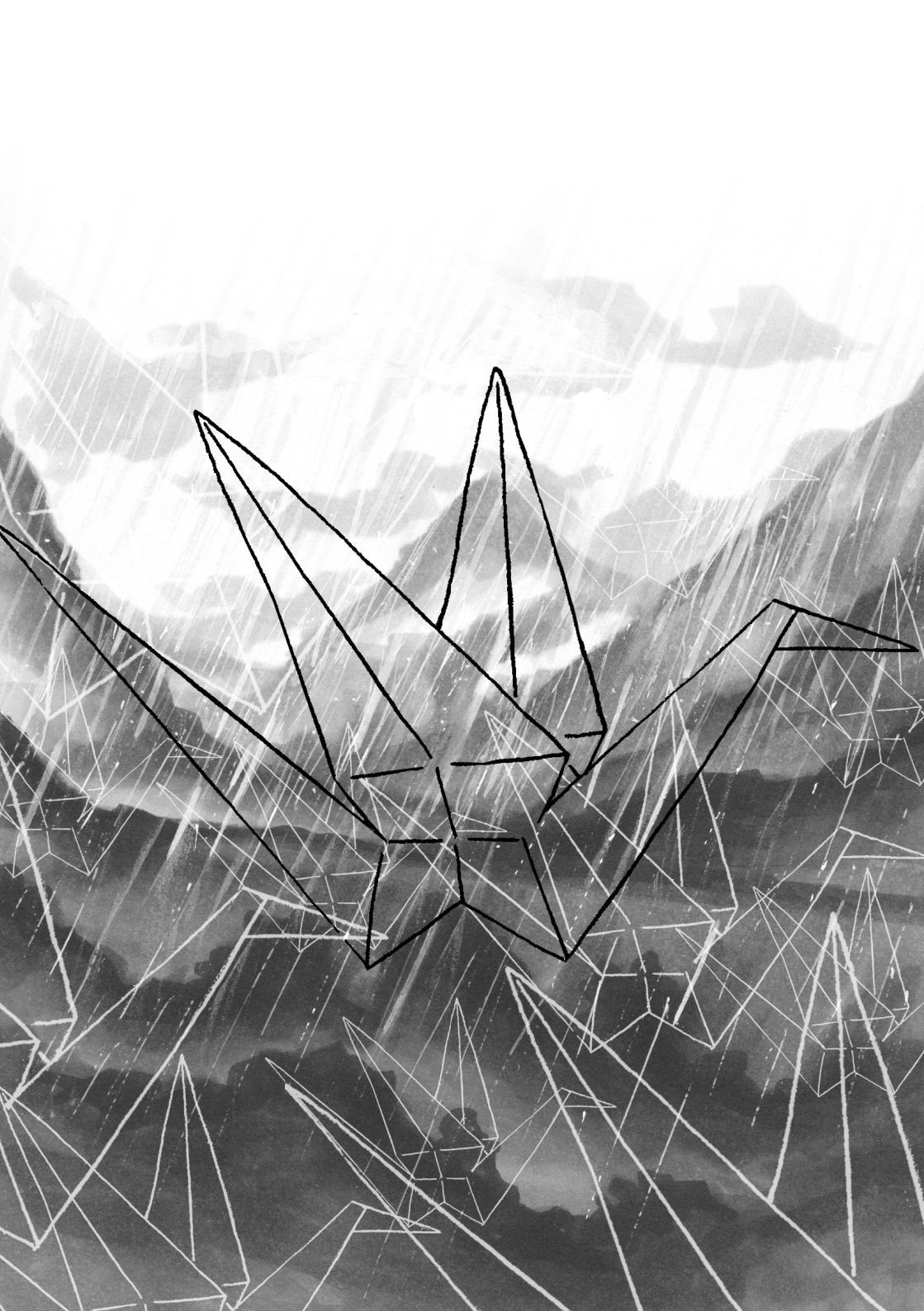
I dive, dive towards Samuel in the centre o' the circle.

Adam shoots – misses – he's shot the rope clean thru. Bayin', Samuel spins round an' speeds away. Adam lets fly a volley o' shots after him, which send up plumes o' mud.

The mob is silent with surprise for half a breath, to see Samuel gone an' me in his place. Then they roar with delight an' surge towards me, hungry for fresh blood. My brain whirs, but it's like the hammer clickin' on an empty gun – I got no plan.

The big militia picks up the shot rope an' saunters towards me, the rope danglin' from his hand.

'Do you dance, Negro?'





REBECCA LANGTON

Rebecca is a children's literary scout, freelance editor, book reviewer and professional plate spinner. After studying history, a PGCE and a master's in Children's Literature at Cambridge, Rebecca realised it was time to join the real world where the world of children's publishing provided a soft landing.

Rebecca's short story *The Circus* came second in *The Caterpillar Magazine's* short story competition, and was praised by author Mark Lowery in the *Irish Times* as a 'truly exceptional piece of story-telling' with an 'exquisite lightness of touch'. Beyond writing, Rebecca is a fan of long distance running, podcasts, ghost stories and true crime. *Featherweight* received an Honourable Mention in the 2017 United Agents/Bath Spa Prize.

About *Featherweight*

Feather hates Fennloch. It won't stop raining, Mumma's boyfriend gives her the creeps and she and her little brother Fox are sleeping on a sofa bed that reeks of wet dog. Then Feather meets Skye. Weird, tempestuous, hot-headed Skye. For the first time ever Feather feels like she might have made a real friend. But Skye disappears and strange messages start appearing around Fennloch. Messages that Feather knows are meant for her.

Feather must fight. Fight to be seen. Fight to get justice in a town where boys will be boys and girls are asking for it. Fight to reveal Fennloch's dark secret.

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FEATHERWEIGHT

Chapter One

Feather squinted out through the blur of rain. She could just make out a huddle of low square buildings, a mud-slicked football pitch. A sign welcoming them to Fennloch.

‘Where even are we?’ Feather snapped open her seatbelt, wound down the window a little to see, letting a smir of rain buzz across her face. ‘Apart from the middle of nowhere – obviously.’

‘Ach, you. Stop it.’ Mumma flapped her hand at Feather. ‘We’ll stop here, you can stretch your legs, I’ll get the car fixed. We’ll be on to Callan in no time.’

‘I’m not stretching my legs in that.’ Feather wiped the wet from her nose, wound the window up.

Mumma rolled her eyes at Feather, then turned in her seat, her arm wrapped around the headrest. ‘Fox, do you want to go for a wee walk?’

Fox curled his knees up to his chest, pushed Babbit’s velvet ear on to his lips, shook his head.

‘Fine. Just me then.’ Mumma reached around for her rain jacket, zipped it all the way up to her chin, flipped up the hood and opened the car door.

Feather watched Mumma walk, hunched up in the rain, around to the car bonnet, before she climbed over into the backseat and stretched out her legs so they rested on Fox’s lap. He had Babbit’s ear in one corner of his mouth, his thumb in the other. She reached over, tugged his hand away. ‘Stop that, Foxy, you’re five. You’re not a baby.’

Fox turned away, slipped his thumb back in, mumbled something Feather couldn’t hear.

‘We’re not staying here for long.’ Feather squeaked her finger across the window. ‘Still got fifty miles to go today. At least two hours. Three maybe, cos of the mountains and the rain and all that.’

The rain got louder, a thrumming beat that washed away the muddy football pitch and the dirty buildings into one big smudge of colour, Mumma’s red hood bobbing up and down as she fiddled with the engine. Something smelled burned through. Rubber or plastic. Chemical.

Five minutes later and Mumma climbed back into the front seat. She pulled down her hood and shook her head like a dog out from the bath, sprinkling them with second-hand rain. ‘Doesn’t look good.’

Feather’s stomach slid low. ‘But we’re going to Callan.’

‘Sorry, Birdy. Not tonight.’ Mumma rubbed her hands together, blew on them. They were white like bone, the tips red and hot looking. ‘You two OK to stay here? I’m going to go into town. See if there’s a garage, a mechanic, or something.’ She glanced at Feather, narrowed her eyes. ‘Anyone asks, play stupid.’

Feather nodded.

Mumma blew them a kiss, tossed her hood back up. ‘Be good.’

*

The car started to get cold without the engine on. Feather’s fingers ached, her breath puffed out in clouds. She pulled out the blankets and sleeping bags from the boot and made them a nest, folded Fox into it beside her so they were like peas for shelling.

Feather drummed her fingers on the window, wiped a hole in the clouded glass. Outside, a group of kids, hoods up, shoulders hunched, tramped down the road towards a big, low, long building in the distance, a high school maybe. It made Feather’s stomach squeeze thinking about the hundreds of kids crammed together, ready to sprawl out on to the streets with her stuck there in the car. She grabbed a half-empty bag of starburst, unwrapped a green-flavoured one for Fox, a red-flavoured one for herself, then started folding. Neat edges. Clean sides. It was something Mumma had shown her. How to shape paper. Even as tiny as sweetie wrappers. Concertina it into sharp corners, pulled edges. Fold the buzzing, flickering thoughts, tame them

into birds and boats and cats with pointed ears. Feather thought she had probably made a hundred tiny paper boats, a thousand birds. She set the sweetie-wrapper boats sailing over the backseat and tried not to think about staying here in Fennloch. Another new town. Each one was smaller and smaller. Her life was like a Russian doll of tiny places. Callan was bigger though. Big enough to get lost in, Feather thought. Or get found.

It was an hour before Mumma came back. By then the sun had come out. Watery and grey. The boats were scattered limp and sticky across the floor of the car. Fox's lips were tinged lime green and Feather's belly was folded over with hunger.

Chapter Two

Mumma said they couldn't sleep in the car again, that it would be too cold, that someone would notice. She was going to have to find a B&B. She pressed a tenner into Feather's hand, told her to go wait in the pub.

Fox splashed in every puddle in the carpark. He was wailing about his wet feet before they'd even got in the door. The pub was thick with swirled carpets and smelled of spilled beer. The barman gave them a funny look when Feather asked for a burger but then he shrugged and nodded at a little round table in the corner, told them he'd have to turn on the fryer special.

While they waited, Feather pulled Fox's shoes off and cupped his feet in her hands to get them warm again. The cool, damp of his skin reminded her of when he was a baby, soft as white bread.

When it arrived, the burger was limp looking, the bun curling at the edges, the chips pale and soft. Fox licked the ketchup off the underside of the bun and pushed wet rags of lettuce on to Feather's side of the plate. She made him eat slowly, pretending to be posh, nibbling each chip, their little fingers sticking out.

The barman came over eventually, took their plate. 'I'm no babysitter,' he said, whipping a dishtowel across the table, sweeping up the strands of lettuce, the smudge of mayonnaise. 'Where yous stayin?'

'Our mum is booking us into a B&B.'

The barman laughed, short and sharp. 'Ha! What, here in Fennloch?' He flipped the cloth over his shoulder. 'Yous here on yer holidays?'

‘No,’ Feather snapped. ‘We’re visiting my gran in Pitlochry.’ It was the same line she used most places they went. They were just passing through. A dead aunt in Glasgow. A sick dog in Inverness. ‘It’s just for one night.’

‘Well, there’ll no be many places open this time of the year. Not high season quite yet.’ He stopped talking, looked round as the door swung open and there was Mumma, jaw tight, eyes smudged charcoal black. She’d changed out of her trainers into her fancy boots, had ditched her rain jacket for a black sequinned top that swung round her middle in glittery waves. Her hair was swept up into a high pony, twisted in curls to hide her red roots.

Feather closed her eyes. Tipped her head back. She knew what Mumma’s good boots and big hair meant. That there weren’t any B&Bs. The barman had been right. She shut her eyes, leant her head back against the wall. She should be used to this by now. Sitting up in dingy pubs with a plate of cold chips while Mumma found them somewhere to stay, someone to pay the bill. She still didn’t like it though. It was better when it was just the three of them. Last night they’d been lying on the bonnet of the car watching the stars, a blanket wrapping them burrito-tight. Fox squeezed into the middle so he didn’t fall, Mumma’s hand curled tight into the tangles of Feather’s hair. It seemed a million miles away now.

Mumma flopped down on the seat next to Feather. She leant over, brushing the top of Fox’s head. He was yawning, rubbing his eyes. It was getting late. ‘What are you dreaming about, Feather?’

‘About not this place,’ Feather muttered, keeping the words all soft and mumbled.

Mumma planted a kiss just above Feather’s ear. ‘Grumble, grumble, Birdy. OK, it might not be Balmoral but it’s not the end of the world.’

‘Are you sure? Cos it definitely feels like it.’ Feather sighed, rolled her shoulders.

‘Aye, well there’s a Super-Save and a Freeze-Foods here!’ Mumma made her eyes big, then winked. ‘I know you want to get to Callan. Somewhere a bit bigger, hey? We’ll get there, chicky.’

‘Did you ask about the car?’ Feather didn’t want to give in to Mumma’s joking. Didn’t want to pretend like she wasn’t still annoyed at being abandoned in the car and then the pub all day.

‘They can get someone out on Monday.’ Mumma prodded at her hair, smoothed down the sequins on her top.

‘Monday!’ Feather shifted Fox who was leaning heavy against her ribs. He was a dead weight when he was sleeping. ‘That’s ages.’

Mumma shrugged. ‘Just the weekend, Feather.’ She took Feather’s Coke, finished it off, shaking the half-melted ice cubes round in the bottom of the glass, then looked around. The pub was starting to get busy. A football match was flashing on a TV mounted on the wall. Men mostly, with pints balanced on too-small tables, arms folded across bulging bellies.

Mumma rummaged in her bag, pulled out her makeup bag. She smeared berry-red gloss across her lips and pouted into a mirror. ‘Anyway. Fennloch. It’s a bit small, but it’s nice, cosy, right? We could, you know, let things blow over. A weekend, maybe a couple more days.’ She smacked her berry lips. ‘You want another Coke?’

Feather shook her head. She couldn’t reach it anyhow with Fox all heavy and in the way, leaning against her arm.

‘OK,’ Mumma turned to Feather: ‘Hey listen, Birdy. Listen – Feather – I know it’s not what we planned, but I got a good feeling about Fennloch.’

‘Sure.’ Feather shifted again, wiggled her toes. She was starting to lose circulation in her legs. She was bored and hot and she’d sat in a million pubs like this one, and she already hated how she knew it was going to end.

‘See that bloke over there? The one in the red shirt?’

Feather looked over to where Mumma was pointing. A man slouched on a barstool. A scratchy blue tattoo, wound its way up the back of his neck on to his lumpy shaven head. A snake, a tentacle, she couldn’t quite make it out.

‘He’s a nice guy. Met him in town. Owns the garage.’

‘Mumma.’ Feather’s stomach tightened.

‘Don’t Mumma me.’ Mumma stood up, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. ‘Let me take care of things, Birdy. That’s my job.’

The man watched Mumma walk towards him then snaked a thick arm round her waist, pulled her close.

Fox stirred next to Feather, yawning.

‘Hey, Fox cub.’ Feather brushed hair from his eyes. ‘It’s OK, you can sleep.’

‘Where’s Mumma?’

‘Mumma’s busy.’

‘What about us?’

Feather thought for a moment. She watched Mumma across the pub, leaning into the tentacle man, sipping on a glass of something heavy looking. ‘Mumma said to wait for her in the car.’

*

The night was cold and Feather shivered as they walked through the sandy carpark. She carried Fox, his bare feet dangling by her knees.

‘Ugh you are so heavy, Fox.’ Feather hoisted him higher, was out of breath by the time they got to the car. She dropped him on to the backseat, stretched out the ache in her back.

There was a group of kids, maybe her age, a bit older, sitting in a huddle on the bench across the way. They were laughing, yelling, pulling at each other. Their legs tangled up in knots, the girls sprawled across the boys, looping their arms around their waists. Feather felt their eyes on her, watching as she hurried Fox into his pyjamas, the trousers three inches too short for him, the cuffs tight around his calves.

He pushed her hands away. ‘I can do it.’

Feather sighed. Let him wriggle into his pyjama top, watched as he got it twisted across his shoulders, the wrong way around. He peered cross-eyed at the label tickling his nose.

‘You need to stop growing, Foxy.’ Feather helped him pull it the right way around, tugged it down over the wide strip of stomach showing at the bottom.

Fox reached his arms up so his fingers grazed the roof of the car. He raised his eyebrows like that might make him even taller still and that made Feather laugh. Too loud. She heard the kids across the street fall quiet, listening as well as watching and her lungs tightened, her cheeks burning hot. She held her breath, waited for them to start shouting, wanting to know who she was, what she was doing, but there was just a beat of silence, then a shriek, one of the girls yelling that there’d been a hand up her shirt, laughing *You animal! You prick!* And Feather felt their attention fall away. She made Fox brush his teeth before he got in the car, poured water into his mouth from the flask and he swilled and spit, spattering the dust with mint-fresh foam.

*

Feather pulled her headphones down around her neck, tugged the blanket further over her lap. The pink glow of the pub's neon sign made Fox's pale skin shine almost purple. She could hear the rat-a-tat of the music spill out every time the door swung open. The kids across the road had drifted away. She watched men stumble out, each one catching their balance as they hit the cold night air. A few were followed by women, swaying on high platform shoes. Feather waited for Mumma. It was getting late. Her eyes felt heavy, it had been a long day. She yawned. Felt herself start to drift, thoughts seeping into sleep, the flamingo pink fading.

Someone rapped on the window of the car.

'Birdy. Fox. Hey. Wake up now. Come on, hurry.' Mumma opened the car door. She started pulling at Fox, dragging him out from under the blanket.

'Leave him, Mumma.' Feather leant across, pushed her hands away. 'What are you doing?'

'Feather, stop whining.' Mumma's breath smelt of lemonade and peach schnapps. 'We're going home with Lyzard. He's a real nice guy. He's got a pool.'





NATALIA MARKLAND

Natalia Markland grew up in Soviet Russia, studied English at Moscow State University and now lives in London with her husband and three children. A lifelong fan of science fiction, she always dreamed of writing her own sci-fi novel.

About *Tomorrow Starts Yesterday*

Kill or be killed. Is there no other way?

For years, humans have searched space for alien life. Instead, we could have pieced together clues of its existence right here. By looking closer, we would realise that three hundred and fifty years ago we shared our planet with another race, the Azori, before they were forced to leave. Where are they now? Why can't we remember them?

Seven teenagers, each representing a different continent, are told the truth. Together they must decide how to deal with the Azori fleet now headed for us, wanting revenge. But every plan the group can devise has been tried on alternate versions of Earth. Each one has failed.

Matt Payne is used to beating impossible odds. Can we put our faith in a wild card with his own agenda?

Tomorrow Starts Yesterday is an eighty-thousand-word sci-fi adventure aimed at young adult readers.

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TOMORROW STARTS YESTERDAY

Chapter One

It's Friday night and the pub is heaving, full of City traders and brokers. They drink and laugh and drink loads more, no doubt celebrating another smashing week of getting richer. Their words start to slur, their eyes get cloudy from too much booze, but the air around them still reeks of success and superiority. It must be nice to care about nothing else in the world but your own precious self. Wiping sweat off my forehead, I glance around the dark, noisy room. It's almost time.

'Excuse me.' A young guy in a crumpled pinstriped suit bumps into my chair. He's got an open champagne bottle in one hand and three glasses in the other. The champagne fizzes, spitting foam all over the jacket I borrowed from Ludo's dad.

'Watch it.' I try to move out of his way, but there's no space.

Me, Ludo and Johnny are sitting at the tiny table right opposite the counter, where everybody has to squeeze past us to buy more drinks. That's the best place to watch the City's finest as they stumble to the bar to settle their tabs.

'Matt?' Johnny's elbow sinks into my ribs. 'Is it time yet?'

I check my watch. 'Soon.'

'Another round?' he asks.

I shake my head. We need to stay focused.

This has to be perfect. Exactly seven years ago Dad brought me and Sam to a pub like this one. It was Sam's birthday, and Dad's idea of a perfect celebration was to run a family con to pay for our meal.

'The younger you start,' he told us then, 'the longer you get to practise. By the time the police can punish you, they shouldn't be able to catch you.'

Today my brother would've turned sixteen, so here I am, ready to *pay my respects*. But Johnny has no idea what's really going on; only Ludo knows why tonight is so important. He nods at the half-empty glasses on our table and grins. Three pints each and no money to pay for them. Not yet anyway.

'Cheers.' Ludo raises his glass.

To our right, three loud suits finish their drinks.

'Come on,' I mutter. 'Don't be shy, get your wallets out.' They order another round and put it on their tab.

Twenty more minutes go by, but still nobody is flashing cash. It's getting late, so I quickly check my phone. Tonight is the worst night of the year for Mum and I ought to be home making sure she doesn't do something stupid. But I owe it to Sam to prove that I remember him.

'See Arsenal win last night?' Johnny asks.

I ignore him. Ludo frowns and shakes his head. He knows better than to distract me while I'm choosing a mark. The clock reaches quarter past midnight before the same pinstriped trader who splashed champagne over me staggers towards the bar. He waves his wallet and I glimpse the twenties peeping out of the shiny leather.

'We're on,' I whisper to Ludo. Following my glance, Ludo picks up the remainder of his drink and stumbles after the guy, bumping into as many chairs as he can find along the way.

I watch him make his way to the counter and, for a moment, instead of Johnny, there's Sam sitting in the chair next to mine and it's Dad in the distance waiting for me, but I'm too nervous to move ...

'Sorry!' Ludo booms when the next pissed-off customer looks up. I shake off the memory.

'Where're you going?' I rush after him. 'Come back.'

Ludo reaches the pinstriped trader just as he rests his wallet on the counter and clicks his fingers at the bartender. Right then Ludo trips, splashing his drink into the guy's face. By instinct the trader lets go of the wallet to rub his eyes. Immediately, Ludo grabs hold of the guy's jacket and hugs him tight. 'Sorry, man. Really sorry. I'll clean this up for you.'

'I'm fine,' protests the suit. 'Let go.' Only, instead of looking at Ludo, he glances at me. Is he on to us? I freeze, my heart twisting. But the guy is back to struggling to free himself from Ludo's rugby tackle. False alarm.

'It's all right, I'm taking him home.' I slot myself between Ludo and the bar, hiding the wallet. My left hand is on Ludo's shoulder for everyone to see. At the same time, I slide my right hand towards the cash. One beat. My fingers grip the spines of three crunchy notes and pluck them out. Two beats. I wrap them around my thumb, crumpling them inside my fist, then stick them into the pocket of my trousers. Done. Just like Dad.

'Happy Birthday, Sam,' I whisper under my breath.

'Let go.' The trader sounds angry.

'Enough.' I grab both of Ludo's shoulders and give them a shake. 'Wait outside while I pay.' That's his cue I've got the money.

'No hard feelings, right?' Ludo releases the guy and struggles towards the exit, where Johnny has already opened the door for him.

'You OK?' I ask the red-faced trader.

'Yeah.' He picks up his wallet and sticks it into his back trouser pocket while he tucks in his shirt.

In the meantime, I get our bill together with the fake credit card we used for our tab, pull out the nicked sixty quid and tell the bartender to keep the change. A few seconds later I'm back with Johnny and Ludo, walking down the street towards Bank station.

'That was brilliant!' Johnny beams, looking up at Ludo and then even further up at me. 'I watched but still couldn't see how Matt did it.'

'That's the whole point,' Ludo says. 'Nobody seeing. Cos Matt's a pro.'

Johnny looks at me the way I used to look at Dad. 'I'd like to be that good one day,' he says.

'Then you need to practise.'

'Sure.' Johnny nods like he understands. 'What I don't get is, why not take more?'

The last thing I want to do right now is to explain why tonight wasn't about the money, so I let Ludo come up with an excuse. 'Why risk it?' he says. 'This way the guy won't even realise he's sixty quid lighter. Too drunk to remember how much he spent.'

Johnny grins. 'Still can't believe we got served in a pub.'

'Have to be confident, that's all.' Ludo pulls his wise man face. 'It's a stupid rule anyway. We're almost eighteen, so why do they even care?'

Johnny sighs. 'I'm always asked for ID. You guys are lucky to be so tall.'

Ludo laughs and we jump down the steps of the Royal Exchange towards the tube entrance.

Johnny grabs my sleeve. 'We aren't going home yet, are we?'

'It's late,' I say.

'Pubs are still open. And it's not like there's school tomorrow ...'

I cut him off. 'Free riders don't make the rules.'

The sparks in Johnny's eyes die. Ludo raises an eyebrow. That was harsh, and it's not Johnny's fault I have to rush back home.

'Next time we're running *The Good Samaritan*, you can have a go.' I offer as an apology.

'Thanks, man.' He beams. That's what I like about Johnny – he doesn't hold a grudge. I check my phone again. Still no messages or missed calls. We get inside the station.

The Central line train takes ages to arrive. We race to change to the Piccadilly and manage to pile into the train to Arsenal just before the doors close. When we emerge at the other end, the clock shows 1am.

'See you tomorrow?' Johnny asks.

'Maybe,' says Ludo. 'Matt?'

I wish I could just make plans like that, but I have to check what things are like at home first. 'Not sure. I'll text you.'

'Later.'

'Want the jacket back?' I ask Ludo.

'Nah, keep it just in case.'

Ludo and Johnny turn left. I have to walk up the hill and through the park to get home. The night is warm and muggy and I wish I'd given back the jacket. Too late. I jog, sweating, trying to be as quick as I can. At the top of the hill I stop to catch my breath and feel my phone vibrate. There are seven missed calls from Mum since we got into the tube. Crap. There's no time to walk around the fields, so I head for the alleyway instead. It's a bad idea to use the shortcut at night, but I don't have a choice. It'll be fine. Just a short walk between the back wall of the school and the metal fence surrounding the football pitches and I'll be on our street.

Most of the streetlamps along the way don't work, but luckily there's plenty of moonlight for me to enjoy the view of graffiti covering the entire school wall. I'm halfway through when a sudden muffled noise makes the

hairs on the back of my neck shiver. I stop. The alleyway ahead of me bends and I can't see what's going on.

'H-h-h-h-m-m-m!'

I jolt. Maybe it's better to go around, just to be on the safe side. But that'll take at least ten minutes. Mum can do a lot of damage in ten minutes.

'Help!'

It's a girl. This changes things. I can't leave a girl to be mugged or ... worse. But what if Mum's in trouble?

'Please! Help!'

I charge forward. He won't see me coming. He? Or they? Shit! Why didn't I think of that? It's too late to stop. I skid around the corner and there they are: two men and a girl.

The first guy is holding her from behind. I can't see his face, only his hand plastered over the girl's mouth. His other arm is wrapped tight around her tiny waist. The second man is trying to wrestle her handbag from her, but she's holding on to it as if it's stuffed with gold.

'Leave her alone!' I shout as I aim my shoulder at the second guy, run and crash into his back. My bones jar like I've hit a concrete wall. He lets go of the bag and turns towards me, flexing his neck, his muscles bulging beneath his shirt. A sour taste fills my mouth. He's going to beat the life out of me. This is a mistake.

'Please!' The girl's lips tremble, her eyes are huge. For a moment that's all I can see. Then a fist flies into my face.

I stumble backwards, my arms flailing. The guy steps closer. He's young, my age. Pale skin, narrow lips, hooked nose. And his eyes. Cold and colourless. Fish eyes. I shudder and he punches me straight in the gut.

The blow knocks me off my feet. I lie on my side clutching my stomach, gasping for air. The girl drops her bag on the ground and the guy behind her lets her go. Instead of running away, she walks towards me. What the hell is she doing?

The girl leans forward, studying my face. She's so close, her long, blond curls almost touch my cheeks. I notice something odd about her expression. She doesn't look scared. At all. Suddenly she smiles and it hits me – I've just been conned.

'I don't have any money,' I manage to wheeze out.

‘Not a problem.’ The second guy towers over me. ‘I have enough for both of us, right?’

I look up and break into a cold sweat. It’s the pinstriped trader from the pub. Only the suit is gone. But how is he here?

‘Are you sure about this one?’ he asks the girl.

‘Who are you?’ I blurt. ‘The police?’

‘Quiet.’ He aims his boot at my face. I curl into a ball, covering my head. Shit, not the police. Shit. Shit. How am I going to get home?

‘Enough,’ the girl says. ‘He came to my rescue, so it’s my decision.’ The guys take a step back and she stares at me, frowning.

‘Look, if it’s the money you’re after,’ I hurry, ‘I can double it for you.’

Fish Eyes and Trader just stand there. Blank expressions. The girl keeps frowning.

‘OK, just tell me how much you need.’ I roll on to my knees.

‘It’s not about the money,’ she says.

‘I get it. You want something else.’ I try to crouch. ‘What is it?’

The girl sighs. ‘Deep down, you must be a good person, Matt.’

I flinch. ‘How do you know my name?’

‘We know everything about you.’

Bloody brilliant. They’ve been watching me. They might know where I live.

‘Just tell me what you want.’

‘I’m going to give you a chance,’ the girl says.

‘What chance?’

‘A chance to save your planet.’

I stare at her. Is she kidding me? She isn’t smiling. ‘What do you mean?’

‘I’ll tell you everything once you cross over.’

‘Cross over what? The road?’

She smiles. ‘You’ll see.’

Cross over. Save the planet. They *are* taking the piss. Or they’re nutters.

‘So what do you say?’ the girl asks.

‘Err ...’ I play for time as I shift my weight on to my toes. If I charge forward now, will I be able to get away?

She shakes her head like she knows what I’m about to do. ‘Are you with us or not? Choose.’

I glance at the two guys, at their stony faces. Some choice. If I'm going to run, I need them to trust me. 'Sure. I'm with you.'

'Hold him,' the girl says.

Fish Eyes grabs my shoulders and pushes me back on to the ground. I try to roll away, but Trader is faster. He flattens my legs and sits on top of my knees, pinning me to the ground. My head is banged on to the asphalt.

'Wait! What are you going to do?'

'Don't be scared.' The girl takes a deep breath and her face turns semi-transparent. I open and close my mouth, but can't say a word. What kind of trick is that? Her shoulders start to look glassy too. She's like a felt tip drawing on cling film. I can see the red brick wall right behind her.

'What the ...' I mumble as I watch her fade.

She's vanishing faster and faster until the only thing left is the outline of her body. One more blink and she's gone. I gasp for air. I've never seen anything like that in my life.

'How did she ... what's going on?'





LUCY MOHAN

People often joke about Lucy being an eternal student but it's not too far from the truth. She's spent over twenty-five years of her life in education (so far ...) either studying subjects like media and creative writing, or teaching media and English in secondary schools.

She lives and breathes horror and fantasy and wrote her first stories as a teenager, always searching for new and gruesome ways to terrify her friends. It was inevitable, therefore, that Lucy would become a storyteller of things that scare her.

About *The Sixes and Seven*

One chosen to save the world: one chosen to end it.

When sixteen-year-old Faye learns of a looming apocalypse, she wonders if it's such a bad thing. With her mum always away and after the death of her best friend, Faye feels she has nothing left. But it isn't long before she begins to question everything she thought she knew about the world and the people in it.

Faye and a group of mismatched teens are taken to Glastonbury where they discover a prophecy linking them to the apocalypse. But, when they all become targets of the demon, Lix, Faye is left with one burning question: is the world worth saving?

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THE SIXES AND SEVENS

Chapter One

The frost has made everything cold and bitter tonight, including my mood.

I work hard at my expression – or lack of one. Mum taught me that: how to show nothing on your face, even when your mind is spinning.

Beanie's footsteps tap endlessly behind me as she paces the pavement. I stare ahead, my back to her.

The rest of the street is empty except for one man and his sign on a stick. 'Beware,' he shouts. 'The end of the world is nigh.'

I roll my eyes. He's preaching to the wrong girl. If the end of the world is coming, bring it on. This planet could use a makeover.

'Faye, I said I'm sorry.' Beanie's footsteps stop behind me but I don't turn around. She sighs – loud, so I can hear.

The man ventures close enough that I'm able to make out words on his placard: some bullshit about a pale horse and Death. With a capital D.

I shiver.

'Faye!' Beanie yells.

I turn around – my lips squashed together – but I don't expect what I see. Mascara tears map their way down Beanie's face and, for a second, I almost drop my mask.

'You just don't get it,' she says and stares at me with that look. The look that says I don't understand her. That I never will. Despite the fact we've been inseparable for the last ten years. Despite the fact that she shares *every* little detail of her life with me; even when images I'd rather erase permanently scorch themselves into my frontal lobe *for ever*.

And yet, I still *don't get it*.

'I have to go home,' she says.

I don't say anything.

Beanie shuffles from foot to foot, biting her nails down to the skin. 'You should go too?'

I sit on a street bench behind me, folding then unfolding my arms. She promised she'd come to this gig weeks ago. And now, as usual, she's backing out.

That's why I'm mad, but I have no idea why she's crying about it.

'Faye, please. Don't be angry.' She wraps her yellow scarf around her neck. 'My parents are waiting up and it's late and we're underage – we won't get in and –' She pauses, wiping her cheek, 'we have school tomorrow and mocks after Christmas.' Her face crumples.

'Seriously ... school?' I roll my eyes and clench my fists. It's like all she thinks about.

No one at school cares about us. They don't even know we exist. But I can imagine her parents nagging, wanting her to get good results. And Beanie, being Beanie, won't want to disappoint them.

It's important, Faye,' she whispers. 'Come with me.'

'I'm fine,' I say through gritted teeth.

She probably doesn't want to leave me here alone at night – and maybe she shouldn't be walking home on her own this late either – but I'm too mad at her to worry about that.

'Now isn't the time for one of your moods, Faye. God!' She throws her hands up in the air. 'I'm going.'

But she isn't moving: just staring.

She's biting her lip so hard it goes white, cracks; she wipes away a drop of blood with the back of her hand. We've argued before. We've argued about this exact thing before. But she's never got this upset. I don't actually know if I've ever seen her this upset.

I probably should say something. Should I feel bad that I don't want to?

Beanie pushes her hands under her armpits and breathes out. A puff of frosty air hides her face. 'Faye?'

'Yeah?'

'Do you want to say goodnight or something?'

'Night,' I say, but my eyes focus on the frost sticking between the cracks in the pavement.

'We can go out another time. We have that other gig in January,' she says, trying to sound upbeat. She doesn't.

'Sure,' I say.

'I'm leaving. I mean it.' She turns her body slightly.

'I'm not stopping you.' My insides twist. I hate the way that sounded. But I can't take it back now.

'You can be such a –' She throws her hands up in frustration, her voice turning from optimistic to irritated to angry in seconds.

I tend to do that to people.

She's sucking in her lips and I think she's about to start crying again. God, what is wrong with her?

'Goodnight, Beanie.' I'm forcing a smile. 'Say hi to your parents for me.'

Beanie groans and turns away. Her parents hate me. Beanie says it's not me they hate. But what else is there?

'Goodnight.' She says it to the night air, to the rest of the world. Not to me.

I look at the back of her red hair snuggled in that yellow scarf. I wonder what her face is saying now. Is it still crying? Scrunched up? Disappointed?

I don't see why I should care. She doesn't seem to care about my feelings. Just because I don't wear them on my face every day doesn't mean I don't have them.

I guess she doesn't get me either.

Beanie walks away but stops at the corner, under an orange streetlight. It makes her hair flicker like fire. Just before she turns out of view, she looks over her shoulder at me. Her eyes widening, her forehead creasing.

My stomach knots. I open my mouth to say something – so I don't leave it like this – but I'm not good with words, never have been. I didn't mean to be such a bitch.

A cloud of breath surrounds Beanie's head, like she's speaking or sighing. She's too far away to tell which. I hold her stare for a second. Then look at the floor.

When I glance back up, she's gone.

I sit there for a few minutes contemplating whether to go to the gig alone. I should – that’s what Beanie thinks I’m doing – but, without her, it won’t be much fun. And she’s right, I won’t get in. Beanie looks older and if I have any chance of getting past security it would be with her.

There’s nothing left to do but go home.

Home, what a joke.

My stomach grumbles so I stop at the corner shop at the end of my street. The closed sign hangs lopsided in the window, surrounded by a piece of scrawny tinsel. It’s usually open until nine o’clock. I wonder if it’s later than I realise but, when I check my phone, it’s only just gone eight.

Ice has its grip on almost everything tonight, even the car windscreens are glittering alongside the Christmas lights. I blow hot air into my palms and rub my cheeks but the heat is lost before I touch my skin. A gust of icy wind pushes me from behind and, for a second, I think I hear someone call my name. It sounds far away, like a hiss. I glance behind me – maybe Beanie came back – but there’s no one there.

I pull my leather jacket across myself and quicken my pace. It used to be my dad’s so it wraps around me easily. I feel a little warmer which could be due to the jacket but it’s more likely from the thought of him wearing it: before I was born, before we moved here, before he died and left me alone with Mum.

The silhouette of my house juts up into the dark sky, its black windows reminding me of the emptiness inside. I walk up my path, kicking weeds that even the frost can’t kill. At least Beanie has a bright, warm home to go to; parents who care (even if sometimes too much); an annoying brother; a hot dinner; a warm bed.

The smell of damp hits me as soon as I open the door and my stomach clenches. I never get used to it. It’s cold too; heating packed in last week. I haven’t been able to get hold of Mum to sort it out. I could ring the gas man, pretend to be her. I’ve done it before – maybe tomorrow.

I zap a microwaveable pasta meal from the fridge – it’s only two days past its best before date – and cut the dried end off a block of cheese, sprinkling the rest over the top of the pasta. I eat it standing at the counter.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I put it next to my plate and stare at it, shoving another piece of pasta in my mouth.

It's Beanie's home number.

I feel the heat rise in my cheeks again: anger, guilt, disappointment?

Whatever the reason, I don't like feeling it.

My finger hovers over the green accept button but the phone rings off before I can press it.

I'm not even sure I was going to.

If it's important she'll ring back. I don't have anything to say anyway. Well, nothing nice. Some things are more important than school and pleasing your parents. There's nothing wrong with having fun.

The food is undercooked and tastes of cardboard but at least it's warm. I push a bit more down my throat before throwing the rest away.

The lightbulb in the living room blows as I turn it on, so I settle into the darkness and pull a blanket around me. The news is on, showing clips of starving children. That's all that seems to be on the news these days: endless misery and suffering.

There's a horror film on another channel. The bad acting keeps me awake for a while. But my mind is wandering. Wandering to Beanie's red hair, her creased forehead, her crying eyes; wandering to my folded arms, my silence, that missed call. And then my eyes are closing. I'm listening to the distant screaming and jumpy soundtrack until they drift away too.

Somewhere my phone vibrates but I'm too tired and it's too late and, anyway, I'll see her in school tomorrow ...

Chapter Two

It's 9am.

That's what the clock above the TV says. I'm still in the armchair and my alarm hasn't gone off. School started fifteen minutes ago.

Shit!

Makeup from last night – still good; hair up; yesterday's jeans and a T-shirt (still wrinkled and a bit damp) off the radiator.

I catch myself in the mirror. I've looked worse.

‘Sorry I’m late.’ I practise into the reflection.

The tip of my phone is poking out from the side of the chair I slept on. I pry it free and shove it quickly in my jacket pocket.

If I miss a day, they might call Mum – that’s if they can get hold of her – but, if I make it in time for second lesson, the chances of that happening are less likely. The last thing I need right now is Mum mad at me. It’s easier when she just stays away.

I slam the front door shut. At the same time, a rumble of thunder rocks the grey sky. A few neighbours are gathered on the pavement near my gate. I don’t know their names. They turn and stare at me as I pass. Eyebrows V shaped and mouths in straight lines: *my biggest fans*. They keep staring so I give them my best *like I care* look and walk off.

‘Sorry I’m late.’ I practise again. I *almost* sound sorry.

My school – St Jude’s – is the only Catholic comprehensive in Sibrydion. Being one of the smallest towns in south Wales, nowhere takes that long to get to. The school, therefore, is only a few minutes away from my house. This isn’t always a good thing, but today I’m glad of it.

I consider running into the corner shop for breakfast but it’s still weirdly closed. The windows are dark, but I look through anyway. There’s no movement inside. I don’t want to be any later so I leave the shop behind me and pull out my phone to check the time: *eleven missed calls*.

What? I remember ignoring one call – or was it two – but *eleven*?

There are three voice mails too. The first is from last night: ‘*Faye, this is Mrs Beane. Abbey hasn’t come home yet. Is she still with you? She’s not picking up.*’

I snort. Typical Beanie family melodrama.

The second: ‘*Faye, where are you? I still haven’t heard from Abbey. Call me.*’

There’s an edge of panic to her voice. It echoes around in my head, my chest, my gut. But I’m almost at school. I’ll find Beanie there, in English, rolling her eyes at my lack of punctuality.

But there’s a niggle at the back of my brain. Why had it taken her so long to get home?

The final message: ‘*Faye ...*’ Mrs Beane’s voice is quivering, crying. ‘*Faye ... please, please call me.*’

This last message was from 6:30am this morning. I almost drop the phone. She hadn’t gone home at all? She said that’s where she was going but she

I round the corner and freeze.

No one's inside the school. Everyone is out on the grass, the road, the pavement. There's police tape and police and teachers and students and parents and someone is grabbing my shoulders and saying my name.

'Faye, Faye – thank God! You're all right.'

I turn to the voice. It's my form tutor: Mr Westby. He's looking at me, his eyes watery.

'Faye, we've been ringing you all morning,' he says. 'We were just about to send someone to your house.'

My house phone's been disconnected for months.

'Sorry ... I'm late ...' The words tumble out of my mouth but I'm distracted and I'm confused and there are people crying. And a policeman is holding a plastic bag and inside is a yellow scarf.

'Faye?'

'What's going on?' I turn and look at him. 'Where's Beanie?'

'Faye, listen to me. We should go inside.'

But no one is inside. Everyone is out here. Everyone except Beanie.

'Where's Beanie?' I ask again, louder.

People turn and stare. They're all watching, looking at us with pale faces and wide eyes. My head feels funny. The school, the people, the street – they all blur. I reach out for something to hold, but there's only air.

I turn back to Mr Westby, whispering this time, my voice shaking: 'Tell me where she is.'





EMILY CHARLOTTE OULD

Emily has been writing since she was twelve years old. She grew up in Cornwall and always finds herself writing about family and falling in love for the first time. She studied creative writing at Falmouth University before going on to complete her masters in Writing for Young People. She's had short stories and poetry published, and has loved English language and publishing for as long as she can remember. She's also a big fan of country music. On completing her MA, she combined her love of country music and writing – something she never even thought possible – and wrote *Don't Fence Me In*. She finds setting hugely inspirational and often gets depressed in cities.

About *Don't Fence Me In*

It's 1989. Sixteen-year-old Bonnie Wild hates her teeny, tiny Texas hometown, Old Springs. There's nothing there but the heat, the dust and, just like every other small town, gossip. Lots of it. Every day is just the same old, same old. So, when aspiring country singer Beau Hartley shows up at a county fair one night, Bonnie's world is turned upside down.

But first love comes at a price.

Can she escape Old Springs with Beau in her stride and track down a father she's never met ... or will her roots keep her tied down?

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DON'T FENCE ME IN

Chapter One

Old Springs, Texas. 1989.

*I ain't leavin' this town
It's got my memories tied down
Only way I'm leavin' is if
You come round and tell me to quit'*

Let me tell you something about Texas. It's real hot. Like, swelteringly hot. If you cracked an egg on the pavement, it would fry. My hometown, Old Springs? It's just the same right over. A forgotten, sunbeaten town which nobody pays any mind to.

Sometimes I wish it might just burn down. That the heat would be enough to swallow it up, flames crackling, 'til all that's left is sparks and ash. That we could create something new out of the wreckage. But that'll never happen.

We're right on the outskirts of Texas near the Mexican border. Our dirt roads are full of potholes with weeds that are too stubborn to disappear. We don't get many tourists here, but when we do, it's usually 'cause they're lost.

I've lived here my whole life and the worst thing that's happened to us is a few storms and a couple hurricanes spreading their torment over our rooves. It's hot here, always hot. There's nothing more than a few beauty shops across town, an old dime store, and our sheriff, Tom Bale, wandering round with not a whole lot to do, except maybe flash his badge and have coffee with one

of the neighbours. The town's tiny houses and cheap dime stores look like they might crumble and fall apart any second.

There ain't no way in hell I'm staying here.

Because I haven't even done anything with my life yet, let alone been anywhere else in this huge world. I think about Washington and North Carolina and Michigan and get goose bumps pricking my skin. When I'm caught daydreaming 'bout it, my mama tells me to quit dragging my feet, but I just can't wait to get gone.

'Bonnie?' Mama calls. 'What ya doing out there?'

I'm sitting on the broken oak tree that lies square across our yard. It's the only place you can ever get any shade. It came down in a storm once and nobody ever bothered to move it since.

'Great Aunt Annie needs your help,' she calls again. 'Can you come here?'

I lie back across the thick branch and prop my turquoise sunglasses on top of my wild brown curls.

'Be right there,' I holler back.

In the hot Texas sun, you kinda need somewhere cool to kick back and relax. The knotty bark of the tree is rough against my bare legs and cool where I rest my hands. Mama can get real riled up when she wants to, mostly when I don't do exactly what she says *when* she says. But I don't see why I can't lie in the sun a little longer. It ain't exactly like my Great Aunt Annie is bed bound or nothing.

'You comin' or what?' I hear her again.

Pushing my sunglasses aside, I reluctantly scramble off the tree and tiptoe back into the house. The dusty heat sweeps over me as I wobble on the balls of my bare feet, making my way down the concrete path. The kitchen tiles welcome me inside, cool against my toes, after the heat of the rough ground outside.

I slump against the cold slab of kitchen counter where Mama's preparing vegetables for dinner.

'Can't you quit your lazing about for one afternoon?' she says, slicing the top off a carrot. 'You're always lounging around in the sun. Ain't you got better things to do?'

I shrug.

'Will you just look at yourself?' she carries on, throwing me a glance, and

I roll my eyes. 'Your hair's a mess and dirt's all over your face. Go wash. Then help your aunt. She's having trouble with her cards again. She's comin', Annie!'

She brushes me swiftly out of the kitchen, taking care not to bump my head on the low beam hanging above the door which leads to the small living room.

Great Aunt Annie is hunched in her usual spot in the old armchair. That chair's been part of our family for years. Great Aunt Annie is eighty-nine, but I know that chair ain't as old as her. Its patchwork squares are grubby with age and it's so threadbare that it's a real wonder she can sit in it at all without falling through. Her glasses sit on top of her head while she squints at the fresh newspaper on her lap.

I swish past her with my skirt and wait until she notices I'm standing real close. When she sees me, she pulls her glasses off her head and pushes them up along the edge of her nose.

'How you doin', Aunt Annie?' I ask and rest my knee on the side of her chair.

'I'm doing well, Sweet Thing,' she replies.

Ever since I was little I've never heard her call me anything but Sweet Thing. I've never been Bonnie to her, not since the day I was born. It's *always* been Sweet Thing, like she plucked me right out of a candy store.

'Now.' She squints as she points her rickety, old walking stick towards the chipped paint on the wall. 'Can you get that deck of cards out for me on top the fireplace? I can't get up, see.'

'Sure, Annie.' I pass her the deck of cards. 'You want me to shuffle?'

'No, I ain't that senile. Just sit and I'll roll 'em right up.'

She winks at me as I sit down on the carpet stool right opposite her patchy armchair and wait while she deals at expert pace. Apparently, before I was born, she used to be the fastest dealer in Texas. She still has her own neighbourhood bridge league and we always play a game of Ruby Red on Sunday afternoons, straight after church. Just me and her.

'You OK, Sweet Thing?' She looks at me from behind her deck of cards, still shuffling, and I smile back.

'I'm OK.'

But she carries on looking, so I try to throw off her watery stare and look

out the window instead. When Great Aunt Annie stares at me I always get a weird feeling, like she's seeing right through me. Her old eyes are like a watery film, the kind that can glide right into your soul, unannounced and uninvited. More than once, she's known what's on my mind, and I'm worried she knows it now. Even worse, I'm worried Mama knows it too.

Because, even though I may hate this town down to its roots, if it weren't for Great Aunt Annie, I'd be out of this zip code before you could say gone.

'Bonnie?' Mama calls now from the kitchen. 'Come here. I need your help with something.'

'I'm helping Great Aunt Annie with her cards. Like you asked.'

She breezes into the living room. Her hair is like mine, with wild brown curls and flicks that curve out at the end. But her hair is short, while mine is long and tangled.

'I almost forgot. Take this over the road to Mrs Tucker,' she says, handing me a large brown envelope. It has Mrs Tucker's name on the front in big black letters, the handwriting neat and liling. But it stays in the air, breaching the space between us, while she waits for me to take it.

'But I'm helping Aunt Annie with her cards,' I say again, still sitting on the stool.

'I need you to take this letter, Bonnie.' She flaps it once in my direction.

'Why?'

'Don't concern you right now, does it? Please, baby, just do it.'

She's softened, so I get up off my knees and take the letter. I notice it isn't even her handwriting. Before I can ask her whose it is, she's left the room and holes herself back up in the kitchen, peeling more vegetables like there ain't no tomorrow.

'I want you to take it now, Bonnie,' she shouts from the kitchen.

I peep through the doorway. Her back is turned and her hands are busy. I glance back at Great Aunt Annie before I go, making sure she's all right, and she gives me another wink.

Then I slip on my boots and step outside where it's just me and the hot Texas sun. I take a step forward, snap my shades down and the street goes a whole shade of tinted blue.

The ground is hot and dry. Mr Martinez waves to me on the other side of the road, walking his dog, and I wave back before walking five doors down to

Mrs Tucker's. Our town is so old it looks like it might as well be a part of the Wild West.

Walking along the sidewalk, I try to imagine our local thrift store as an old saloon, filled with women with breasts as big as watermelons squeezed inside clinching corsets and men guzzling whiskey all day; clouds of dust rising up from the ground as rickety wagons roll by and masked bandits on horseback gallop across town.

But the daydream fades as I catch Mrs Montgomery slipping out the double doors of the liquor store, rimmed glasses on her head and her white-grey hair perfectly permed. Just like that, I'm pulled back to the present day.

You know, at sixteen, it's hard living here. We're a dirt road town that leads to nowhere, known only to drifters and folk who live here already. Sometimes, it's like the rest of America has forgotten about us, wiped us off its heel and left us in the dirt. Even worse, I think the people here like it that way.

Two minutes later and I'm right outside Mrs Tucker's. Swinging baskets of hibiscus flowers hang up in the porch, floating like froth on top a milkshake at Creaky Joe's Diner across town.

Before I make my way up the path, I unlatch the gate in front of her house where a huge tomcat is lounging on the windowsill outside. Ginger. At least that's what we call him. He doesn't belong to Mrs Tucker any more than I belong in Old Springs, but he still hangs round here every day. I stroke his ears as I walk up the front porch.

'Still here, Ginge?' I run my fingers all the way to the end of his tail. 'I guess it's hard to leave this place, huh?'

'Is that Bonnie?' a voice says behind a screen door and I look up. There's Mrs Tucker, already waving at me with a green watering can in her hand.

She pulls me into a hug once she's out on the porch and I catch the scent of her perfume: midnight rose, which she hasn't changed all my life.

'Now,' she says, hitching up her skirt, 'what can I help you with, dear?'

'Mama wanted me to give you this,' I say, showing her the letter in my hands.

'Ah, yes. She told me you would be here. Sweet tea?'

'Well, no,' I say. 'I have to get back but -'

'Follow me.'

She bobs away, leaving me and Ginger baking out in the sun. For a second

I think about staying out there with him, but shake the thought away as I hear Mrs Tucker already tinkling with the cups from her cupboard. I step into the little white house and click the door shut behind me. She tinkles in the kitchen as I slip off my boots.

The letter stays tight in my hand.





JO PESTEL

Jo was born in a little, historic city in Ireland, and brought up on Irish myths and Grimms' fairytales. As a child, she played among the ruins of a neglected Viking watchtower, squeezing past the 'Danger. Keep Out.' sign. Her city had crumbling walls, seven churches with tolling bells and the tower where Strongbow married Eva. The past was always present.

After studying Irish and Latin at University, she had four children, taught for years at a north London comprehensive, ran a teashop and worked as a hospice ward assistant. She's had poetry anthologised and published in various magazines, and several nonfiction articles in Irish Tatler. *The Night Writer* is her first story for young people.

About *The Night Writer*

The time is 586 AD. The place is Ireland.

Cahal's passion is to draw and colour; his father's vow forces him to live in the monastery of Clonbray.

Cahal is desperate to work on Clonbray's greatest treasure – a vellum Book with illustrations – the only Book of its kind in Ireland. Instead he has to spend long, lonely hours toiling in the fields. When Columba – monk, artist, prince and Clan ally – comes to Clonbray and arranges for Cahal to work in the Scriptorium, Cahal helps him defy the abbot, and secretly copy the book at night.

But then Columba demands a price Cahal cannot pay ...

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THE NIGHT WRITER IRELAND. TIR EOIN. A D 586

Chapter One

Revenge raid

Soon. It will be soon.
My horse quivers and shifts
My father holds up his hand
We watch for his signal

Bryn is riding beside him;
Bryn – four winters ahead of me
already a fearsome warrior
eyes blazing, axe raised.
My insides tighten. I lean forwards
Somewhere in the silence a curlew cries

My father twists in his saddle
looks each and every one of us in the eye
I long to please him, earn his praise
Fionnbrua and his men stole our cattle
We are going to take back that which is rightfully ours

I shiver, not from cold
The air sings with excitement
Yet I dread this coming battle
I long to be far from here

I long to be with Malachy
in the forge
bending and shaping the iron
peaceful

I look at my axe lying in its sheath
I have practised throwing it; my aim is true
I can bury it in wood
exactly where I want—
but to bury it in living flesh?
I shrink from that picture
I have seen a man return to our fortress with half an arm
hugging his useless, bloodied stump

I dare not let my father see my dread
He would despise me.

My father's hand drops and
'Clan Davnet Abu!'
Our battle cry roars into the morning
thwack and snap of our colours in the wind
my father first down the hill, axe aloft
Bryn straight after him, long hair streaming
I crouch over my saddle, my knees grip

Shrieks rend the air
A horse squeals
Children run, fall, are trampled
Axes swing and cleave all round me.
Sweat blinds me
I can hardly hold the reins
Bodies thud and fall. The gurgle of death cries.
My horse leaps over a man. I see his terrified eyes
The ground is slippery with blood
The air reeks of blood

Someone gallops across me
tosses a torch high on a roof
Up and up leap the yellow-red hungry flames
Heat blasts my face
A wail of terror – and three women burst from the house
One stumbles. Falls. I see hooves kick her face
Next moment her face is not there
'Clan Davnet Abu!'
Try not to hear
Try not to see or smell or taste this swirling madness
All I want is to get away
My father yells, 'Your axe. Use your axe, boy!'
I look at the axe. For a moment my fingers half grasp it
then I thrust it from me.

'Cahal! In God's name!'
A child flees past, wild-eyed.
'Get him!'
I cannot move
My father swoops, runs his spear through the child
swings him high
I see arms and legs squirm in the morning sunlight
Little. So little
My father blood-spattered. Laughing
'I knew it! Finnbrua's son.'
laughing
pulls the child off the spear
throws him at me
laughing

My arms reach up
my arms hold tight
hold the smallness of him
hold his aliveness close to me
feel his warm blood
soak right into me.

Afterwards I could not move. Afterwards they had to wrench him from me.

Chapter Two

Homecoming

All the way home my father railed.
In the name of God Almighty what was wrong with me? Had I forgotten I was a chieftain's son?

How could he ever again hold his head high?

On and on and on. And, of course, 'Why can't you be like your brother? Dear God in heaven, what have I done to deserve a son like you?'

Slumped in the saddle, I had no answer.

All the way home I could see the child's face, feel the imprint of his body.

I lay on my bed, re-living.

I had washed as though I would never again be clean; still the smell of blood tainted my skin. Rising heavy-eyed, I washed again. Aoife, my mother's servant attended me. Her face was kind, her hands were gentle. A pile of fresh clothes lay on the chair and I held them close, inhaling their faint sage smell.

Slowly, I dressed and went down to the courtyard.

Around me, the morning bustled. A cartload of turnips rattled along to the kitchens. Bent double, a workman lurched, his steps unsteady under a great bag of grain. Hens moaned and squawked. I watched a kitchen slave pause to eye a maidservant. Three fat hens lolled over his shoulder, their necks wrung.

Over by the far barricade shouts came from a group of boys practising combat skills. They swung their axes and hurled their spears, but stopped when I approached and I heard them muttering. I knew it was about me.

Inside the great hall, the air reeked of wine and vomit. I tried to breathe lightly. Dozens of indoor servants were clearing greasy platters off the table, righting chairs, sloshing buckets of water over the unspeakable mess on the floor. Yesterday's evening meal had lasted long into the night. I heard my

father roaring, his voice huge and strong; wild cheering accompanying his every declaration. Then the battle cry, *Clan Davnet Abu*, louder and louder, feet thumping faster, ever faster, until they became a continuous drumming.

Pushing the memory away, I went up the curving stone steps, and walked towards my mother's chamber. Her tapestries brightened the walls, the bedcover she had embroidered glowed yellow and orange and brown like woods in autumn. She lay on it now, looking pale, but smiled when she saw me. I knelt beside her. 'How are you today, Mother?'

'You mustn't worry, my Cahal. The new life stirring within me is greedy. It wants my strength too. But when the little one is born I will once more be fierce. You wait and see.' She reached up and caressed my cheek. 'What troubles you?'

'My father says I disgraced him. That I am not worthy to be his son.'

She drew her fingers through my hair. 'Your father knows how to fight and lead men. Your hands have a knowledge and skill that does not destroy. He does not yet know how to value you.'

My laugh was shaky. 'He wants to disown me.'

'When he is calmer, he will wish he had not said that.'

I longed to believe her, but before I could reply I heard his step on the stairs. He stood in the doorway, looking at me.

'Our upstart neighbour has dared to cross our borders and make off with our cattle.' His voice was without expression. 'Your brother and I ride out today to defend our Clan's honour. Your brother has planned to get back that which is rightfully ours. I can rely on your brother.' He advanced, his voice getting softer, more menacing. 'But you care nothing for that, do you my lad? You are content to sit and let Bryn do all your work.'

He swung round and began addressing an imaginary audience: 'And meanwhile, what is the brave Cahal up to? Let me tell you! My son Cahal, my *son*, is busy traipsing round with a bit of charcoal, making likenesses of birds and beasts – or else he's plucking at his harp or idling his time with those beneath his station. And when I want him – where do I find him?' His voice was rising, anger breaking out of him. 'Hiding under his mother's skirts. That's where.'

'I do not hide from you, Father.'

He ignored me. 'You should have seen him, Emer. Sitting as though frozen

– with Bryn having to cover his back.’ He turned, jabbing his finger in my face. ‘You didn’t even see that, did you, boy?’

He began pacing, waving his arms. ‘You are fleet of foot – I’ve seen you win at the Games. And you can wrestle – so why in God’s name can’t you fight to defend us?’

Glowering. Pace. Pace. Pace. Anger so fierce I could touch it.

He turned to my mother, pointing at me without looking at me. ‘That *amadan* didn’t lift his axe once. Not once. And if that wasn’t enough, he began crying over the traitor’s spawn – actually crying – in front of everyone. When I think of it!’ He put his hands to his temples. ‘Never has any Clan Davnet chieftain been so humiliated.’

My mother heaved herself up. ‘Let him be, Hugh. One day you will be proud of him.’

‘Of *him*? Never!’

Ignoring my mother’s cry, he bore down on me. ‘Listen, boy! Do you mean to tell me you’d stand by and watch while enemies sacked and burned our home?’ He pointed towards my mother. ‘Attacked Emer?’

‘I would always defend my mother!’

‘So why can’t you defend our honour?’

I didn’t know how to answer.

Below in the courtyard, a trumpet blew. The sound made him stop in mid-stride. Thrusting me out of his way, he peered out.

‘Bryn is assembling the horsemen.’ He turned and looked at me. ‘I give thanks to the great God Almighty that I have one true son, my firstborn. I can have pride in him.’ His voice went tight. ‘As for you – you ride with us.’

‘No.’ I backed away.

‘Come here!’

‘Hugh! Do not force him. No good will come of it.’

Grabbing my tunic, he pulled me towards him, his fist huge, his breath hot on my skin. ‘I tell you, boy, you will come with us.’

The face of the dead child flashed in my mind, and something went hard inside me.

‘I am not a coward, Father,’ I said, my voice trembling, ‘but I cannot kill.’

He raised his arm as though to strike – then suddenly hurled me from him so that I staggered and toppled sideways. I lay unable to move. Making a

sound deep in his throat, he crashed one fist into the ball of the other. 'You should have seen him, Emer. Sitting, not lifting a finger, while Bryn fought like three men to protect him.' He towered huge over me. 'You'd have been dead but for Bryn – do you know that? Nearly got run through he did, saving your wretched skin. And for what? What use are you to man or beast?'

'Hugh – stop! In God's name – stop.' She had risen from her bed and was holding her hands out to him. Her voice was a sob.

Drawing deep breaths, he slowly stilled, then went over to her and held her close, enveloping her. 'I am too loud. Forgive me, my love.' His voice became gentle. He kissed her forehead and her mouth and held her face in his hands. 'I forget how this little one is sapping your strength.'

She raised her hands and laid them on his huge ones, her fingers white, thin.

The trumpet blast rose again, tearing the air.

'We shall be back soon after nightfall. Rest well today. With God's help this little one will live.' He turned towards me. 'As for you – I'll deal with you when I return.'

He clattered down the stone staircase, calling to Bryn. Below in the courtyard, the men were assembling. Some were swinging their axes and whipping the air, hungry for revenge.

He mounted, his horse restless and pawing the ground. The flag-bearer rode to the front.

Bryn was issuing orders, his voice clear. Everyone was listening. He looked up at me and nodded, this warrior – almost a stranger – brother of mine, who got praise for every single thing he did.

My father held up his hand. A moment of silence. The flag was raised.

'Clan Davnet Abu!'

Round and round the courtyard the cry echoed, bouncing off the palisade, ricocheting back from the fortress walls, and I could sense the blood-lust rising. My father's hand dropped. They surged forward.

I watched them thunder out the gate, their shouts shattering the stillness of the fields and hills.

I watched till every trace and sound of them had vanished.

For a long time I listened to the silence. When I turned back, my mother

had drifted into sleep. Quietly, I went down the stairs and made my way across the courtyard into the darkness of the forge.

I had until sundown.





RAYAN PHILLIPS

Rayan grew up jumping between the Welsh Valleys and the West Country, using books to make friends in the many schools he went to. Favourites from childhood include *The Spiderwick Chronicles* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, which have greatly influenced his love of the weird and fantastical. Coming out as transgender during his bachelors, he grew to love LGBT YA stories, but always wanted a sci-fi/fantasy edge to them. He worked at a stationery shop during his four years at university, which did nothing to help with his notebook addiction

About Children of Tomorrow

THE CYCLE STARTS ANEW. THE CHILDREN OF TOMORROW RISE ONCE MORE.

Mitch's life is in shambles. Bullied for being transgender, misunderstood by his parents, and now he's seeing monsters. When he finally leaves the house after a life-changing accident, Mitch is harassed by a bully from school in a men's bathroom, and unleashes a blast of unknown power in self-defence.

Now Mitch is determined to learn how to fight. Approached by an organisation called *The Children of Tomorrow*, he must battle unknown creatures and keep the world in balance. But he's not doing it alone. He's got a few friends by his side ... and some enemies.

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CHILDREN OF TOMORROW

Chapter One

Let my parents' voices wash over me like a violent wave. It's hard not listening to them, especially when they're arguing about me. If Matthew was here they wouldn't say a word, but of course they left him behind. This is just between us three. A secret visit to the doctor that no one can know about.

I gaze out the car window, watching the heavy rain belt against the glass. I focus on a few droplets and watch them race. I want the third one to win, the one that's a little behind. I can see that the other two are slowing down, finding a harder, squigglier route down the glass, making it complicated. The third droplet makes a straight drop to the bottom. I love an underdog story.

'Mara's only sixteen ...' Mum says. Her voice is high, about to break. Tears will follow soon. 'She can't put herself through that and you know it, Rob.'

'I know,' Dad says. I don't know why they're arguing. They're both on the same side: against me. 'I know, I know. I don't want her to do it either.'

'I won't be able to, then,' I speak up, my arms crossed. I'm still staring out the window, the dull grey motorway showing me all of the British countryside's best sights, like a green mound, a sign for a McDonald's and a caravan. 'You have control over my life until I'm eighteen, so you can just say no.'

'We don't have control over you, Mara,' Mum says, leaning back in her seat to face me. 'We just want to do what's right for you.'

I want to argue back. She knows what *I* want, what *I* feel is best for me. Otherwise we wouldn't have made this trip. Part of me hoped that they could have been swayed to see it from my point of view. I'd arranged the talk with

the specialist. They were the ones that agreed to go along, see what it was all about. But now with all the talk of injections and hormones and operations swimming in their heads, along with all the shit I've had to put up with in school, I don't think they'll ever allow me to think about it again.

The glass of the window shakes as heavier droplets of rain hit against it, like they're desperate to get in. In the distance there's the distinct rattling of thunder, shaking up the sky. Dad's hands are white as he grips the steering wheel hard. There's no one else on the road right now, and I can see him getting more and more frustrated as he and Mum talk about me. He wants to get home quick.

I pull my hood over my short, curly hair, cut fresh last week. It's getting cold, and considering how old this car is, I'd be surprised if there weren't gaps in the doors letting in the storm. I can see the city down in the valley: its tall blocks of concrete that are ninety percent graffiti, its brightly painted houses that dance on the side of the hills.

My eye flickers, like something ran past really close to my face.

I look around the car. There's nothing, not even a fly that's escaped the rain. It must've been one of those things, a trick of the eye.

'... and I don't know how the school will feel about that ...' Mum whispers.

Something runs in the opposite direction. I'm sure of it. I'm sure there was something this time. Maybe it's a fox or rabbit, frantically trying to find shelter. It must be super close to the window, whatever it is, 'cause I feel like it's right in my face.

The car jerks slightly to the left.

'Dad!' I shout, my heart rate racing. 'What you do that for?'

'Wasn't me,' he mumbles, flexing his knuckles. 'Must've been this bloomin' wind.'

There's a flash of light. I jump. We all do.

'Oh dear,' Mum says. 'Here comes the lightning.'

But I'm sure the light came from just outside the window. Lightning couldn't have struck that close to us, could it? I'm sure we're safe, though. Saw a guy on TV prove that lightning won't hurt you if you're in a car.

I press my face against the glass, trying to get a good look of the outside world. I manage to see some things. The bleak black clouds that have wiped

away the spring afternoon, the plants on the side of the road being battered by the harsh wind, a looming shadow, creeping closer to the car ...

There's something out there.

Something bigger than I thought.

A deer? A horse?

No. It's the wrong shape. It's not galloping, it's ...

Scuttling.

Like a spider.

'Dad!' I yell.

'What? What's wrong?' he says, a little harsher than I would like. 'I'm driving the best I can in this weather.'

It's scuttling alongside us, keeping up with the car. It's right next to us, surely Mum and Dad can see it! It's hairy and it's fast and it's SO. HUGE.

But they're not reacting at all. They're just sitting there, still thinking on what happened earlier. How the doctor explained to them what 'transgender' means, and what choices I have to make me feel like myself, and how they know just what's right *for me*.

I sniff back tears. What is wrong with me?

I shake my head. I blink rapidly. Maybe I'm imagining things, but it's not going away. I consider bashing my head against the window, knocking some sense into me.

'I know you're going through a difficult time,' Mum says in response to my sniffing. 'Puberty was hard for me when I was a young girl ...'

'But I'm not a -' I say. I don't finish the sentence. Not because I can't say it, but because one of those spindly limbs crashes down on the car, crushing Dad's door, making him let go out of the wheel, making us spin out of control.

I scream. Mum screams. Dad screams. I close my eyes.

The car collides with something metal and solid. I'm flung forward, caught by the seatbelt. I feel a sharp pain erupt from my ribs. Tears escape from my closed eyes, almost forcing me to open them, to witness what is happening.

I can't hear Mum. I can't hear Dad.

Then there's eyes, a whole bunch of them. White and glowing like orbs suspended in space. I realise I haven't opened *my* eyes, yet I'm seeing that thing's face like it's real and in front of me. I want to lash out, fight against it,

get it away from me. But I can't. I can't raise my arms and I can't open my eyes. I'm paralyzed with fear.

I feel something prickle my arm. Hairs like needles, scratching me, hurting me.

And then I feel dizzy. I feel something drift on to me, like I'm being covered in sugar. I want to throw up. I feel my stomach lurch and I retch, but nothing comes out. My hands drop to my sides. I feel the rain drip on to my face.

And then I see shadows dance in my vision. They tease me, they want me to catch them.

And then I hear sirens blaring in the distance. Their cry echoing round the valley.

And then I feel myself drift, like I'm sleeping, and not sleeping, stuck beside me, watching myself.

And then ...

And then ...

Darkness.

*

'Miss? Miss! Can you hear me?'

My head hurts and I feel something sticky drip down over my eye. I try to open them both but only my left one can see things properly. The other one just sees dark, gloopy red.

'Can you say your name? Stick with me here. Can you say your name?'

'M ... Mitch ... ' I breathe.

'Can you repeat that? Can you speak louder?'

'Mara ... ' I say louder, my lungs feeling like they've been stabbed.

'Mara, stay with me. We are going to lift you into the ambulance and –'

I can't remember what happens after that.

*

I wake up in the hospital to broken ribs, a fractured wrist, a gash across my head, and the news that my parents are gone, killed instantly by a strange, freak accident.

They're amazed I survived.

I'm too hurt to cry. Tears trickle down my cheeks but moving, breathing, sobbing, yelling – all make my ribs feel like they are being pulled out, one by one.

I'm told that they think there was something wrong with the car, and combined with the rain and my dad's speed, that basically sealed our fate.

Their fate.

I'm still here.

I don't mention anything about the weird creature I saw. I'm not even sure that was real. My mind is frazzled, and every time I try to think back to the moment it's like I'm watching static, flickers of something trying to break through. When I fall asleep I see it in my dreams, and when I wake up I see shadows dance in my vision. They look like tadpoles, and tentacles, and thick, spidery legs. They're trying to get me, but I shake my head and they disappear. But I feel like something is always there, clouding my brain. I don't mention the dreams. They've heard me scream at night. They tell me it's normal to have trauma-related nightmares.

I also don't mention that I'm not Mara. Now's not the time to come out to all the doctors and nurses that are poking and prodding me, asking how I'm feeling when it's obvious that my life is falling apart around me. The use of my deadname loses its sting after a while, like a throbbing pain that you just get used to. Though, as I look through the cards people have sent me, I resist the urge to rip them up, both for writing the wrong name and for thinking that they can make me feel anything through a card.

All but one are from distant family, unable to help in any other way than a few words of condolence. The one that matters is the one that doesn't say 'condolences' or 'get well soon' or 'thinking of you', instead having an illustration of a superhero. Inside is a message: 'You are super. We are here for you, Mitch. From Dan, Nikki, and Skye xxx'.

I hug the card close to my chest whenever I have a private moment. The ink has smudged from where I've let tears drip on to it. I keep it under my pillow, worried that my brother will take a peep at it and notice that it's addressed to someone other than Mara.

I also don't want to suddenly spring a coming out on my brother, Matthew. At age twenty, and with no other family nearby to look after us, my brother is now my legal guardian. He has enough on his plate with social

workers and inheritance stuff to fret over to worry about his little sister actually being a boy called Mitch.

*

There's a few days where I'm still in the hospital, and he comes to visit me and he cries, which he hasn't done in front of me since he was twelve. And that was over a lost football game.

'I must protect my little sister ...' He repeats to himself. My stomach lurches whenever he uses that word. 'I must keep you safe.'

Life seems to pause after that.

*

Going home is bittersweet. Everything still being the same is equal parts comforting and depressing. A pile of shoes that need to be sorted out. A tower of official-looking letters from various intimidating sources (that's gonna continue to grow for some time), those breakfast bars that only Mum liked will have to be eaten soon, or just chucked away. Eventually.

I go to my room and shut it all away.

*

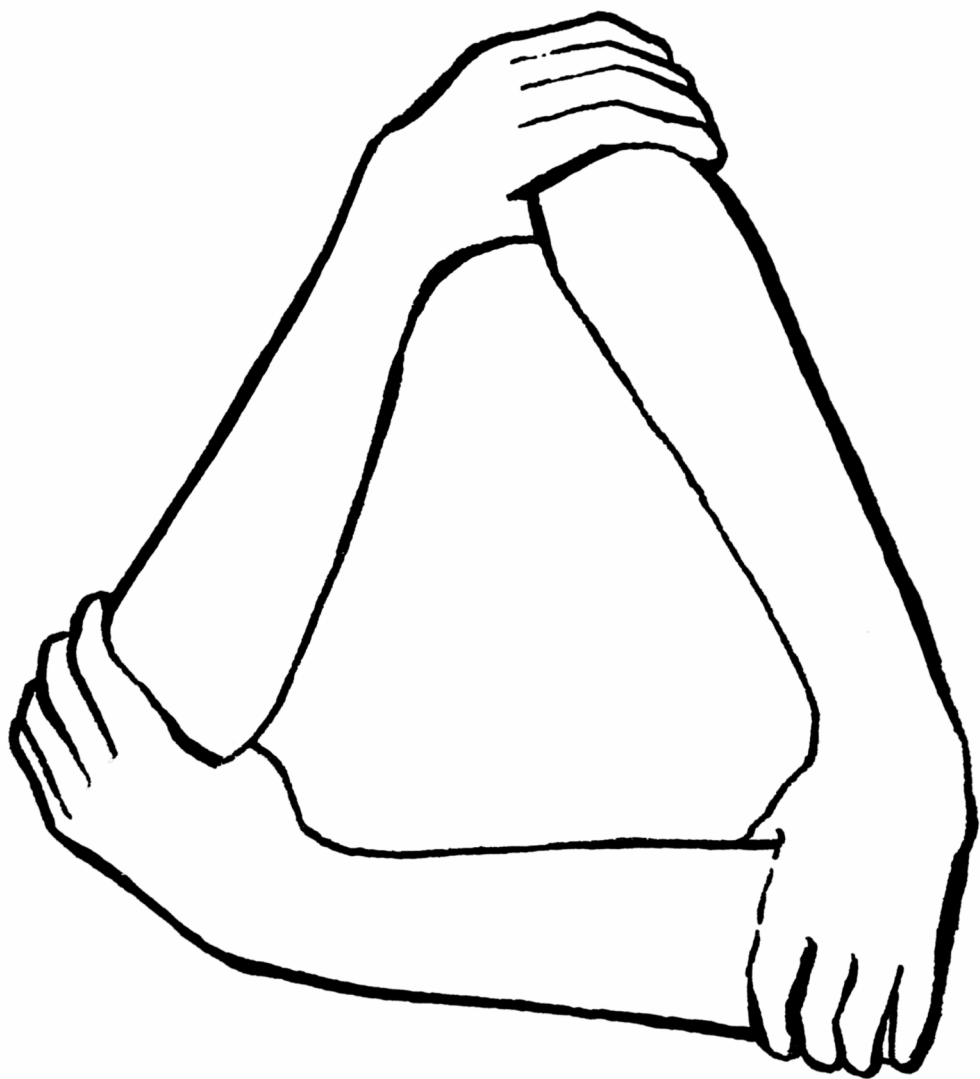
My life is on repeat for the next four months. The same dull, depressing slog all day, every day.

The routine:

1. Wake up (usually at midday).
2. Take painkillers for my ribs (until the one-month mark, when I'm told to stop).
3. (Optional steps) Shower/put on fresh clothes, though only if I feel incredibly gross.
4. Read/watch/play a game until it turns dark.
5. Have food brought to me by Matthew once he's back from work (although when I say food, I mean microwave pasta that would make Mum cry).
6. Lie to him about leaving my room to eat lunch.

7. Message my friends and promise that I'll hang out this summer, but back out of any plans they make (also NEVER invite them round. I don't deserve them).
8. Try to sleep, if the nightmares permit it.

Amazing routine. Brilliant. Well done me.
My life can't get any worse, can it?





YASMIN RAHMAN

Yasmin loves issue-led YA with a dash of hope and humour. During this MA, she gained a reputation for killing off characters, despite only a fraction *actually* dying. When she's not writing, she makes bookish fan art; her designs are sold worldwide on behalf of John Green. Her short story was published in Stripes' anthology *A Change is Gonna Come*. Yasmin is represented by Hellie Ogden at Janklow & Nesbit.

About *All the Things We Never Said*

Three girls. Three reasons to die.

Mehreen can't cope with her anxiety and depression. Her Noise tells her she's better off dead.

Cara hasn't been the same since the car crash. She's suffocating under the guilt of causing it, and her father's death.

Olivia's life seems picture perfect: she's rich, smart and beautiful. But inside, she's carrying a huge secret that's drowning her.

The trio are matched together by an overbearing suicide partner website and given fifteen days to prepare for their deaths. Fifteen days to live. But what happens when they start having second thoughts? Will the website let them off that easily?

A pact is a pact, after all.

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ALL THE THINGS WE NEVER SAID

Chapter One

MEHREEN

4th April

Bismillah hir-rahman nir-rahim

In the name of Allah, the most gracious, the most merciful.

The call to prayer is supposed to be relaxing. The Arabic is supposed to flow through you, cleansing your body from head to toe. It's supposed to be a time to ponder the significance of God's words. I guess it helps if you understand Arabic, which I don't.

Mum finishes her prayers and leaves the room, but I stay kneeling on the mat. They say that dawn is the best time to ask for things, so I start a little personal prayer.

Allah, I feel like there's something wrong with me, something completely and utterly unfixable. I just want to live a life where I'm not suddenly struck by an intense feeling of sadness. I'm fed up of the Noise – when my head is so crammed with thoughts and worries that I can't even focus on what I'm doing, who I'm with, whether I'm breathing. I want my brain to slow down, to focus, to just ... be normal. I need something to live for, Allah, because right now, the only thing keeping me here is you. And I'm starting to feel like that's not enough.

As usual, I find myself so overcome with tears that I can't continue. I curl up on the prayer mat in the foetal position, squeezing my eyes, clenching all my muscles, trying to push away the darkness.

‘Mehreen! Come down and eat!’ My mother’s voice is at the pitch that tells me this isn’t the first time she’s called me. When I stand up, my body is stiff and the sun is beginning to peek through the curtains. I wipe my face and compose myself before making my way downstairs.

In the kitchen, Mum is at her position by the sink, furiously scrubbing a pan while Dad sits at the head of the table, tapping away on his phone. The Angry Birds theme tune hums quietly around the room. Imran is leaning against the counter near the toaster, also on his phone. I slip into the room, fix myself some cereal and sit down at the other end of the table.

No one looks up.

No one says anything.

*They don't even notice when you're in the room.
THEY'RE BETTER OFF WITHOUT YOU.
They don't care about you.*

I chew my cereal and watch as Mum dries her hands and touches Imran on the back to squeeze past him to the cupboard. She pulls out a plate and silently hands it to him. He rolls his eyes and drops the toast from his mouth on to the plate then takes a seat right next to Dad, who’s picked up his phone again.

‘Want me to do it?’ Imran asks with his mouth full.

‘Almost got it,’ Dad mumbles. The downhearted tune plays a few seconds later. ‘Dammit!’

Imran laughs, snatches the phone and starts tapping away.

Watching the three of them is like watching a totally normal family interacting. It’s nothing momentous, what they’re doing, but it’s the little things that make a family a *proper* family.

*Look how happy they are on their own.
THEY'RE BETTER OFF WITHOUT YOU.
No one would even notice.
THEY'RE BETTER OFF WITHOUT YOU.*

Mum's started chopping some vegetables on the counter. I drop my bowl in the sink next to her, roll up my sleeves and grab the sponge.

'What's that on your wrist?' Mum asks, turning her head to look at me, the knife poised mid-slice.

There's a jolt in my chest. The heart I thought had become stagnant starts up again. Jumps straight into my throat. I shake my arm inconspicuously to loosen my sleeve so that it rolls down and covers the scars, but it only shuffles part way down. Mum's eyes are firmly fixed on my wrist.

This is it.

The moment I've both been dreading and hoping for.

I stare at her intently, hoping that she'll finally *see* me, that this pressure, this pain will finally go.

'Did you get those marks from your bangles?' she asks, her eyes only lingering on my face for a second before returning to her chore. 'I told you to stop wearing such cheap jewellery.'

Of course she doesn't see. She doesn't realise because things like this don't exist for her. In her world, there's only sunshine and butterflies. No one ever hurts. No one ever feels the need to not exist. Everything is *perfect*.

'Why don't you use all that time you spend in your room to find a job instead? That way you can afford things that don't ruin your body.'

I stare at the knife as it moves up and down between her fingers, willing it to slip, wishing it were my skin beneath it.

'Who'd want to hire her?' Imran laughs from the table, his eyes still fixed on Dad's phone. 'It's not like she's actually good at anything. Besides being a loser.'

He's right; you're such a loser.
No one will ever love you.
LOSER. LOSER. LOSER. LOSER.
They're better off without you.

I get that urge rushing through my body, that tight constriction in the middle of my chest, my wrists beginning to itch. There's an image in my head already of the trail of red, the sense of relief that I'll achieve. I wrap my fingers around my wrist and squeeze.

Dad's phone lets out an upbeat melody, and he squeals, patting Imran on the back as he takes his phone back to start the next level. Imran sits back in his chair, looking smug. His gaze moves back to me and before he can even start his next insult, I'm out of the room, up the stairs, slamming my bedroom door.

None of them care about you.
CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT.
You'll feel better.
CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT.
they don't want you around.
CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT.

The need to cut is a physical thing. My wrists pulse, my heart races, my brain whirs. I dig my nails into my palms to try and quell the rage within me, but that's not enough. I'm not strong enough to resist. Weak and pathetic, that's me all over. Every time I do it, I hate myself, literally *hate* myself for doing that to my body, but when the thought enters my mind, it's like there's only one thing I can do to get rid of it. So, I just kneel on the floor and take out the craft knife hidden under my mattress, like the loser I am.

YOU'RE SO STUPID. WORTHLESS.
No one would even realise if you weren't here.
CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT. CUT.
LOSER. Just end it all. NO ONE WOULD
EVEN NOTICE.

When I'm done and have tidied everything up, I log on to my laptop, feeling completely spent. Cutting usually makes the Noise quieten down for a bit; it's one of the only times I feel like I can actually think clearly.

I open up the sole website I have bookmarked: a website I haven't been able to get out of my head since I stumbled across it a few weeks ago. www.MementoMori.com, a website with a simple message on the homepage:

Enter your details in a simple questionnaire to be matched with a suicide partner and have a pact tailored to your needs.

It's like something clicked into place when I found this site. As if it had

appeared to me as a sign. I've been thinking about suicide a *lot* recently, but I've also always known that it was out of my reach. I may not be the best Muslim, but I know that suicide is a sin, that I'll regret it in the afterlife. But MementoMori makes me think maybe there is a way out. All I need is someone else to take away the guilt, take away the blame. If I were to join MementoMori, then I wouldn't be the one responsible.

I scroll down the page, reading the questions I've now memorised. I open the word document containing my prewritten answers and then hesitate. Mum's laughter floats up the stairs and I think about her emotionless response to my scars, the way her eyes always gloss over me. Without a second thought, I paste my answers into the questionnaire and press the submit button before the doubts creep back in.

Chapter Two

OLIVIA

We sit down for supper. The smell of lobster permeates the room as Maria brings the plates in. It's a special occasion, according to Mother.

He sits at the

H

E

A

D

of the table, in **Daddy's** seat.

I've already had three glasses of champagne. It's a *special occasion*, after all.

I'm still not drunk enough.

I can still see straight.

see the way she l

e

a

n

s into him when he talks, the way she

pushes around her food on the plate, no doubt still stinging from the comment he made about her weight last week.

He kisses her on the neck.

I pour another glass.

She giggles. Shoots a glance my way. Reminds him that they've got company.

Company.

I've lived here my whole life and *I'm* the company.

He looks over at me.

I duck my head, focusing on my plate.

He suggests she tell me the news.

My head **SNAPS** up.

The champagne hits. Makes my head spin.

I force myself to look over at her.

Fuzzy faced,

oblivious

Mother.

I ask her what news he's talking about.

To her credit, she looks mildly uncomfortable, fiddling with her pearl necklace.

He reaches over and squeezes her fingers, that disgusting smile

s p r e a d i n g

across his face.

He encourages her to go on.

She straightens her back.

Clears her throat.

She tells me that they've been dating for a while now.

As if I didn't know.

As if I wasn't aware of the

preposterous

amount of time they've been spending together,
the amount of time he's spent in my presence.

She says it's time they **took the next step.**

No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

No.

I look up at her.
Pleading.
Begging.
Wishing.

She proudly tells me his flat lease is up.
They've rented a van to bring his stuff over.

Next week.

He looks at me.

Smirks.

Winks.

We're going to be roomies, he tells me.

The glass

S H A T T E R S

in my hand.

Champagne goes everywhere.

It's a special occasion, after all.

The glass

CUTS

into my fingers.
into my palm.

The sound of cracking glass slices through the silence.

'Oh, Olivia!' Mum chides. 'That's a crystal flute!'

'You really should be more careful, Liv,' he says.

LIV.

He calls me Liv.

Maria rushes over dutifully with her dustpan and brush.

She tries to smile at me as she clears away the mess, but all I can focus on is the shard of glass in my hand.

I want to place it against my throat and drag it along

s l o w l y

To feel my skin slice open.

Y

A

R

P

To watch the blood S P R A Y

P

R

A

Y over everything.

To see it stain the lace tablecloth Mother dry-cleans every fortnight.

I want to take the glass and **stab** it into my chest

OVER
AND
OVER

‘Olivia?’ Mother asks, when Maria’s out of the room again.
When the mess is gone.
Her brow is creased and I know she’s waiting, watching.

But not too closely.

Never closely enough.

God forbid she see the truth.

‘Congratulations,’ I manage to say. ‘That’s great.’
‘Isn’t it just?’ she says, putting her hand on his again.
His eyes are on me though.
‘You okay, Liv?’

LIV.

He calls me Liv.

‘Can I be excused, please?’
She doesn’t even ask why.
doesn’t notice the alteration in my breath.
can’t hear the **pOuNdInG** in my chest.
She’s got what she needed.

We’re going to be roomies.

In my bedroom, I unclench my fist, noting the thin, dry trail of red with sadness.
I pull out my laptop.
Open up a word document.
The list I’ve been building up for months.
The list that was supposed to be just a fantasy.
But is now my only option.

~~Line upon line of crossed out websites.~~
Websites where the most hopeless people reside.

People
like
me.

DESPERATE

for a way out.
I click on the first uncrossed website.
www.MementoMori.com
Please let this be the one.





LUCY TALLIS

Lucy lives in Bristol with her family, a zoo of animals and a library of musical instruments. She has been a teacher all her life. Other than her main subject – maths – she’s taught dance, creative writing and she’s even turned her hand to the piano.

Growing up in a bustling city, but descended from country folk, Lucy yearned for the freedom of the countryside. Disobeying her parents, she climbed tall trees and looked towards the horizon. When Lucy writes, she likes to remember the stubborn character she was as a child: the child who said no to authority, who saw things further afield, who just needed to work out how to get there.

About *Chicken Boy*

Jethro’s really messed up. He wants to lose his virginity off his home turf. Best friend Rowen discovers her boyfriend’s done the dirty; she wants to get the hell out of the city. A perfect union. The two friends take a road trip down a muddy lane. It’s chaos and craziness, humour and pain. Jethro finds Anna: gorgeous and seductive, but dangerous. He has to run away. Then there’s Harriet: bold, brave and driving Jethro to distraction. *Chicken Boy* follows Jethro through the final break before university. It’s abject madness, but he learns a lot about himself and who he wants to become.

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CHICKEN BOY

Chapter One

Friday 16 June – 11.57pm

‘Rowen!’ I shout. She’s over by the fireplace, chatting with that tall girl. ‘Rowen!’ I swig my beer and fall into cleavage. The owner holds drinks in both hands. With a look of disgust, she steps back.

‘Arschhole,’ she snarls.

I growl, stagger and take another swig. I’m dancing now. Arms wide, body moving. Bashing. Girl in the corner wears a short dress. She has long legs. Laughing with friend. Through the crowd, I find her.

‘Hi, Jethro.’ She kisses my cheek.

‘Fancy a shag?’

‘What did you say?’ she shouts.

‘Fancy a shag?’

Girl in corner looks at friend.

‘What did he say?’

Girl shakes head. ‘Nothing.’

‘Go away, dickhead,’ friend tells me. I am pushed.

Sidle over to Brett. ‘All right, mate?’ He’s DJing. ‘All right?’

He nods.

‘Music’s shite.’ I laugh. Brett nods to the beat.

Stop it, Jethro.

This room is too busy. I need to sort myself out. Push someone and I’m down on the sofa. I take a long, slow breath, heart beating fast. I take another breath. The beat of the music is fast but I breathe in time.

That's better. What now?

Swig of beer.

A pair of nice legs is dancing in time with Brett's music. I kick the legs.

'What?' voice shouts.

I grin. 'Nice legs.' Face scowls. Face comes close to mine. 'Why don't you just ...'

I push and stagger away. Find the downstairs toilet. Sit on toilet lid, head in hands.

Breathe.

Calm down.

The toilet door flies open and Rowen squeezes in. 'There you are!' Bouncing to the music, Rowen grabs my wrist and yanks. 'Dance with me!' I throw heavy arms around her neck.

'No,' I say. I slide down the wall and my face lands on the toilet seat. I am laughing.

'Get up.' She's hard-tickling me. It hurt; makes me laugh. 'Up, Jethro. You're not going to find a girlfriend this way.'

She's right.

'On it,' I slur, my eyes half shut. Still have beer in hand. I roll over and pour it into my mouth.

Rowen tuts. She leaves.

Must find her.

The kitchen is hot and busy and I can hardly breathe. There is hot, heavy weight against me. Nice girl? No. Very tall girl. Like a drugged wasp, her voice is a low rumble in my ear. I swat the noise. 'Off.' It's back. I swat it. 'Off.' I am laughing. See the back door and push away from the worktop. Going outside.

Pushed.

I turn. 'What the ...?'

'Virgin!' It's a drunken voice. I take a running leap. I'm pummeling. Pummeling the voice. Pummeling the word. Pummeling the world. I receive a sharp punch.

'Yeeeeow.' It hurts.

Stagger away.

I'm outside.

It's a milky, hot evening and the garden is peppered with people. A girl lies in front of me. Her long, pale legs end in a pair of clean white Converse and I stand and stare.

She'll do.

But I need a piss.

Pond. I let out a satisfying stream of hot piss then turn and watch the girl. She is flirting with a guy whose legs are American-football wide. He would crush me in a fight.

I shrug and look around. Where are all the girls?

Just breathe, Jethro. Calm it.

I can't calm it. Nearly eighteen. Not cool to be a virgin. Got to get on with it. Where are all the girls?

There's a weird guy leaning against the house. He's not a girl, but he has beer. That's the same. This guy looks rough. I walk over and snatch his beer.

'Where are all the girls?' I ask. He doesn't answer me. I sidle closer. He has a roll-up behind his ear and I nick it. Stick it in my mouth; I lean towards him. I'm rocking. 'Light it, mate,' I mumble. He doesn't. 'Light it.'

I take the cigarette from this guy's mouth and light my roll-up. Place the cigarette back between his dry lips then poke him. He rocks. I flick his cheek. Nudge him in the leg. He doesn't do anything. Nudge him again. He grunts.

I tut and take two large drags on the roll-up and a long swig of his warm beer.

Head goes. Slipping. I sink against the wall and suddenly feel the cold stone floor against my cheek. *Don't lose it.*

Crawl back through the open door and push my way through the legs. Brett's music is an ambulance siren in my ear and I want to get away from it. I'm on the floor, behind the sofa, Artex swirls swirling.

Rowen leans over me. 'Get some water.' I swat her. She steps over me, a black light in a rose ocean. She is cross. I like it when she's cross. I am Fat Laughing.

'You're a shit best friend,' she tells me when she sits down next to me with a pint of water.

'What do you mean?'

'No fun.'

I pull her towards me and kiss her.

She laughs. 'You're such a dick, Jethro.' She scoops up my head and leans over me. 'Just drink this.' But I don't want to drink water: I want to get laid.

‘No.’

‘Drink it.’

I pull Rowen close. Water spills. ‘You promised to help me.’

Why is Rowen laughing?

‘I promised to help you find a girlfriend. This isn’t “finding a girlfriend”.’

She’s right.

I’m up. I stagger into the hallway and look up into the light.

Morag McCormack.

Morag, leaning over the banister.

Go away, Morag.

Must go upstairs. Lie down.

Climb the stairs. Drink beer.

Don’t say anything to Morag.

‘Hello, Morag.’

Morag is at the top of the stairs. I fall on the carpet and touch her. She feels soft and warm. I slide down, sinking. Morag’s wearing polyester trousers. Nice trousers, big girl, warm smile, down with me. Nice moustache. I touch Morag’s face. It’s a happy face, raisin eyes with glasses. I’m sinking. I’m sleepy on the carpet. Morag is with me. Sleepy. My trousers. Where are you going, trousers? Trousers, I think you are stuck. My bootlaces. I will undo my laces.

Just kiss me.

Chapter Two

Saturday 17 June – 9.43am

Awake.

There’s a washing machine in my stomach and it’s on the spin cycle. Morag McCormack, the girl with the hairy back and skin the colour of batter, lies on top of me, prostrate as if dead. I push. Morag begins to stir. I do not want Morag to stir because I do not want to speak to her.

There is only one thing I can do: move slowly. Very, very slowly.

*

I am sitting on the kitchen worktop, legs swinging against the cupboard door. In the next room a guy from Year Twelve hangs lifeless over the side of the sofa. On top of him, a miniature female is asleep. A girl I don't know shares an armchair with the weird guy from last night and Brett and Rowen sit at the breakfast table, heads down, hands clasped.

'So, what do you think?' I ask them. I've been explaining my theory.

Rowen lifts her head. 'What do we think about what?'

'Guys, come on.' I flick on the kettle. They need coffee. 'I'm serious. I think I may have shagged Fat Morag.'

Rowen rolls her eyes. 'She's not fat, Jethro.' She lowers her head. 'Anyway, you're such a dick.' I can tell she's suffering. Her usually straight hair is kinked and fuzzy. Her olive skin looks ghostly pale.

'Brett, man?' I beg. But Brett looks like he's going to puke. He's banging his forehead on the table and rocking backwards and forwards. 'Do you think I shagged Morag?'

He lifts his head. 'Saw you, dude. It was pretty revolting.' His head lands back on the table, ginger fringe flopping over bloodshot eyes.

'Seriously, guys? I can't remember a thing.'

I scroll through memories. There was the heat in the lounge when everyone was dancing. I know the kitchen was rammed. Then there was that bloke who shouted at me. And the garden: that weird guy with a cigarette.

I don't remember much after that.

The stairs. Her face. The floor. Darkness.

Rowen slaps me on the back. 'At least you've done it. You can stop banging on about it.' Brett and Rowen perform a weak high five.

'Do I bang on about it?'

'Yep,' they say in unison.

'You guys are totally taking the piss, right? How can I have lost my virginity and not remember?'

'Errm ... let me think ...' Rowen scratches the side of her face. 'Because you're always drunk?'

'I need a cigarette.'

Rowen pulls skins from her shirt pocket and takes tobacco from Brett's hand. She's taunting me.

'Twos-up on that,' I tell her.

‘Nope,’ she says. ‘You’re an adult now. You’ve got to take responsibility for your own cigarettes.’

‘Yeah, dude,’ Brett says. ‘For all you know, you could be a father.’

He’s got to be kidding. I laugh, but it’s not that funny.

I look around the room. I don’t know who owns this house but it’s trashed. The carpet is smeared with takeaway pizza and the worktops are covered in cans and bottles. The patio doors are open and a sleeping boy lies half in, half out. His fingers are stained, and next to his hand, the carpet is singed. It looks like someone threw wine on the burn because there’s a soupy mess leaking from the singe.

With his head still on the table, Brett points his finger in the air. He waggles it to get my attention.

‘What?’

‘She told us it went on for hours, dude.’

I wish he’d shut up. ‘Really?’

‘Yeah, like *hours*.’

‘Shit, really? Was I any good?’

Brett does a fake yawn at my question.

‘Yeah, but was I?’

‘Dude, you were awesome.’

‘I knew it. Pass us your skins, Row.’

She holds them out. ‘Come and get them if you want them.’ I jump down, walk across the room and snatch them from her. ‘I’m seriously worried,’ I whisper to her.

Rowan shrugs. ‘What’s there to worry about? This is something you’ve been working towards for, like, *ever* and now you’ve achieved your goal.’

I guess she’s right. I sit down and make a cigarette.

Brett groans. Rowen kisses him. She’s gentle. ‘You want another cuppa?’

He shakes his head. ‘Give me five and I’ll go and get breakfast.’ His eyes are closing and Rowen lays her head on his shoulder.

I am alone in a room of people and it doesn’t feel great. I need a friend.

I hear someone on the stairs. Slow, steady steps. They are heavy steps and they could belong to Morag. The thought of meeting Morag this morning makes me feel unwell. I cannot see Morag. She is not my friend.

‘Rowen. Outside?’ I whisper.

‘Eh?’ She’s buried in Brett’s clothes; her eyes are closing.
‘Come out the back.’

She nods, pushes back her chair and gets up. I step out on to the paving stones.

In the suburbs, the sky is light grey and the air is challenged. We sit on the concrete and she passes me her cigarette. I take a massive drag.

‘Do you seriously think I could have lost my virginity? You’re not taking the piss?’

She shrugs and kisses me on the cheek. ‘You’ve done it, big boy.’ She looks at the fields in the distance. ‘Now shut up and get on with your life.’

I lean my heavy head on her shoulder. There’s perfume on Rowen’s jumper and I breathe it in.

I take another long, hard drag and then I grin.

I guess I’ve finally done it.

Chapter Three

Sunday 18 June – 1.13pm

I must have fallen asleep. My head is on the kitchen table and my lip is firmly glued to the corner of Nana’s Marie Claire. An article, The Best Kissing Tips and Tricks, lies open. I hear the key in the back door and I look up. The shape of two humans is visible through the mottled glass. One is the height of my mother but appears to be dressed in clothes my mother wouldn’t wear. The other must be male because it is extraordinarily tall. This better not be the father figure she’s been threatening me with for the last four months. In the usual fashion, because the lock needs sorting, the key rattles and rattles. Finally, the handle squeaks down.

‘What’s with the pink glow?’ I ask Mum. Her nails match the colour of her handbag.

‘No reason.’ She is grinning.

The reason for her pink glow stands next to her. He’s a lion in blood-red trousers and in the three seconds I’ve known him, I’ve discovered his balls are bigger than mine.

‘So, this is Jethro?’ A hand thrusts into my face. ‘Nice to meet you, Jethro, I’m Dan.’

I do not want to shake the hand that will crush me and I do an extremely good job of ignoring it. ‘New jeans?’ I ask Mum. The jeans are slim and smart.

‘Bought them in Amsterdam.’ She twirls. ‘Like them?’

‘Sure. They look good.’

‘Thank you.’ I know what’s coming next. Mum will want to give me a friendly hair ruffle. This is something she does when she gets overexcited. It is very annoying, and it will be especially annoying in front of a tall stranger with big balls.

She’s on her way and I form my defence: I block her with my hands.

‘Not appropriate, Mother.’

She laughs and gives my hair a quick ruffle.

Dan is watching us as he moves to the sink. He picks up a baking tray resting on the top of a pile of washing up and stubs his Marlboro in the pooling water. The cigarette fizzes. When he sees me staring, Dan looks at me. ‘Is there a problem?’ He pulls out another cigarette, puts it to his lips and taps his pocket for a light.

I shrug.

‘You have a problem with my smoking?’

I shrug, again.

‘But your mother smokes.’

Mum?

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This book is for Jacqui, a much loved and much missed graduate of the MA WYP class of 2016

Rebecca Langton and Kel Duckhouse
Editors of the MA Writing for Young People 2017 anthology

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