

Boundless

Bath Spa MA in Writing For Young People

2020 Anthology

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BOUNDLESS

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Bath Spa MA in Writing for Young People
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Directors: Isobel Clara & Carley Lee

FOREWORD

by Professor David Almond

Professor David Almond's novels for children include Skellig, My Name is Mina and A Song for Ella Grey. His major awards include the Carnegie Medal, two Whitbreads, 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.

For the last 8 years, I have been Professor of Creative Writing at Bath Spa University. I am so proud to have worked on the wonderful, world-renowned MA in Writing for Young People. Over 15 years, this programme has launched the careers of more than 66 published writers and has nurtured and supported many, many more. It has established a true community of writers who share the belief that there is no more important artistic act than writing for the young.

The children's book world is a place of great creativity and experimentation. Children's literature, like young people themselves, is in a state of continual growth and change. It is playful, troubled, hilarious, serious, adventurous, ambitious. And of course, despite what the pessimists tell us, young people read. They read with passion, intelligence and excitement. They read with their bodies and their senses as well as with their brains. They ask the most perceptive questions and give the most vivid responses. For children, our ancient world is brand new. For them, the ancient much-told dramas of being born, growing up, falling in love, discovering death are experienced for the very first time. What better audience could an author ask for? Ted Hughes wrote that 'every child is nature's chance to correct culture's error'. God knows there are enough cultural errors in the world today. But we believe in change. We write with optimism and we try to offer hope. We write the

very best books we can, in the very best way we can, in order to help bring about a better world.

This last year has been particularly challenging for us all, but we need stories more than ever. I congratulate the new writers published here on their talent, their doggedness, their wide-ranging imaginations, their industriousness, the beauty and conviction of their finished work. They continue with the writer's constant task of putting words into order, of bringing new characters and tales to life. The times are weird, we are surrounded by cultural errors, at times it might seem easy to become downhearted. But we must all write, and keep on writing. Hasn't it been heartening to know that, during the pandemic, people are reading more than ever? The world does recognise the importance of our task. Our work matters.

This fine anthology is yet another showcase for the splendid writing that is being created on the MA Writing for Young People. It's not just about individual success. The programme and all of the people who teach, study and write within it contribute to and draw strength from the wider culture. We are part of the age-old human quest to tell stories, to nurture the young, to try to create a better world.

INTRODUCTION

by Dr Lucy Christopher

Dr Lucy Christopher is a Reader in Creative Writing and the Course Director of the MA in Writing for Young People. Her novels for young adults have been published in over twenty countries and have won major international awards, including the Michael L. Printz honor award, the Branford Boase, the International Reader Award, the Prix Farniente, and the Golden Inky. She has been shortlisted for the Waterstones Prize, the Costa Award, the Prime Minister's Award, the Children's Book Council of Australia award, and longlisted for the Carnegie Medal.

2020 has been... quite a year. But the 2020 MA in Writing for Young People students are... quite a cohort. Honestly, they are extraordinary. If you are an agent or a publisher reading this, I urge you to open your ears WIDE because you will want to know more about them.

Not only have the cohort of 2020 ridden the tumultuous tides of nationwide university strikes, a global pandemic, and a move to online teaching, they have crested the waves of thinking more deeply about inclusive teaching and learning, about Black Lives Matter, and about how important empathy is in a time of crisis. This cohort has been kind – to us, to their work, to themselves – but they have also been rigorous. All of this deep personal journeying and thinking shows in the work.

In this extraordinary year, our students have been offered the chance to resubmit with no detriment, as well as given the option to intercalate their studies to the following year. However, for the vast majority, our students continued to choose to submit on their original deadlines and complete their MA. Furthermore, in this difficult year, we awarded more distinctions than we ever have before. These distinctions were not brought about out of pity or kindness towards struggling students; our course is far too rigorous to allow this; the work itself merited them.

So, if you aren't thinking it already, let me assure you in the loudest way I can with simple letters on a page: the work in this anthology is

EXTRAORDINARY. And these students are that, too; they are also hardworking, resilient, empathetic, and enormously, brilliantly talented. None of this is an easy accomplishment in the midst of a pandemic.

It is imperative, also, to acknowledge that the measure of our students' success is not only through whether a Distinction is granted to them, and, indeed, historically many of our most commercially successful students were not ones who gained distinctions. Some of our most original, boundary-breaking students are not the ones who gained distinctions either. The real student success is here in the work itself, as it always is each year. And, once again, let me assure you, dear reader, this work is... yep, you guessed it... extraordinary. Here we have 26 stories that sing with creativity, talent, experimentation and fun. We travel to Indian railways, to French palaces, to 1940s wartime, to biodomes and dystopian futures, and to far far beyond, and all within a COVID travel ban. If that doesn't illustrate the magic of what is between these covers, I don't know what does. The writing here transforms and transports us. It will also change the world. And don't we need a bit of that right now?

So, dear reader, read on, turn the page. I'm so excited for you to discover these writers for yourself... The extraordinary cohort of 2020.

We are so proud of them.

FROM THE TUTORS

I knew to expect great things from a new cohort of MAWYP writers. Even so, I am blown away. By the level of talent: the music of the language, the diversity of topic, character, and setting. By the ability of these writers to open up worlds for young readers: towns and cities; wide, wild, spaces that need our care and care for us. But, most of all, I am moved by the way these writers shine light into the world of possibility within young readers: the insights into the lives and feelings of others; the compassion. I wish every one of these aspiring authors a universe of good luck as they step out from here, armed with their beautiful words.

Susanna Bailey, Manuscript Tutor

The MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa has produced many wonderful writers in its time, people who create books that move, delight and entertain. I am certain this year will be no different. In fact, given how resilient and sheer grit-filled-focussed these writers have had to be in 2020, I am expecting they will soar to even greater heights. Despite the difficult circumstances, this cohort has created astonishing work. There are extracts here that push at the boundaries of form, that explore new ways of storytelling and that speak from the heart with passion and grace. You'll love getting to know them, as I have.

Dr Elen Caldecott, Associate Lecturer

2020 was an exceptional year, in a terrible sense, for all of us: curtailing our physical movements, invading our mental space, and shrinking our horizons. The achievements of this year's MAWFYP graduates are all the more astonishing against this backdrop. Despite everything, they have managed to create stories that entertain, educate and, above all, inspire, to become perhaps our strongest cohort yet. They are our hope hunters of the future, and I am proud to have worked with them.

Dr Joanna Nadin, Lecturer

Covid-19 might have prevented us from exploring the world itself, but one thing it has not taken away is our ability to travel the world inside our minds. In this latest collection of excerpts from the MAWFYP cohort, there are a plethora of new lands to visit, cities to explore and characters to meet. From iron gardens to jungle rooms, sinister woodlands full of witches to weird and wonderful palaces housing strange machines, here you will find plenty to keep your imagination busy and your awe inspired. Our students continue to impress me with their talent and dedication to their craft, and this latest cohort is one of the finest we have ever produced, not least because they have been writing their debuts in one of the most challenging years on record. Let them whisk you away from all things COVID for a while as you travel onwards into their stories – I promise you many eventful journeys, but always a safe return.

C.J. Skuse, Senior Lecturer

It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with such an exceptionally talented group of writers. Anyone reading this anthology will quickly see not only the wide variety of subjects and genres, but also the thought, imagination, inspiration – and perspiration – that has gone into each and every piece of writing. This anthology may mark the end of the MA, but one has only to turn the pages to see that it also marks the beginning of many new and extraordinary creative journeys...

Steve Voake, Senior Lecturer

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YOUNGER READERS



OSCAR BEAUCHAMP

Oscar is twenty-three-years old, born and raised in London. His parents got divorced when he was nine, but that was also the year he lost his favourite Pokémon card, so, by comparison, the divorce was pretty small potatoes. From an early age, Oscar's love of stories became apparent to anyone who came within shouting distance. His primary school teachers would even call on Oscar to stand in front of the class and improvise stories involving everyone in his class.

However, Oscar was diagnosed with dyslexia, and sentenced to work with a reading tutor every Thursday until he left primary school. This started his theory that reading was stupid and whoever came up with the English language was the devil (well, maybe not *the devil*, but definitely one of his Foreign Diplomats). It wasn't until he was handed a copy of *Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief* that he understood why people bothered with the whole reading malarkey. Ever since, he's been an avid reader. Oscar loves a good story, whether it's in books, movies, games, or comics.

Oscar has a BA in Creative Writing and Philosophy, as well as a Masters in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa. Since graduation, his goal is now to convince young people that overcoming the struggle of reading is worth the effort.

Since starting his MA, Oscar has taken the time to write every day. He does this because he believes the best way to improve is through putting in the hours. So know that in-between the time Oscar wrote this and you read it, he's become an even better writer.

oscarsilvesterbeauchamp@gmail.com | @beauchamp_s

About *Falling Up*

In World War II, twelve-year-old Tom is evacuated to London, the magic capital of England. After moving into a house that will supposedly keep him safe from the threats of the war, he struggles with being separated from his friends and family. That is, until he befriends Oliver, a young wizard who also struggles with the war.

However, things take a turn for the strange when Tom gains the ability to turn weightless. He grows afraid that he might one day drift off endlessly into the sky. Oliver promises to find a way to get Tom back to normal. But tragedy strikes, and Oliver is found murdered. Heartbroken and determined, Tom feels compelled to solve the murder, despite being afraid of his new ability.

With the help of the people he meets along the way, Tom seeks to unravel the mystery of his friend's murder. His search for answers will lead him to strange and dangerous places where he will be forced to make deals with frightening figures from London's magical underbelly. Tom will have no choice but to face his own limitations and question what he is willing to do for the sake of getting justice.

Can he learn how to bend the law without breaking it, for the sake of the truth? Will he be able to question people's good intentions? Will Tom find the answers he's looking for, or will the city chew him up and spit him out?



FALLING UP

It's a House, not a Home

Tom stood at King's Cross station with his bags at his side and a cardboard plaque hanging around his neck. It read:

Thomas Ashcroft

Age: 12

2 Bags of Luggage

The people passing by likely assumed he was waiting to be evacuated to the countryside as part of *Operation Pied Piper*. He squirmed at the thought of them discovering it was actually the opposite.

Tom tried to pass the time by looking around the station. Everyone in London seemed to move with a sense of urgency, like they were all five minutes late for something. He wondered if it was because of the war, or if it was just a Londoner thing.

There was a group of young men, all around eighteen, gathered in a corner of the station waiting to leave for military training camp. Most of them were mucking about while they waited, doing imitations of their future selves gunning down imaginary enemies.

Tom wondered if any of them would do anything amazing, like storm Berlin or earn the Victoria Cross medal. As he imagined the possibilities, he noticed some of them were fidgeting and kept checking their watches and bags. These were the boys that reminded him that they were going to war.

One of the young men noticed Tom watching them. He smiled and gave Tom a wave. Tom waved back, imagining a happy future for the soon-to-be soldier. A future full of heroism, where he'd do great things and then come back home, safe and sound.

Then Tom spotted them. The magic folk. Six men and one woman, all wearing black cloaks and battered pointy hats with long brims. He wondered how they managed to walk through doors without knocking off their hats. The youngest looked around the same age as the boys waiting to enlist, and the oldest looked so old that all his belongings could be antiques.

Tom couldn't help but notice that, besides himself, no one seemed to pay them any attention. He knew London was the magic capital of Britain, but were they really so common that they weren't worth staring at? Personally, Tom couldn't take his eyes off them. The only magical folk he knew were his Nana and her bingo friends, but they weren't proper magic folk. They only had the occasional vision and, even then, it was normally whether or not it was going to rain. They also didn't wear funny hats or coats; they just wore whatever made them the least cold.

A woman stopped in front of him. She was by far the tallest woman he had ever seen. She wore a long fur coat, a wide-brimmed hat and was smoking a cigarette. Her expression was somewhere in-between bored and irritated. She took a long drag of her cigarette as she looked Tom up and down.

"Are you the child who'll be staying with Dr Simmons?" the woman asked, breathing out a long trail of smoke.

Tom stood as straight as he could in hopes of looking respectable. "Yes, Miss."

“Very good. You may call me Miss Lake. Dr Simmons asked me to pick you up.” The woman leaned in to better examine him. “You don’t look like you’ll be much trouble. Come along. I have my car parked outside.” She turned and strutted away, leaving Tom with both of his bags.

Tom scooped up his luggage and hurried after her. His first impression of Miss Lake was that she could go jump in one. Was she Mr Simmons’ wife? Was he going to have to live with her throughout the war? Tom couldn’t imagine she’d ever want to be near a child unless she needed something to kick. Maybe he’d get lucky and she’d turn out to just be Mr Simmons’ neighbour doing him a favour.

“You have a slouch,” Miss Lake said. “You should do something about that. It’s awfully pedestrian.”

“Sorry,” Tom grumbled, his ears burning. He wanted to tell her it was because he was carrying two bags, but Miss Lake didn’t seem like the sort to accept excuses.

“And that accent of yours, what is it?”

“I... I’m from Stoke. Everyone sounds like this back home.”

“Well, that isn’t an excuse. Also, you’re mumbling.” Miss Lake breathed out more smoke. “So, we’ll have to do something about that too. You don’t want people to think you’re a dullard, do you?”

“No, Miss,” Tom muttered through gritted teeth.

“Speak up and speak clearly!” Miss Lake raised her voice.

“No, Miss Lake,” Tom repeated more ‘clearly’. He thought about telling her that the reason she was having trouble hearing him was because she was so tall! But he didn’t.

Outside the station, a line of vehicles honked their horns at a fancy blue car parked in the middle of the street. To Tom’s complete horror, Miss Lake sauntered up to it, ignoring the outraged drivers.

She popped open the boot and Tom rushed over, shoving in his luggage. Eager to get away from the glares and shouts, Tom went to sit in the passenger seat, only to find it occupied by Miss Lake’s hat.

“No, no,” she said with a dismissive wave. “You can go in the back.”

Tom stifled a grumble and resisted the urge to kick the wheels, then clambered into the back seat.

As they drove off, Tom turned his attention to the London streets. There was always so much talk about the city on the wireless and in the paper that it felt weird being there in person. To be honest, it didn't look at all how he'd imagined.

Instead of shining streets filled with dapper folks in stylish clothes, it looked like a grubby maze filled with unhappy people. The smog was so thick it curled at the ground and hid everything in the distance like a cold damp veil. The smell of burning coal and petrol clung to the air like an invisible stain. It was hard to imagine such a place was the capital of England.

Almost every building, lamppost and mailbox had a war poster stuck on it. Tom had seen them so many times he could probably draw copies from memory. There was the one with the soldier telling a boy holding a toy gun to go and be safe in the country. Then there was the one with a ghostly Hitler telling a mother to keep her kids in the city where he could get them. Why couldn't his parents have listened to those posters instead of his Nana? If it wasn't for her stupid dream, he'd still be back home.

"While you are living with Dr Simmons, you should keep in mind that he is a very busy man," Miss Lake said, interrupting his thoughts. "Not always a useful one, but a busy man nonetheless. So, you should do everything you can to stay out of his way."

"I promise I won't be any trouble," Tom said.

Miss Lake let out a joyless laugh as she flicked the butt of her cigarette out of the window before lighting another. "Your promise means nothing to me. I have already told you to do something and the stupidest thing you could do in life is ignore one of my instructions. Besides, we have only just met, I don't yet know what a promise is worth to you." She gave Tom a look through the rear-view mirror that made him suspect she had been the one to kill the animals that made up her glamorous coat.

“Are you Mr Simmons’ wife?” Tom asked, quietly hoping she was just doing Mr Simmons a favour and he’d never have to see her again.

“It’s Dr Simmons,” Miss Lake corrected, “and no, I’m not his wife. I imagine he would call me his muse, if you asked.”

That didn’t really answer his unasked question about whether or not he’d be seeing more of her. Tom wanted to ask what a ‘muse’ was but didn’t want to seem stupid, so he just nodded. “If you aren’t his wife, why are you picking me up?”

“Because he couldn’t be here himself. Obviously.”

Tom was getting the feeling that Miss Lake wasn’t the sort to give straight answers.

As they drove into a marketplace, Tom felt himself perk up. There were people walking on the road as if they hadn’t noticed where the pavement stopped. Stalls were selling food, antiques, clothing, pieces of art, and radios. Even the smells of coal and petrol were drowned out by the scent of frying meat and varying street foods. Tom felt a flutter of joy at seeing somewhere so full of life despite the country being at war.

“Damn pedestrians,” Miss Lake cursed. “Don’t they know that people go on pavements and cars go on the road? They shouldn’t be allowed out of their houses if they don’t know how to behave in public.”

Miss Lake’s frustration only made Tom like the market even more. He even had to fight off a smile. He hoped he’d get a chance to come back and explore it.

Miss Lake managed to weave her car out of the market, which eventually led to number four, St Quintin’s Avenue. It was a tall, detached house made of dark red bricks, and its windows were so grubby it was hard to see through them. Despite how unfriendly it looked, a part of Tom was excited to be staying in such a big house.

“Alright.” Miss Lake stopped the car outside. “Get out and collect your bags.”

Tom did as he was told, before noticing she wasn’t leaving her seat. “Aren’t you coming in?”

“Child, I have to sleep in that place. That doesn’t mean I have to

live there as well.” She gave him a final look of bored contempt before driving off.

Tom tried to figure out what she meant by that but decided Miss Lake was probably just weird. At least he now had an answer to whether or not he'd be living with her, even if it wasn't the answer he'd been hoping for.

Tom took hold of the door's tarnished brass knocker and gave it a couple of taps against the wood.

“Come in,” a silky female voice called.

Tom took a deep breath before pushing the door open. His first thought was that the house's inside was just as grubby as its windows. It was poorly lit, smelled of wet paint, and the carpet was so worn out that only tufts of its original red came through. That's what he got for being hopeful.

At the end of the hall was a long flight of stairs with a cat sitting on the handrail. Its black fur made it hard to see in the shadows of the dank hallway, but its glowing yellow eyes stood out like two small burning matches. They made Tom uncomfortable, like he was a mouse about to be gobbled up. He did his best to ignore the cat and its spooky eyes and glanced up the stairs to see if whoever called was up there.

“I assume you're Thomas Ashcroft.”

Tom's eyes widened as he realised the voice was coming from the cat. He'd heard of talking cats, but had never actually seen one before. It was hard not to stare.

“What's the matter? Are you mute?” the cat asked irritably.

“No, sorry. I'm just tired,” Tom stammered. A small voice in his head joked that the feline had missed a great opportunity to say, ‘Cat got your tongue?’

“I see,” said the cat. “My name is Diana, and I run this house. As long as you live under this roof, you will be checking in with me once every day. Is that understood?”

“I thought this was Dr Simmons' house?” Tom hadn't stopped staring. He tried, but there he was, still staring.

“It is, but Dr Simmons is a busy man, so I handle what I can to help lighten the load.”

“Oh, alright.” Tom thought about questioning it but, then again, he wasn’t exactly an expert on what talking cats got up to. “So, are you his cat?”

Diana’s eyelids lowered into a glare. “I do not belong to anyone. Have you never met a cat that wasn’t owned by a human?”

“Well, yes, but none of them could talk.”

“All cats can talk if they try, stupid boy. Some just don’t bother to learn.” Diana raised her head, as if trying to find a better angle to look down on him from.

“Are you pulling my leg?” Tom asked, fidgeting under her gaze.

“Cats do not lie, if that’s what you’re implying,” said Diana. “However, sometimes we tell the most inconvenient of truths, which makes humans promote the idea that we are liars.”

“Oh. I’m sorry,” Tom said. As an Englishman, whenever he was unsure what to say he’d go to the default of apologising. Even when he had no idea what he was apologising for.

Diana made a ‘humph’ sound. “I don’t suppose Dahlia told you when she’ll be getting back?”

It took a moment for Tom to realise she was talking about Miss Lake. “Sorry, she didn’t say.”

“Typical,” Diana huffed.

Tom found it surprising the two of them didn’t get along, given their cheery personalities.

“Through the door at your side is the living room. Use it whenever you want,” Diana said, casually pointing with her paw. “In there is a second door that leads to the kitchen. We use the garden to grow our own vegetables. We’ll work out what you’re welcome to later. Do you have your ration book?”

“Yes, Miss.” Tom nodded. “My mum also put some food in my bag, so I should be good for a while.”

“Good. Your mother sounds very sensible.” Diana spoke with the

sort of approval a teacher would give to a student that had managed to not set anything on fire. “You will have to get signed up at the local store at some point this week so they can prepare your rations.”

“Oh.” That reminded Tom of the most crucial question he had to ask. “What time are meals?”

Diana blinked at him. “What do you mean?”

“Is there a set mealtime?” Tom asked. “Or should I just come when I’m called?”

“Let me put it like this.” She tilted her head. “What can *you* cook?”

Tom shifted his weight from foot to foot. “Sandwiches.”

“Then you’re going to be eating a lot of sandwiches while you’re here,” said Diana. “Come, I will take you to see Dr Simmons and then I’ll show you to your room.” Diana turned and walked up the handrail with perfect balance, leaving a gobsmacked Tom staring after her.



MARINE BRENIER

When Marine was eleven years old, she moved from France to the United States. There, she fell in love with the English language and discovering new landscapes and cultures. A few years later, she went to England to study a BA in Creative Writing and Business Management, followed by an MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University. She wrote *Crystal Shards*, her first novel, while on the course.

Marine is currently enjoying living in Wales, but might move again in a few years as there is still a lot of the world she hasn't seen.

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About Crystal Shards

Twelve-year-old Kit lives alone with her mom and grandma on a small island which a magical crystal keeps thriving in eternal springtime. Somewhere on the ocean are four other islands like hers, each with their own crystal, but Kit has only heard of them through stories. This changes when Mica, a boy from another island, comes seeking help for his home's dying crystal. One crystal's death would doom all five islands, including Kit's. Determined to keep her home safe, and armed with her family's knowledge of crystals, Kit volunteers to help Mica. However, unpredictable people, surprising customs, and lands unlike anything she has ever known stand between her and the crystal she must heal.



CRYSTAL SHARDS

Chapter 1

Kit crouched in the ferns. She pressed her hands into the rich earth and peered through the leaves of a bush to meet the fox's dark eyes.

"Hello," she whispered. "It's me again."

Around them, the forest was as lively as always. A sparrow joined a spotted wren in song, squirrels chased each other up branches, and bees buzzed around sweet flowers. Only Kit and the fox were still.

"You know me," she said.

The whiskers on the fox's brown snout twitched.

It wasn't running away. Usually, it left as soon as she tried to get close.

The fox sniffed the air and flicked its ear. Its fur looked thick and soft, and Kit wanted to hug it to her chest. It wouldn't let her, of course, but they were starting to become friends.

She kept her movements slow and smooth and stretched out her hand.

The fox's pink tongue flicked out, and she smiled.

"Kit!" A loud caw made her jump.

The fox bolted. Its red tail flashed through the leaves, then disappeared into the undergrowth.

Kit groaned and let herself fall back against the rough trunk of a tree. “Erie...” she complained to the large black bird watching her from a low branch.

“Kit,” the raven repeated in her croaky voice.

Kit huffed. She stood and brushed dirt and leaves from her trousers. It had taken her hours to find the fox. Why did Grandma have to call her home now? She always sent Erie to find her at the worst times.

“Kit!”

“I heard you the first time.” Kit shooed Erie away. “I’m coming.”

She threw a last glance at the tangle of bushes and ferns where the fox had been. Tomorrow, she would look for it again. If Erie didn’t ruin everything, she might even get closer.

Erie squawked, then flew off.

Kit watched her leave. Above her, the canopy of leaves framed patches of blue sky, and a grey tower rose over the trees. The lighthouse was always there to guide her home, no matter where she was.

She started walking towards it, ducking past branches and climbing over mossy stones. When she and the fox were friendly enough, it would be fun to have it running by her side.

She reached the stream and followed the murmuring water. Frogs hopped out of her way, and a spooked berrymouse with reddish fur and rounded ears scampered away to hide in the tall grass.

A purpleberry bush grew against the thick trunk of a tree, and Kit reached past the thorny vines to pluck one of the juicy, round fruits. Sweet flavors burst on her tongue, and she picked two more berries for Mom. If Erie came back, Kit would have to share, so she hurried on before Grandma grew impatient.

The house appeared between the trees. Kit dodged a spiderweb, careful not to break the thin threads of silk, and stepped into the clearing.

Her home was a small stone cottage with a thatched roof that leaned against the tall, unshakeable lighthouse. At the side of the cottage, Mom tended to her vegetable garden. It was the only place on the island where plants were tidy, each growing in their separate rows.

“Hey, you.” Mom smiled as she looked up from her tomatoes. Her brown hair was tied back, and her blue apron was streaked with dirt.

Kit came closer and opened her palm to show her the two purpleberries. “I got these for you.”

“Thank you. One for you, one for me?”

“Both for you.” Kit leaned over the tomatoes, breathing in the freshness of the green shoots.

Mom ate a purpleberry and brushed the leaf of a tomato plant. “Look at how well this little one is growing.”

“Is that the one Moon crushed?” Kit turned to look at Mom’s cat.

He was stretched out in the doorway of the lighthouse, enjoying a patch of sun. If he had felt any guilt for knocking the watering pot onto Mom’s plant, he had quickly forgotten it.

“I’m sure it was an accident,” Mom said.

Kit shrugged. Moon had looked too smug for her to agree, but Mom never believed anything bad about anyone.

“I better go see Grandma,” Kit said. “Erie came to get me.”

Mom nodded as she snipped a stray leaf. “Don’t make her wait.”

Kit walked to the lighthouse. Ivy crept over the worn stone wall, and insects buzzed under the leaves. As she came closer, Moon opened one eye and flicked his tail. She scratched him behind the ears and stepped over him.

The inside of the lighthouse was dim and cool. Its damp stone had a mellow, old smell that Kit had never found anywhere else.

She started up the tight, winding staircase, keeping her hand against the cold, bare stone. The stairs were just wide enough for two people to pass each other by flattening against the wall, but Mom said not to do that with Grandma anymore. She thought she was too old and might lose her balance.

The light that came through the narrow, slitted windows was faint, but Kit knew the stairs so well she could have kept going with her eyes closed. She had been climbing up and down the lighthouse since she

could walk. Back then she had been excited to help with grownup work, but now she recognized the chores for what they were. She could have a lot more fun down in the forest.

She reached the doorway at the top and paused to catch her breath.

Grandma swept the floor while Erie watched, perched on the metal frame that held up the lighthouse's large, orange crystal in the center of the room.

"Kit," the raven announced with a ruffle of wings.

Grandma looked up. "There you are, little cat. Where were you?"

"Just in the forest," Kit said.

"Up to anything interesting?"

Kit didn't want to tell her about the fox until she'd successfully befriended it. She shrugged. "Not really."

"You took so long I thought you might have fallen down a rabbit hole." Grandma tossed her a rag. "The windows have been waiting for you."

Kit sighed. The windows went all around the circular room. They gave a great view of the island, but keeping them as clean as Grandma wanted took ages.

She set to work. Below her, the thick canopy of the forest stretched in every direction. It only stopped, with a sliver of rocky beach, when it met the sea. The water itself spread unbroken until the horizon.

Sometimes, Kit imagined she could see the four other islands of Grandma's stories. According to Grandma, they had once been linked to Kit's home as a single, big island. When the four broke away, they each took a crystal to guide the islanders as they built their new worlds: a purple, a green, a white, and a black crystal. The fifth, an orange crystal, stayed on Kit's island.

One day, Kit hoped to see the other islands for herself. Who knew what they looked like now? They could have more foxes, be covered in berries, or have tiny birds the size of butterflies.

"I'm done." Grandma broke through Kit's daydream. "Will you be all right while I go help your mom with supper?"

Kit still had over half of the windows left. “No,” she sulked.

Grandma smiled. “Great.”

She put away her broom and moved to the center of the room to lean over the orange crystal, which was at least as big as Kit’s fox. Kit had never seen the crystal so much as twitch, but Grandma said it was the source of all life on the island.

“Looking strong and happy,” Grandma said as if the crystal were a precious pondturtle in hibernation. She straightened. “Right, little cat, I’ll see you when you’ve finished.”

She left down the stairs, but Erie made no move to follow. Kit eyed the raven. Cleaning was bad enough without having to put up with her. Once, the bird had left droppings near the crystal, and Kit had been the one to get in trouble.

“Well?” she said. “Go.”

“Go,” Erie repeated. “Kit.”

Kit shook her rag at her. Erie squawked and flew off after Grandma.

Kit went back to the windows. Grandma never let them get dirty, so her rag barely made a difference. She gave each window a quick wipe until she found herself back where she’d started. She stretched and took a step back. It all looked clean enough.

Outside, the sun was setting, turning the same warm shade of orange as the lighthouse’s crystal. Kit tossed her rag down next to the broom and brought a hand to her stomach. She couldn’t wait for supper. Hopefully, it would be ready when she got down.

“Enjoy your clean windows,” she told the crystal.

Once night fell, the top of the lighthouse would be surrounded by stars. It would be beautiful, but the crystal had no eyes to enjoy it. If it was a clear night, maybe Kit would come back later to look at the sky.

She was about to turn away when a blinding flash of light lit the room.

Kit tripped backward, her back hitting the wall. Even through her closed eyelids, her world was a sea of orange light. Was it lightning? A thunderstorm?

The light dimmed, and she risked a peek. The room was calm, but the crystal glowed like the embers of a dying fire. What was happening? Unease prickled her skin. Even in Grandma's craziest stories, crystals never blazed like the sun.

She squeezed her eyes shut, and spots of colored light danced behind her eyelids.

When she opened them again, the light had faded. The crystal looked the same as it always did. A rock. A pretty, orange rock, but still a rock.

She shook her head and backed out of the room. The crystal didn't change, but, as soon as it was out of sight, she ran down the stairs.

The orange light had been bright enough for all the island to see. What would Mom and Grandma say? Kit hoped she wouldn't be in trouble. She couldn't blame Erie for this.

There had to be some explanation. Maybe the sunset had been particularly bright and had reflected from the crystal in the same way sunlight gleamed when bouncing off the sea.

Her heart pounded as she ran down the stone steps, leaning against the wall for balance. She reached the bottom and burst outside into the soft, fading daylight.

Grandma stood in the grass, clutching her hands to her chest. Her wide eyes were on the lighthouse, high up where the crystal rested.

Kit let herself fall into the grass to catch her breath.

"The heart of the island calls," Grandma said, as if speaking to herself.

"Don't say that," Mom scolded from the kitchen window.

Kit looked up. Mom never snapped at anyone, even when Moon broke one of her favorite plates.

"I didn't do anything," Kit said just in case.

Grandma didn't spare them a look.

"Kit," Mom said, "come help me set the table. Food's ready."

Kit hesitated, but Grandma was lost in thought. Maybe Mom would have some answers. She left Grandma to stare at the lighthouse and went inside.

“What was that?” she asked Mom.

Mom handed her the water pitcher. “Put this on the table, please.”

Kit took it. “You saw it, too, right?”

Mom didn’t answer, and Kit frowned. What was going on?

She tried asking more questions during supper, but Mom changed the subject every time, and Grandma wasn’t listening. Instead of sunlight and crystals, they talked about tomatoes, rain, and whether Moon was gaining weight.

Kit wished the fox were here with her. It wouldn’t interrupt her to say, ‘Oh, and I mended your sock,’ when she brought up the lighthouse. She poked her carrots. She’d go find the fox again tomorrow. If Mom and Grandma wanted to keep things from her, she could have her own secrets.



JESSAMY COROB COOK

Jessamy grew up in the countryside in a house full of books. An incurable lover of stories, she trained as an actor and has performed all over the UK. When she's not dressing up and pretending to be somebody else, she teaches drama to kids. Jessamy loves travelling – whether in the real world or the story-world – and spent a year studying in Massachusetts. She now lives in London and will never get bored of exploring such a fascinating city, though her inner country-bumpkin still needs to see some trees, mud and a few sheep every now and then. She can't imagine a better way of getting through a lockdown than completing an MA in Writing for Young People.

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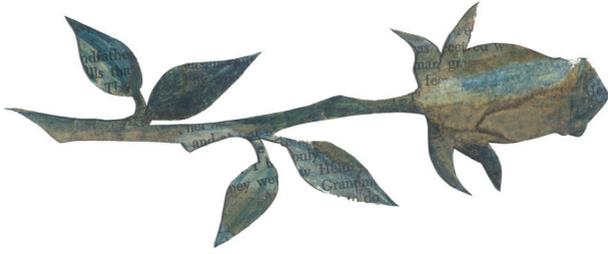
About *The Iron Garden*

Some rules are made to be broken. But if you break the rules, you face the consequences...

Eleven-year-old Beatrix knows all about rules. She knows all about punishments. She knows all about being quiet, sitting still and not answering back. And she's had enough.

A garden made all of iron – beautifully crafted, unsettlingly realistic – has been causing a stir in Victorian London. When Beatrix is taken to visit it, she finds a real white rose growing from an iron stem and she can't resist taking it home. She doesn't care that it's against the rules. But the rose doesn't stop growing, and things quickly get out of control.

An enchanted forest, a girl with a missing brother, a man with a sinister plot, and a dangerous deal with underground fairies all await Beatrix in this magical fairy tale adventure. Beatrix must find a way to undo her mistake and bring back the old, familiar, normal London. But does she really want to go back to a world without magic?



THE IRON GARDEN

Prologue

Some said the flowers were so lifelike that bees made their way between the petals, sending angry buzzing vibrations down the rigid stalks. Birds, they said, nested amongst the cold, twisted branches of the trees. Some said that rabbits tried to burrow there, claws scraping metal.

Visitors came flocking. All of London wanted to see for themselves. You'd think it was made by the hand of God, they said, not by man at all.

You'd think it was real.

Chapter 1

IRON

Thursday afternoons were when Beatrix had her outing. If it was raining, it would probably be the British Museum. If it wasn't raining, it would be a walk around Regent's Park. If Nanny was in an excellent mood, they might go to the zoo. This had happened exactly twice in Beatrix's memory.

This Thursday was different.

"Your Papa," Nanny said as they strode along the crowded pavement, "has some extremely *unique* ideas about the proper place for a girl of eleven to have her outing."

"What..." Beatrix was out of breath. She always was when walking with Nanny. Nanny's natural walking pace was a-lion's-escaped-from-the-zoo-and-he's-not-noticed-us-yet-so-let's-leave-before-he-does. "What sort of ideas, Nanny?"

"Speak when you're spoken to," said Nanny.

Which was not Logic, because Nanny *had* been speaking to her.

Sometimes Beatrix hated Nanny so much she could feel it like lightning in her bones. She wanted to scream, you're wrong, I am allowed to speak, it's not fair!

She didn't.

The street rang with the rattle of horses' hooves and the clatter of cartwheels, splashing through the puddles left by the morning's rain. The sun was creeping out now. The air smelled of London: coal and smoke and horse manure and many pungent humans. And just the tiniest, zesty spark of spring.

Nanny turned into a quieter street and Beatrix hurried after her, her boots slipping on the wet cobbles.

"Do try to walk with a little grace, Beatrix," Nanny snapped, never breaking her stride.

Beatrix clenched her teeth. Inside Beatrix lived a rage like a vicious dog.

She had to keep it chained up tightly, but she couldn't stop it growling like thunder in her chest. She imagined biting Nanny's ear. Hard.

Nanny turned into an even narrower street, then under a brick archway that led to a lane where there was a queue of chattering people. There were gentlemen in top hats, giggling young ladies with sour-faced chaperones, grey-haired men leaning on walking sticks, their wives in elaborate hats. And there were children. They clutched their nannies' hands or skipped on the spot or squabbled with their brothers and sisters. Beatrix wondered what it would be like to have a brother or a sister. Or, even better, a friend.

She stood on tiptoe, trying to see where the crowd was heading, and caught her first glimpse of intricate, iron gates. They loomed, a lacy silhouette against the grey sky. The delicate iron tracery made out words above the gates. Beatrix tilted her chin up to read:

*ENTER, DREAM, EXPLORE, STAY,
BUT BE SURE TO BE OUT BY THE END OF THE DAY,
AND MOST OF ALL, FROM THE GARDEN, TAKE
NOTHING AWAY.*

"A garden? Why does Papa want me to go to a garden?"

Nanny said, "Your hat. It's doing it again."

Beatrix's hat had a habit of sliding down over her left ear. She wanted to rip it off and fling it in the gutter. If she did that, though, Nanny would take her straight home and send her to bed with no supper. And she did want to see the garden. She pulled her hat straight as Nanny paid two shillings to the man in the ticket booth, and they followed the crowd through the gate.

Before them lay a path lined with slender trees, flower beds with twirls of fern and open-lipped lilies. At the end of the path was a small, circular fountain. But everything was black and stiff and frozen. Even the water gushing from the fountain seemed paralysed mid-gush. Everything in the garden was made of iron.

Take nothing away... How could you take anything away? Unless you could rip off a chunk of iron with your bare hands.

There were children high up in the iron trees, calling to one another, swinging from the branches, giggling. Nanny had never allowed Beatrix to climb a tree before, but perhaps there were different rules when the trees weren't real. Beatrix checked her hat was absolutely straight, did her angel-child face and turned to Nanny.

"Nanny? May I please climb the trees, as the other very proper and respectable children are doing so beautifully?"

Nanny's face was the face of someone who had just been asked for permission to cross the English Channel on a donkey.

"We are going to go for a *walk*," said Nanny. "And then we are going home."

As they walked, Beatrix had to stare very hard at everything to be sure it wasn't real – every leaf, every blade of grass, even the delicate texture of lichen on the tree trunks.

From the fountain, several paths led in different directions. Signs (iron, of course) directed the way to the orchard, the rose garden, the maze, the lake...

Beatrix's eyes widened. The lake! Would that be made of iron too? It sounded perfect for skating. Probably. Or, if not skating, at least sliding on. She'd never been allowed to skate because of thin ice and drowning. But that wouldn't be a problem on iron.

"The rose garden seems most appropriate," said Nanny, steering Beatrix in the opposite direction to the lake. "Or," she said darkly, "the least inappropriate."

Beatrix's rage growled a little louder and rattled its chain. She imagined Nanny crashing through thin ice, thrashing in freezing water as weeds wrapped about her ankles, dragging her down, down, down.

The roses were, if possible, the most lifelike thing in the garden. Beatrix kept thinking she caught them, out of the corner of her eye, blowing in the breeze. She whipped her head round every few steps, to

see if she could catch them (Nanny said, “Beatrix, your hat!”).

Arches, swathed in climbing roses, criss-crossed the paths that wound among the flowerbeds. One of the giggling young ladies from earlier had escaped her chaperone and was standing beneath an arch less than an arm’s length away from a young man with curly hair. There were more children here, too. Many were crawling about in the tunnel-like spaces between the rose bushes. A little boy in a blue jacket popped up from beneath a bush and pulled a face at Beatrix. She pulled one back, making her eyes roll behind her eyelids and poking her tongue up to her nose.

“Beatrix!”

Beatrix quickly made her face normal again, but it was too late.

Nanny’s voice was the most iron thing in the whole garden. “I knew this was a mistake. Twenty minutes in this place and you have entirely lost all sense of decency.”

People were looking. Nanny wasn’t even trying to speak quietly. Beatrix felt her blood starting to simmer.

“We are going home,” said Nanny.

She turned and began to stride back the way they had come, but Beatrix’s feet seemed to have rooted themselves to the ground. Her legs stiffened, as if they too were made of iron. Inside her, the rage roared. It was a monster, and Beatrix’s chains were barely strong enough to hold it.

Nanny stopped. She turned slowly back to Beatrix. Beatrix clenched her fists and didn’t move.

“The moment we get home,” said Nanny, “you shall be sent to bed. There will be no supper, and if you do not come this minute there will be no breakfast tomorrow.”

The rage burst free from its chains and surged up Beatrix’s throat, and she did the thing Nanny hated more than anything: she yelled.

“NO! I’m not coming with you. You can send me to bed, you can starve me, you can *kill* me, I don’t care! I HATE YOU!”

And then she did the other thing Nanny hated: she ran.

She skidded down the narrow path, burst between the couple under

the archway, and when Nanny was out of sight she dropped to the ground and slithered between the rose bushes. Iron thorns scraped at her hands and tore a big rip up her sleeve. Beatrix didn't care.

She crawled until she reached the other side of the rose bed. She glanced over her shoulder to be sure she was out of Nanny's sight. Then she ran. She clutched at her petticoats, which were getting tangled in her legs and slowing her down. Through the iron trees and along the iron stream, over the iron bridge and into the iron maze.

Hushed quiet. Perhaps not many visitors dared enter the maze. Whispers and the rustle of skirts. Soft footsteps hurrying along paths. Only the most adventurous.

A crow flapped down to perch on top of a hedge nearby and cawed at Beatrix. The sound reverberated off hard iron.

Beatrix ignored it. She was still out of breath from running. She walked. Along the curving paths of the maze, turning left, right, left... She didn't pay attention to which way she went. She wanted to be lost. If she didn't know where she was, then Nanny didn't either. Quiet. No more than glimpses of other visitors exploring the maze: a bobbing top hat over the top of a hedge, or a swish of bright shawl in a gap.

As she went on, the hedges got taller. The paths snuggled into shadow. The air chilled. This part of the maze felt old and forgotten. Some of the black paint was peeling off the iron twigs and the metal beneath was rusting. Spiders had spun their webs amongst the intricate iron leaves. In some places, the cobwebs were so thick it made the hedges into strange, pale shapes. Like piles of bones. What if this was the sort of maze you could get lost in forever, wander till you starved, and then your skeleton became a part of the hedge?

Beatrix paused. Maybe she should try to retrace her steps. But she couldn't remember which way she'd come.

Then, through the tangled black twigs to her right, she saw movement. A flash of green. Someone was nearby.

She crept along the path till she reached the next opening to her right and peered through. It was a woman. She was standing with her

back to Beatrix. She had wild, wavy hair that was long and loose and stood out around her shoulders like a lion's mane. It looked as though it had never been brushed: bits of twigs and leaves were tangled up in it – real twigs and leaves, which was quite a feat, when all the twigs and leaves around here were made of iron.

Beatrix would love to have hair like that. Hair that was part tree. Hair that didn't care. Hair that refused to be quiet and sit still. She tugged resentfully at her own neat curls, pinned in place by Nanny's firm fingers that morning and adorned with a ribbon.

There was nothing neat about the woman's dress, either. Layers of every shade of green: mud-streaked, with a belt that seemed to be made from vine. It was an odd shape at the back beneath the spray of hair, hard and flat, like a shield. Her sturdy leather boots were also caked in mud. It was an outfit for exploring in. An outfit for running through long grass, squelching through mud, splashing in puddles.

When I grow up, Beatrix thought, smoothing down her white cotton skirt, I want to be a ... whatever she is.

The woman turned and Beatrix jumped back, trying to look as though she hadn't been staring. The woman smiled. It was a fiery sort of smile: warm, but maybe dangerous. She had eyes like a leopard. Beatrix knew because she'd seen a leopard at the zoo, and when it had looked at her, she couldn't look away.

She said, "I beg your pardon." (She knew it was better to apologise in advance when speaking to an adult – it saved time later.) "I'm trying to find my way out of the maze. Can you help me?"

The woman stared at her.

"I just want to know how to get out," said Beatrix. "I'm lost."

The corners of the woman's eyes creased when she smiled. Beatrix couldn't work out how old she was. One moment she looked much older than Nanny, and the next she looked much younger. "You are exactly where you are supposed to be," she said.

"I'm not. Not at all," Beatrix said. "I'm not supposed to be out of Nanny's sight, and I'm completely out of her sight."

“Some rules are made to be broken,” said the woman. And, almost without pause, as though she was merely continuing the conversation, she began to sing. Or, perhaps, more a sort of chanting than singing.

*“Enter, dream, explore, stay,
This is a place where the dark ones play,
You may choose to obey, or you may choose to stray.”*

The words above the iron gate. But not.

“That’s not how it goes,” Beatrix whispered.

A cloud drew over the sun and the maze grew darker than ever. Beatrix shivered.

“I must go,” she said, and turned away.

“Some rules are made to be broken,” the woman called, as Beatrix hurried back the way she’d come.



ALICE ELLERBY

Alice worked in a literary agency before running away with the circus, where she performed as a trapeze artist for companies including the Roundhouse and NoFit State Circus. She has a degree in English from the University of Leeds and was awarded a distinction for her MA in Writing for Young People. She is now sub-editor at Juno, a natural parenting magazine. Alice lives in Bristol with her wife and daughter and their dog.

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About *Circus of Stars*

Sylvie is desperate to become a trapeze artist – just like her mum. And now she has her chance. This year, for the first time, Sylvie – and her dog, Welly – are spending the whole season with the Circus of Stars. Sylvie can't wait to become part of the troupe; to pull back the curtain and experience the dust and grease of the *real* circus. Only, Mum seems determined to stop her playing any part in the show.

Sylvie feels unwanted and out of place, and she's still coming to terms with losing her granny, who used to care for her while Mum performed. She longs to return to her old life. But, when she tries to run away, an unlikely friendship with a local boy, Jacob, leads Sylvie back to the circus, where she discovers a secret from her past that paves the way to the dizzying heights of the Big Top.



CIRCUS OF STARS

1

THE BIG TOP

Sylvie woke to the dull, metallic thud of the sledgehammer, driving the huge stakes into the ground. Mum's bed was empty. She must have slipped out early to start the tent build while Sylvie and Welly slept. Sylvie ducked her head under the curtain of the caravan window to look at their home for the next week. Sun streamed in through the plastic and she squinted. She pushed the window wide open and the smell of fresh-cut grass rushed in. Welly, curled on the end of her bed, stretched and yawned, then padded across the quilt to lie beside her.

'Good dog,' Sylvie said, scratching his thick ginger coat. He let out a low, rumbling growl.

Everything within the circus field looked just the same as yesterday, before they'd packed up at the winter quarters. The line of caravans formed a neat horseshoe and, at the top end, the crew were busy setting up the red and white striped Big Top.

But it was like a huge hand had reached down, plucked the circus from its spot and carried it gently across the country while Sylvie slept.

She looked beyond their field to soft green hills dotted with sheep, broken up by thickets of woodland. None of it had been there the day before.

‘Welly,’ she said, ‘it’s started. Our first whole season with the circus.’ She could barely contain her excitement. In the past, Mum had always spent summers at the circus without her.

Someone popped a head up inside the open window and Sylvie jumped, then smiled when she saw Olavo’s toothy grin. She’d known him her whole life, ever since she’d first visited Mum at the circus.

‘Eh, Sylvie, what’s going on? Are you hibernating?’ he said. His soft brown eyes crinkled. ‘With all this sleeping, I’m starting to think you’re half-girl, half-hedgehog.’

‘Well, I’d still be sleeping if you hadn’t woken me up with all that banging!’ she replied.

‘Sylvie, we’ve got a show tonight. We gonna need a tent, no?’

‘I guess so.’ She yawned loudly. ‘Maybe I’ll have another sleep during your act later.’

‘Hey, I better hear you laughing, Miss!’ Olavo said, pointing a finger at her. ‘I’ve got a new joke for you. I want to put it in my act.’ He picked up the sledgehammer, raised it above his head as if to strike the ground, but then toppled over backwards. Sylvie giggled and he lifted it again; this time it dragged him off to the side and he fell to the floor, legs in the air. She laughed again.

‘What do you think? It’s good, no?’

‘No,’ she said, smiling.

Welly barked.

‘See, Welly likes it. He has a good sense of humour, your dog. You know, I think I should put *him* in my act.’

‘I’m not sure you’ll make a circus dog out of Welly. He barely sits when I ask him to.’

‘I see,’ Olavo said, stroking his chin. ‘Not a performing monkey then, no?’

Sylvie shook her head.

‘A performing dog?’ he asked.

‘No!’

‘Okay, okay, Sylvie Dolittle. I get it. No animals in the circus. Well, what about you then? Isn’t it about time you thought about your part in the show?’

She rolled her eyes but inside she brimmed with excitement.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘you’d make a great trapeze artist.’

Sylvie felt her cheeks grow hot.

‘One day,’ he said, wagging his finger at her. ‘But now, I’m back to work. I’ll see you later, okay?’

He scampered off, hopped in the air and clicked his heels together.

Of course Sylvie had thought about being in the show. It was all she could think about. Every year when she came to see the circus with Granny, she watched in awe as Mum flew high above the crowd on her trapeze.

But this year would be different. This year, Sylvie wasn’t just a visitor; for the next five months she would be part of the circus as it travelled from town to town. She saw it as her apprenticeship. She would make herself an indispensable member of the troupe until she earned herself a spot in the show. Mum would train her up on the trapeze, and she would spend every summer from now on wowing the crowds.

Sylvie leapt off the bed and pulled on her clothes. She gave Welly his breakfast while she gobbled down a bowl of cereal, then the two of them headed out of the caravan.

The four king poles were already up, piercing the sky. Flat on the ground, the stretched-out canvas marked the footprint of the tent, and the stakes formed a perfect circle around the outside.

‘On my count,’ Bruno, the ringmaster, shouted. ‘One, two, three, heave!’

With grunts and groans, the crew winched up the red and white striped canopy.

No wonder it was once a job for the elephants, Sylvie thought.

She skipped around the edge, Welly trotting beside her, until she

spotted Mum leaning all her weight into a guy rope to pull the canvas taut as it went up.

‘Mum!’ Sylvie called, running over. ‘Can I help?’ She grabbed the rope Mum held and pulled it. Mum lost her grip.

‘Hey, hey, hey,’ Bruno shouted. ‘Matilda, watch your side!’

Sylvie and Welly flinched as the Big Top lurched towards them.

‘Careful, Sylvie!’ Mum scolded, fumbling to get hold of the rope again.

Sylvie stepped back. ‘Sorry, I was just trying to help.’

‘Well don’t,’ Mum said. ‘It’s dangerous and you don’t know what you’re doing.’

Sylvie scowled and turned away.

Up and down the length of the field, the rest of the crew unpacked boxes, carried props and equipment, laid out cables, strung up lights.

‘Is there something else I can help with, then?’ she asked, looking back at Mum.

‘No. Everyone’s working flat out to be ready for tonight. You and Welly just keep out the way.’

‘Fine,’ Sylvie huffed, and she stormed off.

‘Be back for break time,’ Mum called after her. ‘Half ten in the tea tent.’

Sylvie didn’t reply.

‘Sylvie! Ten-thirty, okay?’

‘Okay!’ Sylvie shouted, but she didn’t look back.

CIRCUS GIRL

‘Let’s get out of here, Welly,’ Sylvie said, stomping off towards a stile at the end of the circus field.

Mum was infuriating. Sylvie only wanted to help. She didn’t need to get so moody about it. For weeks now, Mum had been acting funny about having her at the circus, but Sylvie had hoped things would be different once the tour actually started.

On the other side of the stile, an overgrown footpath sloped up through a field towards some woods. Butterflies flitted across the top of the long grass. As Sylvie reached the shade of the trees, she thrashed at the undergrowth with a stick and a pheasant flew out right beside her, squawking. Welly leapt after it. His four feet cleared the ground as the pheasant rose to the safety of the sky.

‘Ooooh, so close, Welly!’ she consoled him. She threw the stick, sending him crashing through the brambles.

The woods sloped steeply down towards a wide river which cut between the trees on either side. Sylvie and Welly edged along the bank until they reached stepping-stones. They jumped across, Sylvie first, Welly second, his nose bumping into her legs every time. Welly snapped at the water that splashed up over the rocks, trying to catch it with his teeth.

On the other side, Sylvie took off her shoes and socks, lay back on the bank and let her feet dangle over the edge into the cold water. Welly lay beside her and she rested one hand on his warm, rough fur, feeling the gentle movement of his body as he breathed. She closed her eyes and the sounds and smells of the woods came alive. The damp, mossy mulch of the ground, the wind whooshing through leaves, the chorus of birds and insects chirping, singing, humming.

‘Listen to them, Welly,’ she said, her eyes still closed. ‘We’re not alone.’ She imagined all the creatures of the forest watching them and

she wondered who else was out there. She wondered whether Granny could see them too. Whether she missed them like they missed her.

Of course I do. More than anything, I wish I hadn't had to leave you, Sylvie, you know that. Sylvie knew it was her own thoughts talking to her, but she felt somehow it was Granny too.

But it wasn't the same.

If Granny hadn't died, Sylvie wouldn't be here now; she'd be at home with her instead. She wouldn't have her chance at the circus, but she'd have Granny, who loved her, instead of Mum who Sylvie sometimes thought would rather she didn't exist.

Voices and laughter interrupted Sylvie's thoughts and she sat up, Welly suddenly alert beside her. A couple of boys on bikes sped down a track a little way off. Sylvie felt uneasy, jolted out of her reverie, and held tightly to Welly, not moving, until they were out of sight.

Sylvie checked her watch. Ten-thirty already.

'Oh no, Welly! We're late. Mum will go mad.'

They ran all the way back, over the stepping-stones, along the river path and up through the woods to the top of the hill where they stood, panting, looking down into the circus field. Perched on the stile into the field was one of the boys; the other leant his back against the fence. They looked towards the Big Top, their bikes discarded next to them on the grass.

Sylvie felt her pulse quicken. It might be fun to make some friends, but she didn't have time now. Hopefully they wouldn't think she was rude if she rushed past.

'Come on, Welly, quick,' she said. 'We've got to get back before Mum loses it.'

She strode down the hill towards the boys, but they still hadn't noticed her by the time she reached the stile. The one sitting on top threw a stone at a rook in the field. He missed, to Sylvie's relief, but still, the rook took off with a loud caw and the boy laughed.

'Can I get through, please?' Sylvie asked.

Their heads turned.

‘Oh, who’s this then?’ Rook-Pest said, staring at her with his sharp chin lifted. He was a few years older than her and his voice had an edge. Something told Sylvie she was the new rook.

He shifted round to face her and she stared back, not speaking, willing him to move.

‘Where are you off to?’ he asked.

The other boy kept his head down.

‘Just home,’ she said, trying to keep her voice steady.

‘Where’s that then?’

‘Just over there. Can I get past, please?’

‘Are you in the circus?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ she said.

His eyes lit up with a twisted glee and Sylvie knew she’d given too much away – made herself an easy target. She desperately wanted to look down at Welly for reassurance, but she willed herself to keep looking straight at the boy.

‘Can you let me through now?’ she asked.

He didn’t move. The other boy shifted uncomfortably.

‘Do you live in a caravan?’ Rook-Pest said.

‘None of your business.’

Sylvie glanced to the side, hoping to find another way through. Perhaps she could run further up the field and jump over the fence. He might come speeding after her on his bike.

‘Get out of my way,’ she said.

‘Or what? You’ll set your dog on us?’ He sneered. ‘Here, doggy.’

Welly, suddenly aware of the attention, wandered towards him, wagging his tail.

‘Welly, heel!’ Sylvie said firmly, and he slunk back to her side.

Rook-Pest curled up his nose. ‘Urgh, what’s that smell?’ he asked.

Sylvie couldn’t smell anything. She looked at the silent boy, but he didn’t look up.

‘Oh yeah, I know what that is,’ continued Rook-Pest as he wafted his

hand in front of his face. ‘Smells like someone who lives in a caravan.’

He cracked up and Sylvie’s cheeks burned. She clenched her teeth and looked down at Welly.

‘Come on, Deacon, let her through.’

Finally, the silent boy had spoken. He stopped leaning against the fence and took a step towards her, his face serious beneath a mess of curly hair. Sylvie noticed he was younger than the other boy – about her age. He gave her a slight nod and his earring glinted as it caught the sun.

Deacon laughed. ‘Keep your pants on, Jacob,’ he said. ‘I’m gonna move. I’m just making conversation with *Circus Girl*.’

Deacon stepped down from the stile and brushed past Sylvie, a little too closely. He watched as she climbed over the stile and Welly ducked underneath.

Walking away, Sylvie’s heart pounded. She felt Deacon’s eyes boring into the back of her head.

‘Pikey!’ he shouted.

Tears pricked at her eyes.

‘Keep going, Welly,’ she whispered, just as a stone whooshed past her head.

‘Run!’ she cried.

Welly let out a piercing yelp; he must have been hit. Sylvie scooped him up, buried her face into his neck and carried on, as fast as she could, back to the caravan.



CATHY FAULKNER

Cathy Faulkner graduated with distinction from Bath Spa University's MA in Writing for Young People and holds a BA in English Literature from Bristol University, as well as having studied Art and Design at the University of the West of England. Cathy has taught in schools, colleges and universities in England and abroad. She is currently working as a primary school librarian and teaches English for Academic Purposes at Bristol University. For a number of years, Cathy was the Artistic Director of the Yeo Valley Children's Book Group. Besides writing, Cathy loves playing large bass instruments, making stained glass windows and growing her own fruit and vegetables. She also enjoys going on long walks in the countryside. Cathy lives with her husband, three children and ten chickens in North Somerset. She has enjoyed contributing both her writing and artwork to this anthology. *Digging for Victory* is her first novel.

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About *Digging for Victory*

Twelve-year-old Bonnie wants to be a war hero like her older brother, Ralph. She certainly does not want to stay at home and tend the family vegetable garden. But when the mysterious Mr. Fisher is billeted at their farmhouse, Bonnie discovers that being a hero doesn't necessarily involve wearing a uniform. Can she actually make a difference to the war effort, though? And is there really any point in digging for victory?



DIGGING FOR VICTORY

Wednesday 3rd December 1940

Ralph's going off to be a hero.

It's official.

He got his papers this morning –
Two-Six-Six squadron are expecting him.

That's my brother Ralph, in case you didn't know.

Ralph,

who, until not so long ago,

would sometimes play hide and

seek.

Not that it would ever take me long to find him

(and then he'd pretend he wasn't even playing
and that made me feel daft).

Ralph,

who told me the difference

between Spitfires and Hurricanes,

Wellingtons and Halifaxes,
 but missed the very first actual Spitfire to *fly over* the village
 (and then claimed he was the first to see it).

Ralph,
 who's won the heart
 of practically every girl in the village
 (apart from Mary Smith
 who will always hate him),
 but who's never once won a school prize.
 (The ones I've won for coming first in tests
 don't count, he says,
 since he gave me all the answers –
 which isn't true anyway).

Ralph,
 who's always made me look second best,
 even though I'm not.

Ralph, Mother says
 (whilst brushing away a tear),
wouldn't want us to be sad –
we're to learn to be strong,
keep our chins up
and most of all,
FEEL PROUD.

The thing is,
 if I'm honest,
 I don't actually feel sad and
 even though I'm just his little sister,
 I'm already strong.

And there's no way I'm
ever
EVER
putting my chin up
and feeling proud
until
I
am the hero.

Wednesday 17th December 1940

You can help me carry Ralph's things down to the cellar,
Mother says,
in her that's-what-you're-going-to-do-anyway kind of way.
Why? I ask. *He'll be back before long –*
he said he'll visit us as soon as he's got leave,
didn't he?

Mother sighs.
We don't know when that'll be,
and now that he's really flown the nest
for the good of the country,
it's time that we play our part too.

I wrinkle my face up.
What do you mean?

I mean, Bonnie,
that Father and I
have applied to have someone billeted here,
so now we can all look forward to someone else coming to stay.

So Ralph gets to fly away on an adventure
and we have a stranger come to stay
(not that I was ever asked about it).
How exactly is that us playing a part in the war effort?

Boxing up Ralph's childhood –
his hard-won marbles
 (that he never let me play with)
the prize conker
 (which I know I found)
and badly-painted tin soldiers
 (in all the wrong colours) –
is the only part I get to play.

I dig out Grandfather's old zoetrope from under Ralph's bed –
so that's where it's been!
It's been years since we've played with it –
Ralph told Mother I'd lost it
(and as usual, I took the blame).
I'm taking this to **my** room.

I place it in the middle of my windowsill.

Rising from its polished wooden base,

the round metal drum looks almost

lamp - like, but upside - down with

slits cut round the side.

I spin it really hard,

and

look

through

one

of

the

gaps

and wonder (as I've always done)

exactly how the drawings on the inside

seem to merge into one moving picture.

I watch them as they chase each other

round

and

round

and

round.

They're faded now and covered in dust,

but they're just as I remember them:

the eagle

takes off

and soars

time and

time again,

leaving the chicken

always

scratching

pathetically

at the ground

below.

But as I carry

the boxes and trunks

down to their new home

in the cold, cobwebbed cellar,

I wonder who might soon be moving

their things in.

I hope it's someone nice

like Barbara Robinson

who arrived from Bristol

with her gas mask and trunk

and was billeted with Carol

(my best friend in the whole world)

last September.

Another Nancy Edwards

(who arrived on the same train

in her pigtails and pinafore)

would be all right too

(although I still don't believe

what she said about

never having seen a cow before).

Even a Betty Sanders

(who talks enough for all three of them)

wouldn't be too bad,

just as long as

she doesn't EVER say

that things are backward here.
I've heard that far too much already.

Or perhaps –
 now here's an idea –
it might be one of those land girls
who help out on farms.
Mr Brown
 (that's our closest neighbour)
has requested some, you know,
now that his farmhands have gone off to fight
 (he's got a lot on his plate at the moment,
 what with being in the Home Guard and all).
I bet their trunks would be full of lipstick and pretty dresses,
stockings and high heels.
A land girl might curl my hair
and give me lovely things
just like a kind big sister.
How jealous the girls at school would be!

Yes, by the time Ralph's room is empty,
the memories boxed up
and the dust swept away,

*I realise that I'm actually looking forward
to someone else coming to stay.*

Just so long as that someone
isn't a boy.

Thursday 2nd January 1941

No, it's not a boy,
Mother says.

Thank goodness for that.
I don't want someone who'll tease me
and call me names
and snigger like they do at school.
I want someone like Carol
 but whom I can talk to at midnight
who'll understand me,
who'll share secrets
 (and lemon sherbets),
be like the sister I never had
and who won't ever get to join in the action
and leave me feeling
second best.

No, it's not a boy,
Mother repeats.
It's a Mr Fisher.

That can't be right! I cry.
Why on earth would a Mr Fisher
need to stay on a dairy farm
in the middle of nowhere?

He can't be a farm hand –
 they've already left to fight, and only land girls are sent to help
 now.
And if he were a farmer and allowed to stay,
 why, he'd have his own farm and wouldn't be billeted here.

We don't need another doctor –

Dr Bovington's busy but I'm sure he can manage now that half
the village have gone.

A teacher perhaps?

But the evacuees brought their own Miss Jones with them when
they came on the train from Bristol.

Someone from the Home Guard?

Mr Brown has that all covered what with his whole team of
grandfathers who watch out for invaders (and they've hardly
been run off their feet).

Maybe a new warden?

But Mr Collins, our vicar, loves that job, and although he's
almost as ancient as the church itself, I don't think anything will
stop him shouting, *put that light out!*

And if he were in the military–

he'd either be fighting abroad or based at RAF Oakmoor just
ten miles from here.

What I hope more than anything

is that he isn't another conchie like Mr Howard,

sent here to do the jobs that no one else wants to do
all because he has some strange belief
and doesn't care a bit about the law.

Having one of those in the house just doesn't bear thinking about –
the boys at school would actually have a reason to call me names then.

But Mr Howard wasn't billeted with anyone
even though he's working for Mr Brown.

He lives in his own caravan.

Thank goodness.

Maybe all conchies do.

Mother turns the letter
over
and
over
in her hands
as if looking for the answer to my question.

It must be a mistake.

Friday 3rd January 1941

But when I open the door the very next morning
and see the scrawny RAF officer standing ankle-deep in snow,
I know it's for real.
Not a conchie,
but a man, all the same.

And everything inside turns cold.

Mr Fisher?

Mother asks, untying her apron.
He holds out his hand and gives a quick nod
but his face looks as frosty as the frozen fields behind him.

Come in, come in!

Mother shuts the door, hurriedly puts another log on the fire and the
kettle on the stove.

But the cold has come in now.

And somehow, I think it's here to stay.

Mr Fisher's cold expression
doesn't thaw as he stands

s
t
i
f
f
l
y

by the fire.

He has a faraway look in his ice-blue eyes
and when he stares into his tea
 without drinking
it's clear he'd rather be somewhere else,
doing something different,
with people who aren't us.

Mother chatters and fusses
like she does around Father
when he comes in out of the snow.
But unlike Father,
 he simply nods,
and barely opens his mouth to speak.
And when he does,
his crotchety voice
seems to speak from

miles away.

When Mother takes the tea tray back to the kitchen,
I try to be polite and tell him about Ralph,
how he's going to be a hero of the skies at just nineteen
(I think it might be of interest, him being RAF and all)

but the way he says
 is that so,
doesn't sound like a question at all,
he stops listening altogether,
and just looks
 out of
 the window.

I really don't like this Mr Fisher.
And I wish he were somewhere else too,
doing something different,
with people who aren't us.

And what on earth is he doing here anyway?

Bonnie,
says Mother later in the day,
You're to be polite to Mr Fisher
and show him respect.

We've got to make him feel at home -
he'll be eating with us at our table.
You're to keep quiet outside his room
And give him no reason to grumble.

You're to offer him food before you take yours
and accept if it means having less,
You're to keep your belongings up in your room
and refrain from making a mess.

From now on, his is the chair by the fire
and he's to read any books of his choosing.
You're to make weekend tea at half past ten
and polish his shoes every evening.

*Oh, and under absolutely no circumstances whatsoever
are you to ask him ANY questions.*

Is that understood?

Not understood.

Not understood.

Not understood in the slightest.

How can that horrible old man
just arrive in our house
and expect us to make it his home?

Like a cuckoo,
he's taken over the nest
that Ralph has only just flown.

And like put-upon birds,
we are expected to feed him
and show him kindness
so that he can get on
with whatever it is that he does.

And what is that anyway?
Why is he here?
Why isn't he playing his part?

There's nothing for an officer to do on this farm.

Especially not an unsmiling one.

Not understood.

Not understood.

Not understood in the slightest.

Saturday 4th January 1941

Bonnie,

says Mother

on the way to the village shop

the very next day,

Your father and I have been talking.

What with Ralph gone

(not to mention the farmhands)

and another mouth to feed,

I'm going to have to ask you

to take on something very important.

Oh?

I pull the loose thread on my mitten.

*You see, I'll have to help your father a lot more
out in the fields with the cows.*

We've all got to play our part, you know.

Oh?

I drag my heels through the slush.

Ah! There you go, Bonnie,

she says as we turn the corner,

pointing at the poster that old Mrs Clarke

is straightening in the post office window:

over the top of a perfectly round cauliflower

a lady smiles.

Dig for Victory

the poster says.

I'm not sure why Mother is showing me this.

She already grows our own vegetables.

She's been doing it ever since I can remember.

And then I realise just what she means.

I dig my mittened hands into my pocket
and dig my heels in.

I don't want to dig for victory,
I want to **fight** for it.

Standing at Mrs Barker's counter there are four girls
I've not seen before,
but their brown hats, coats and breeches
and badges of gold and green
tell me that they must be the new land girls
come to help out on Mr Brown's farm.

Mrs Barker examines their ration books,
grudgingly stamps each one
then takes off her glasses
and folds her arms tightly over her enormous chest.
*Just because you're entitled to extra food,
doesn't mean it'll always be available,*
she grumbles.
*There's enough mouths to feed
in this 'ere village as it is.*
Bloomin' townies,
she mutters under her breath
as the land girls step out into the snow
and the bell above the door jangles a *cheery* goodbye.

*Fat lot of good they'll be on a farm –
not an ounce of muscle between 'em.*

*Just trying to do their bit, I suppose,
Mother replies politely.*

Huh!

*They'd do it far better in a factory
or working the telephones –
they'll never replace our boys.*

Mrs Barker is still grumbling to herself
as she disappears into the dark, dusty storeroom out the back
to find Mother some seed potatoes.

*Three weeks, I'll give 'em –
you mark my words.*

Three weeks.

The land girls are still on the village green
as we say goodbye to Mrs Barker and step out into the cold.
The four of them are squealing with delight
and stumbling backwards in the snow

as the mallards waddle from the icy
river and
dart
and *dive*

towards their scraps of bread.

It's as if they've never seen ducks out of water before.

Mother shakes her head at the sight of the bread,
What a waste, she says.

I think of Mr Brown's needy flock of sheep,
 the never-ending
 herding,
 feeding,
 lambing,
 and shearing

(not to mention the rats in his barn).

And I find myself wondering if Mrs Barker is right.

Can they really do their bit here?
 And why would they want to anyway?

But then I think of where they could be instead –
 a factory,
 an office,
 the telephones,
 a hospital –
 and what kind of choice is that?

I wonder how many women there are in England
 wanting to play their part
 and none of them allowed to be heroes.
 It just isn't fair.

What a waste,
 Mother says again.

Sunday 5th January 1941

And so my role in the war effort begins.
Mother shows me how to nestle
the dull brown seed potatoes
in egg boxes she has saved,
blunt end up,

eyes
gazing
skywards.

I think of Ralph
in a crisp blue uniform
snug in his Spitfire,
soaring through the skies.

*It's important, she says,
for the shoots to grow
so that they are ready to plant out
as soon as the conditions are right.*

And I think to myself
that however tall I grow,
the conditions will never be right for me to become a hero.



LOIS FOSTER

Lois lives in Wiltshire with her sister and a spotty cat called Biggie, both of whom are incredibly grumpy. In a past life, she was a songwriter and musician in three bands. She attended BIMM Brighton for several years, where she achieved a BA in Songwriting and Music Performance. After a long spell of mysteriously ill health, she found solace in writing, and more recently graduated Bath Spa's MA in Writing for Young People with Distinction. When she's not writing, or dreaming, or singing, or researching weird things, she's recumbent biking or painting more spots on the cat.

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About *Anomaly Island*

"Your brother is sick..."

Twelve-year-old Fin O'Rye lives in a tent on a mountain with his father and big brother Tag. Tag's the best friend a brother could have. They do everything together: swim, watch *Captain Canadia*, spy on Mrs Tauko. But Fin wishes they could go down the mountain to the cinema and McDoodles, like the Peas.

Then Tag catches the deadly Devil's Lung.

Now, Fin must follow Tag off the mountain to save him. With the help of doctor's daughter Ruth, Fin stows away on the hospital ship to Coralton Sanatorium, the place that will make Tag better.

Or so he thinks.

The island is full of secrets, and Ruth's mum, Dr Blue, is behind them. Fin discovers Devil's Lung is the least of his worries. Can he trust Ruth? Where has Tag gone? Will the brothers ever see their mountain again?



ANOMALY ISLAND

One

Sometimes,
I worry about where we're going.
Sometimes,
I worry I'll breathe too much air and my lungs might burst.
Sometimes,
I worry I'll never see our mountaintop again.
But most of the time,
most
of
the
time,

I worry about Tag.

Two

FIRE IN A CAN

“Your brother is sick.”

I smell smoke, and wood, and something else.
Something a bit like gone off milk.

A wave of heat singes my face. I peek under my eyelids and see my father’s fuzzy red lumber jacket. He’s sitting on my bed, peering round the walls of our tent.

“I know you’re awake, Fin.” He sounds worried.

I open my eyes and he’s staring back at me.

“What’s wrong with him?” I look at the bed next to mine.

It’s empty.

For weeks, people have been getting ill. It started with the Jettison family on the other side of the forest. Next, everyone in the valley by the Kugon River had it. Then the baby a few tents down, and Old Man Tauko next to us.

Now it’s Tag.

Only, Tag’s never ill. Usually, it’s me who catches everything. Last time I was so ill, everyone thought I was dying. My parents kept me in their bed for weeks. Then my father put a fire in a big tin can by the bed and sweated the illness out.

Another wave of heat wafts through the curtain into our room. Maybe that’s what he’s doing now.

Maybe he’s built a fire for Tag too.

“What’s wrong with him?” I ask again.

My father has that look on his face. The same look he had when I was sick last time. The same look he had when our mother died.

That’s how I know it’s bad.

I sit up and peel off my duvet. “I’ll help.”

“You’re a good son.” He ruffles my hair. His fingers are sandpaper rough on my scalp, from where he makes furniture from trees.

“But I think it’s best you get some fresh air.” He hands me my jeans and *Captain Canadia* hoodie at the end of my bed and shuffles out through the curtain.

I pull them on and ignore the sweat beading on the wool. Most of my clothes are Tag’s hand-me-downs, like the hoodie, but sometimes Mr Pea brings us big black bin bags of stuff from KindWill. Then I grab my trainers, which were Tag’s too, and follow the smell of smoke.

Not many people get to live in their favorite colour, but not many people get to live in a tent either. Ours is navy blue, with Gaffer tape patched over all the holes, and curtains instead of doors. It’s cosy and small and I wish it was bigger, but our father says we don’t need a giant tent like the Peas’ when there’s only three of us.

I still wish they’d give us their tent though.

I step over cushions and weave round the sofa and accidentally knock over Tag’s DeeVeeDees. Sweat’s pouring off me when I reach my father’s room, but if I think it’s too hot for me, it’s nothing compared to how hot it is for Tag. I imagine him swaddled in blankets, the tin container next to him burning a fire so ferocious, no sickness will stand a chance.

I hold my hand out to the curtain. My fingers close on the drapes.

“What’re you doing?” My father pops his head out. His skin gleams with sweat. He fumbles with the fabric and his body pops out too. I look round him for Tag, but he holds the curtain tight shut.

“Sorry, Fin. Out.”

“But—” I step forward, and he shakes his head.

Why can’t I go in?

I turn round and step through the next zip to outside. The cold stings my cheeks. There’s a twinge in my chest, like a fish tugging a hook.

’Cause this feels like last time.

’Cause of Old Man Tauko.

’Cause Tag’ll be wondering where I am. He won’t want to be on his own.

Three

THE MOUNTAIN

There are five tents on our mountaintop, with sixteen people in them. That's four men (one dead), three women, one baby and seven kids. They're in a semicircle round a big firepit near the edge. Tag, my father, and me have the one by the forest.

I sit on my blanket at the edge of the mountain. The rock drops in front of me down to the lake. It shimmers and shines 'til it reaches the valley the other side. More forests rise out of the water there. The trees stretch for miles. There isn't a single house here. Not by the lake. Not in the valley.

Not on our mountain.

Mrs Tauko, our neighbour, beats a stick against the rug she's hung on the rope between her tent and a tree. Every time the stick hits, plumes of dust escape from deep within the wool and billow over her head like clouds. She frowns and mutters to herself as she gets ready to hit again. It makes a swooping sound as she swings her arms.

One big one.

I wonder if she's okay. Old Man Tauko only died last week.

She glares at me and shuffles back inside in her slippers.

Next to Mrs Tauko's tent is Peter and Mandy Lut's. They're twins, just a bit older than me. Their dad's strict and I never see them have fun, not like the Peas the other end. When the Lut twins aren't collecting wood or praying or washing clothes, Mr Lut teaches them, sometimes for ten hours a day.

I don't have any lessons at all.

Jimi and Gaia are my favorites. They're seventeen and have a baby and got kicked out by their parents after Gaia gave birth by surprise. They don't even have surnames. They say they don't want to keep them all the way up a mountain.

Gaia sits outside her tent in her old rocking chair with the baby in

her arms. She's cooing and singing and rocking and smiling. The baby tugs her black hair.

She looks up and smiles. "Jimi's gone fishing."

I nod. It's what he does all day, every day.

Then the Peas are at the end of our crescent of tents. Mr and Mrs Pea are friendly and smiley. Mr Pea ruffles my hair and says, "How's it going kid?" every time he sees me. Mrs Pea cooks enough chicken to feed five hundred, but always gives me and Tag the most. The Peas are the only ones with a car. It takes Mr Pea an hour to drive Sam, Becky and Em down the mountain to school, and at the weekends he takes them for burgers and shakes at McDoodles. Sometimes, he takes me and Tag with him when he gets petrol for the generator. We've been to DollarMart twice too, but most of the time there isn't enough room in the family-wagon with the five of them.

I wish we lived more like the Peas.

There's a cough and a big, dragging breath from inside our tent. It's rattling and long and sounds like millions of tiny crystals thundering through Tag's lungs, like salt in the sea when a wave comes.

My father stoops out and wipes his brow with his sleeve. "Hot." He puffs out his cheeks. "Best you stay out."

I nod.

He squints at the sky. "Don't want you to catch it."

I want him to tell me Tag's fine. That he'll be okay. That he's getting better already.

Instead, he says, "Think we better send word for the shaman, don't you?"

Four

THE SHAMAN

At the edge of our mountain, the grass is wet with dew. Bumpy rocks under my blanket hurt my bum. The sun shines through the trees, across the valley and its streams, and every once in a while a bird flies across. Even though it's cold and my fingers are numb and the grass is wet, it's a perfect day.

For exploring the woods, 'cause you can't get too hot.

For painting at the edge of the mountain, 'cause the paint won't dry too quick.

For swimming in the lake, 'cause it's not frozen over yet.

Only it's not perfect, 'cause Tag's ill.

Four tents down, Mr Pea sits in his tent entrance and mutters to Mrs Pea. She's crouching inside too, peeling potatoes into a bin bag. Mr Pea glances over at me, his eyes flicking back to Mrs Pea. His mouth's moving so quick, he's barely opening it.

Mrs Pea plops the potatoes into the saucepan on their camping stove. Steam billows out of their tent and wafts over to ours. My stomach rumbles. Most lunchtimes, Mrs Pea makes chicken and potatoes, or tuna jackets wrapped in foil, or bangers and mash, and whoever's on the mountain sits round the firepit to eat together.

I wonder if Tag can smell them. He probably hasn't had any breakfast.

The potatoes bubble and boil. Mr and Mrs Pea mutter quietly 'til their egg timer goes off. Then Mrs Pea empties the water into the grass. She watches me as she does it, jumping at little noises.

She's acting strange.

Then they disappear into the tent. Cutlery clashes and clangs. I hope she's mashing the potatoes all up. Maybe Tag'll get better for bangers and mash. It's his favourite.

But Mrs Pea gets shouty. I hear 'germs' and 'spread' and 'Old Man Tauko'. The plates clang extra loudly.

Mr Pea stoops out with a steaming plate and marches over to me with his big belly puffed over his trousers. “Lunch for you.” He puts it down on my blanket and whips his hand away quick. He stands back a bit too.

Mash, no bangers. No chicken.

No Ketchipp.

No Peas.

No BarBeeQue Beans.

Just a dribble of GrayVee, and I hate GrayVee.

“Do you have any Cheeze?” I ask.

“No can do, kiddo.” Mr Pea shrugs. “Shelves’re empty.”

I think of DollarMart. It doesn’t look right in my head when everyone’s taken all the food.

Then a jangling sound rings through the forest, sparkly bright, like millions of buckles on shoes.

Mrs Pea sticks her head out their tent.

Mr Pea drops the fork on my blanket.

Gaia stops rocking her chair.

A man emerges between two cedars with bells and animal teeth round his neck. He’s laden with bags and a drum, like a packhorse, and his head droops under a feather headdress.

My father hurries out of our tent. “Thank you for coming.” He holds his hand out to shake the shaman’s.

But the shaman steps back. “We cannot spread the germs.”

“Sorry. I forgot.” My father pulls his hand back.

Mr and Mrs Pea wince. No one on the mountain’s ever this quiet. Especially not Mr Pea.

The shaman dumps his bags by the entrance and unhooks a flute from his gown.

Then he stomps to the edge of my blanket and looks down at me. His eyes are yellowy-watery, like an old wise wolf’s. “Is this him?” he grunts.

My father shakes his head.

Mr Pea clears his throat. “Don’t you think we should call a hospital? If the child’s got—”

Mrs Pea sees me looking,
elbows him in the stomach.

It makes me think.

If Tag's got what?

'Cause no one's told me anything.

Do they know?

The shaman glares at Mr Pea before stooping into the tent with his bags, his headdress snagging the zip. The last of his feathers flick round the corner. My father hurries inside after him.

Mr Pea glances down at me. "Eat up, champ. We'll save some for Tag, when his appetite's better, hey?" He smiles and reaches out to ruffle my hair like usual, but then he makes a weird face and pulls his hand away and dashes into his tent. I wait for him to come back out with Mrs Pea and have lunch with me.

But he rolls their tent curtain down.

Why's he shutting me out? Tag's the one who's sick.

I try to ignore that Mrs Pea brought up Old Man Tauko, and pick up the fork and pile my mash round in a mountain shape. First a short back and sides, then I scoop out a canyon. GrayVee spills inside, filling the cavern like the lake.

If Tag was here, he'd fill the quiet up. We'd talk about *Captain Canadia* and the Kugon Eagle, and he'd have a secret dessert stashed in his pocket for afters.

But Tag's not here.

I push my plate away. There's something wrong about eating his favourite food when he can't eat it too.

"It'll be all right, Fin." Gaia rocks in her chair outside her tent. The baby gurgles in her arms. I want her to come over and sit with me, but she looks at the turning grey sky and takes the baby inside.

Then a drum bangs from our tent, loud and quaking, like a roll of death-thunder through the air.

The shaman sings,
a gargling wail,

and it begins.

Five

THE LUTS

“Tuu— Saaaaaaa...”

Tuu— Saaaaaaa...”

The shaman’s wail seeps through the curtain, drifting over the edge of the mountain and spilling out across the valley below. Behind our little tent, the trees creak in the wind.

The shaman’s been with Tag for four hours and counting. My father said if he sings strong and loud enough, Tag’ll stay and the illness will leave. It’s an evil spirit and if we get Tag hot and cleansed with sage and cedar, we’ll sweat it out. The herbs smell so strong they’re making me cough all the way out here.

I hope he’s right. I can’t be without Tag any longer.

I feel the weight of something on my blanket. I turn round and see my father’s muddy boots. I look up. There are tears in his eyes. The last time he cried was when our mother died.

What’re you meant to do when your father’s sad? Tag’s the one who makes him feel better.

I touch his leg, but he jerks it away.

“Sorry, Fin. No touching. That’s what the shaman says.” He nods at a bucket by our firepit. “We need more cedar.”

I don’t want to leave Tag, especially not when he waited outside my parents’ bedroom the whole time when I was ill, but he needs my help, so I pick up the bucket and walk past our tent, the drone of the shaman swallowing me like a tunnel. I don’t think it’ll ever end, but then I reach the trees and pop out and I hear the forest instead.

Safe sounds.

Like twigs breaking.

Leaves swishing.

I remember last time we were in here. Yesterday, he stole one of Mrs

Pea's jam jars and filled it up with dirt and said it had Dayvee Jones' heart in it, like on *Pierats of the Carrabean: Dead Woman's Drawers*. We were going to put it in the river and see if the Kraken would come, but Sam chased us, so we buried it behind our tree stump instead, next to Jimi's Lego-Less and Mr Pea's spare car keys.

I reach where it's hidden and smile.



NAT HARRISON

Nat Harrison was born on the tiny volcanic island of Ascension, in the middle of the South Atlantic Ocean between Africa and Brazil. She spent her childhood having adventures in England and Hong Kong, and has since journeyed to every continent except Antarctica (it's next on the list). She doesn't stay anywhere for very long but can usually be found exploring with her husband and her best dog Shadow, who doesn't say much but loves a good story.

Nat has been a sweet seller, hamburger flipper, bingo caller, table waiter, and ice-cream puller. She also worked in communications for some of the most well-known technology brands in Europe, Asia and the US.

However, the one constant in a life of change is Nat's love of reading and writing stories. No matter where she is in the world, she'll always have a book and notepad stashed secretly nearby.

Having earned a distinction for her MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University, Nat's next chapter involves writing middle grade adventures.

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About *The Girl Who Raced the World*

When her mother dies, Maggie Appleton discovers London is no place for an orphan. Terrified of ending up in the workhouse, Maggie's only hope is a letter addressed to a mysterious stranger called Passepartout.

But Maggie gets more than she bargained for when she meets Passepartout's new employer, the eccentric Mr Fogg. If she is ever to find a home, Maggie must embark on a daring voyage around the world in eighty days... and the clock's already ticking.

Can the impossible bet be won? Will Maggie find a place to call home? And who is that person lurking in the shadows following their every move?



THE GIRL WHO RACED THE WORLD

Chapter One

IN WHICH A GIRL DISAPPEARS

Down a grimy back alley, in a most undesirable corner of Marylebone, stands a disagreeable little building. It is squat and ugly and lurks menacingly in the shadows. If you were to address it correctly, you would call this establishment *The St Marylebone Workhouse and Industrial School*. But everyone who knows better simply calls it *The Grotto*, named after the grubby passage in which it stands.

The name suits it well. It is a place of dank cellars and damp classrooms, every wall slick and speckled with mould. Its tiny windows are bolted shut, having been painted black many years ago. 'Learning requires concentration, not imagination,' the schoolmaster had bellowed as he smeared greasy paint across the glass.

If you were to approach the school, inadvisable as that might be, you would not hear any of the usual sounds echoing inside: no excitable chatter, nor cheers, nor laughter drifting out of the building. You'd just

hear the shuffle of feet and the sharp, irritable scratch of chalk across the blackboard.

On this particular day, you would find a girl standing outside, staring up at the iron-barred windows and the chimneys belching thick smoke into the sky. Anyone looking closely might see that under her hat, her hair was tangled into a knot. If it wasn't for her smart cloak pulled tight around her shoulders, they might notice a number of buttons were missing on her dress.

They would certainly spot the battered suitcase clutched in her hand, the label on it declaring it belonged to *Magnolia Appleton*, although the first name had been neatly crossed out and replaced with *Maggie*.

But no one did spot Maggie. In Grotto Passage, people hurried by and didn't look too closely in case it invited trouble.

Maggie's other hand was held so tightly by a mountain of a man standing beside her that her fingers had turned scarlet. She tried to pull away, but the man tightened his grip.

'No more of your funny business, you hear?' He was already nursing a throbbing shin and there was an angry scratch snaking across his neck. 'Any more trouble,' he snarled, 'and you'll be for it.'

Maggie scowled, but said nothing.

The man bundled her across the alleyway towards a small black door. Above it, faint letters were written in flaking paint. Squinting up, she could make out one word.

Workhouse.

'No!' She tugged her arm furiously. 'I won't go to a workhouse. Maman said—' She yelped as the man yanked her arm.

'Well, your mam ain't gonna care no more, is she?' He smirked.

His words may as well have been fists; Maggie felt the blow just the same. *Maman*, she thought desperately. *Please help me.*

The man reached up and pulled on a rusted chain. Somewhere inside, a bell clanged irritably, as if it were angry to be disturbed.

'Behave yourself,' he growled, 'or you'll have me to answer to.'

The door swung open and a face peered out. A woman, as squat and

ugly as the building itself, scowled back at them. She reminded Maggie of a rather miserable-looking toad.

‘Yes?’ she snapped, seeming to glare not just with her eyes, but with every part of her. Even her voice sounded like a frown. Spotting the man, her lips gave the briefest of twitches. ‘Oh, it’s you. Dropping off, are you?’

The man shoved Maggie forwards. ‘Aye, Matron,’ he replied, sounding pleased with himself. ‘That I am.’

Matron’s eyes slid over Maggie’s smart bonnet and velvet cloak, settling on the suitcase in her hand. ‘Let’s get a proper look at you.’ She grasped Maggie by the chin. ‘Very nice,’ she muttered to herself, turning Maggie’s face one way, then the other. ‘Not like the usual ruffians that come knocking.’

Something cold and unpleasant crept up Maggie’s spine and she wrenched her chin away. ‘Please, I think there’s been a mistake—’

‘Orphan, I s’pose?’ Matron cut in, looking over Maggie’s head as if she hadn’t spoken.

‘Aye,’ the man answered. ‘Mother buried Thursday, and the father... Well, who knows.’

A painful lump rose in Maggie’s throat and she tried desperately to swallow it back down. Her mother’s voice echoed in her mind, weak and urgent. *Never go to the workhouse, my love. Take this letter. Go to this address.* Reaching into her pocket, she felt the softness of the envelope against her fingers.

‘And no other family?’ Matron eyed Maggie’s pocket greedily.

‘None. No one wants her—’

‘I have a relative,’ Maggie blurted out before she had a chance to bite her tongue. Matron eyed her suspiciously, but she pressed on. ‘He lives close by, on Green Street,’ she added, shuffling backwards. Her eyes darted around the alleyway, searching for a way out. ‘If I could just go and—’

‘You ain’t goin’ nowhere,’ the man growled, blocking her path. ‘Lyin’, she is. Don’t have no one to go to and that’s the truth.’

'I do,' Maggie croaked. 'If I could just get to Green Street, my friend—'

'Friend?' Matron sneered. 'I thought you said relative?'

'It's just... my mother... she told me...' Maggie tried to speak but her words seemed to fade away.

Matron lurched forward in a flash and grabbed her wrist, pulling her through the door. 'We'll soon have that lying tongue of yours straightened out.' She turned and called over her shoulder to the man, 'Go around back and see Thomas. He'll have your wage and a glass of something for you.'

Maggie didn't catch his response as the door to the workhouse slammed shut and she was jostled down a hallway into the gloom.

Chapter Two

IN WHICH MAGGIE APPLETON COMMITS A MOST UNEXPECTED CRIME

Maggie tripped and stumbled after Matron through a maze of passages, each one gloomier than the last. She twisted around, her eyes scanning every inch of the corridor, desperate to remember the route she'd come. But the stone walls all looked the same, slick with grime and blooms of mould.

'Hurry up!' Matron snapped, tugging her wrist hard. 'Don't dawdle.'

Eventually, they reached a large, dimly lit room at the far end of a corridor. Matron pushed the door open and shoved her inside.

As Maggie's eyes adjusted to the gloom, she saw row upon row of empty wooden benches in front of a battered blackboard. Around her, smaller boards had been hammered roughly into the stone walls. Large chalk letters bellowed out instructions like *Thou Shalt Not Steal, Thou Shalt Not Lie, and Thou Shalt Be Polite At All Times*. As they stopped in front of a large desk, Maggie tried to arrange her features to look honest, trustworthy and polite all at once.

'If you please, Miss,' she said, as steadily as she could. 'I think there's been a mistake.'

'Empty your pockets.'

Maggie tried again. 'But I shouldn't be here.'

'Do not test me, girl,' Matron scowled at her and pointed towards the desk. 'Pockets. Now.'

Maggie hesitated for a moment, then reached into her dress. Pulling out two pieces of well-worn paper, a small pack of playing cards, and a silk handkerchief, she placed them gently on the desk. She left Maman's letter nestled in her pocket and prayed Matron wouldn't check.

Matron poked at the belongings. 'No money? Your mother left you nothing?'

Maggie didn't want to think about their landlady, Mrs Copthorne, and her bony hand in Maman's savings tin. Her sharp voice swearing blind there wasn't a penny left. The last thing she'd seen as the enormous man dragged her away was Mrs Copthorne's lying face pressed against her front window, steaming up the glass.

'The money was taken,' Maggie said faintly. 'There's nothing left.'

Matron let out a snort. 'Likely story! You'll pay your keep, one way or another.' She eyed the suitcase in Maggie's hand. 'You can start by handing that over.'

Maggie tightened her grip on the handle as her mind flooded with memories. The dresses Maman had sewn for her, each one folded neatly in the case. The red woollen mittens and soft slippers. The colourful maps they had made together, tied with a ribbon and tucked inside.

'It has nothing of value,' she said in a small voice. 'Only to me.'

'You'll do as you're told.' Matron clicked her fingers irritably. 'Give it here.'

Maggie swallowed hard, ignoring her thumping heart. 'No.'

Matron blinked. 'I beg your pardon?'

'No, *thank you*,' she corrected herself. 'These are my belongings, and I would like to keep them.' She risked a glance at Matron's hard face and immediately wished she hadn't. 'If you please,' she added, in case it was helpful.

It wasn't.

'I don't care what sort of nonsense your mother put in your head, girl.' Matron stepped forward and towered over her. 'But your disobedience will not be tolerated here.'

Maggie stared firmly at the floor. 'Maman made these things for me,' she said in a quiet but determined voice. 'They're mine.' She didn't add, *they're all I have left*.

Matron pushed her face closer, revealing a jumble of crooked, yellow teeth. 'You'll give me that case this instant,' she growled, 'or I'll take you to the Master. You just see if I don't.'

Maggie tried not to breathe in the waft of sour breath.

Perhaps the Master would help, she thought. Anything to get away from this horrid woman.

She ducked towards the desk and snatched up the folded pieces of paper and her other belongings, stuffing them quickly into her pockets. When Maggie dared to look up at the thunderous face looming over her, she thought the woman might strike her. But instead, Matron reached forward, caught hold of Maggie's collar, and marched her out of the room.

As they retraced their steps, Maggie thought for a moment that they were headed towards the front door. But just as she caught sight of the alleyway outside, they took a sharp turn and stopped outside a grand wooden door.

'Speak only when spoken to,' Matron hissed. 'And none of your cheek.' She reached forward and knocked loudly, sending three hard raps echoing down the hallway.

'Enter,' boomed a voice.

With one last glare in Maggie's direction, Matron pushed the door open, but then froze. 'Oh, my apologies, Master. Didn't realise you had company.'

'Don't fuss,' the voice snapped. 'Detective Fix is on his way out.'

Detective? Maggie's heart raced. *Maybe a policeman can help me. Maybe he'll take me to Green Street so I can deliver Maman's letter.* Before she could give it another thought, Maggie found herself being yanked into the room.

Her eyes fell on an unpleasant-looking man standing behind an ornate wooden desk. He was almost as wide as he was tall, and his craggy face looked set hard, as if he'd never once smiled in his life.

In front of him stood an altogether different sort of man. From his hunched shoulders hung a jacket the colour of a rainstorm. His trousers had seen better days, and his shoes looked as though they had walked a thousand miles or more. But it was his eyes that struck Maggie. They were watery and grey, like a river in winter. They seemed to fidget around the room, as if searching for trouble in every nook and cranny.

The Detective.

‘Aft’noon, Sir.’ Matron pulled her mouth into a sickeningly sweet smile. ‘Good to see you again.’

‘Good afternoon, Madam.’ He nodded politely. ‘If you’ll excuse me, I must be getting back to Scotland Yard—’

‘Should take this stray with you and lock her up,’ Matron interrupted, with a nasty smirk. ‘Refuses to follow the rules. Maybe a spell in the cell would straighten her out.’

The detective’s watery eyes settled on Maggie, and she felt as though he could see straight through her. She swallowed hard and tried not to blink.

The detective gave a tight smile. ‘I’m quite sure you have it under control, Matron.’

Maggie’s mind screamed at her. *You have to get to Green Street. Ask the detective for help. Hurry.* She reached into her pocket and pulled out the letter.

‘Please, sir.’ She stepped towards him. ‘It’s very important I deliver this—’

‘Silence,’ Matron growled, shooting her a murderous look. ‘I’m warning you, girl.’

The detective hesitated, his grey eyes darting between Maggie and Matron. Whatever he was about to say, he seemed to think better of it. ‘Thank you for your time,’ he said curtly.

Panic tightened in Maggie’s throat. ‘Please,’ she choked. ‘I shouldn’t be here.’ She glanced towards the door. It was so close she could almost reach out and touch it.

Behind the desk, the master gave an indignant huff. ‘Good heavens, girl! We’re giving you a home when no one else wants you. You should be grateful.’

‘That’s right. You should be grateful,’ Matron parroted. ‘Now step aside at once.’

The detective moved towards the door, but Maggie slid sideways, blocking his path. ‘Please, sir. I can’t stay here.’ She thrust the envelope

towards him. 'My letter.'

His eyes narrowed on the envelope as Maggie tried to hold it steady.

'I need to deliver it to—'

Without uttering so much as a word, he reached out and plucked it from her fingers. It took all of her willpower not to snatch it back immediately. She hadn't let the envelope out of her sight since Maman had pressed it weakly into her hand.

But he'll help me now, Maman, she thought. He'll take me to Green Street, just like you wanted.

Instead, without another glance in Maggie's direction, the detective tucked the envelope into his notebook and turned to pick up his hat. 'Thank you once again, Master Rawlings—'

'No!' Maggie interrupted. 'That belongs to my mother.' Her eyes darted from the detective's face to the notebook in his hand. 'It's not yours.'

'Matron, remove this girl at once!' The Master glared furiously from behind his desk. 'I will not have this unruly behaviour in my school.'

'THAT IS ENOUGH!' Matron thundered towards her.

'It's mine,' Maggie insisted, ducking out of Matron's reach. Blood roared furiously in her ears. 'I need it.'

Then she heard the front door creak open and voices drift in from the street. Her legs itched to turn around and run, but she'd never make it with the suitcase weighing her down. *And I can't leave without the letter,* she thought desperately. She could see the corner of it peeking out from the detective's notebook. It was so close.

All I have to do is reach out and snatch it back.



SUE HOWE

Sue was born in London but moved to the Surrey countryside when she was small. She spent most of her childhood in a pair of muddy wellies surrounded by animals, and was the proud keeper of a mini-beast zoo in her back garden.

Reading stories filled with mystery and exploration has always been one of her favourite pastimes. She also loves dreaming up adventures of her own, often inspired by the nature she encounters whilst walking her dog.

Sue studied psychology and worked in care and education for several years. She has since slipped back into those muddy wellies and now works as a gardener, giving her plenty of time to dream up more adventures.

She lives in Somerset with her family and numerous pets, including a curly-haired tarantula named Brillo.

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About *The Jungle Room*

Mystery, magic and adventure with an ecological twist ~ a story of friendship, courage and finding your place.

Alfie is about to lose his whole world; the bulldozers have already moved in. Soon, he and his elderly neighbour, Mrs Bowtry, will have to leave their homes and the beautiful stretch of wilderness between them will be destroyed.

He could really do without having to spend time with Lucy, who has come to help Mrs Bowtry pack up her house. He barely knows her and finds talking to her difficult. But when they are drawn into the mystery surrounding Mr Bowtry's disappearance and find themselves lost in a magical rainforest, their growing friendship will be key to their survival.

What really happened to Mr Bowtry when he went missing in the Amazon jungle, what did he discover there and could it be linked to a tragedy in Alfie's past?

As the rainforest gives up its secrets, they uncover the truth about Mr Bowtry's discovery and face a deadly task to return it to its rightful place. But time is running out and there's a murderer hot on their trail...



THE JUNGLE ROOM

Chapter One

THE BOOK OF THE AMAZON

Alfie raced through the meadow, stopping only when he felt his heart would burst. Hot and breathless, he climbed the steep flint path to the top of Belltop Hill, where the line of majestic beech trees stood like pillars of a giant cathedral. He slipped between the smooth roots and sat beneath the leafy canopy. It was like being cradled in a giant hand. Smudging away a tear, he looked across the grassy slope, down to the rooftops and gardens below. This was his whole world. Soon, it would be gone forever.

He stayed there for a few moments before trudging down the other side of the hill, where the bulldozer tracks had bitten great chunks out of the ground.

'Are you on your own, Alfie?' asked Mrs Bowtry as he ducked under the tape where her garden fence had once stood.

Alfie waited for the right words to form in his head in the right order.

'Mum's ill.'

‘Oh, poor thing. And with all this worry, too. Well, it’s good of you to come all by yourself to help me.’

Alfie sat on the edge of Mrs Bowtry’s kitchen doorstep. He wrenched off his wellingtons and straightened out the flares of his jeans. They were a good few inches above his ankles, but Mrs Bowtry wouldn’t notice.

The old lady clicked the gas stove alight and filled the kettle in her kitchen. Alfie walked through to the room she called The Parlour. Just inside the doorway, he came to an abrupt halt. There, sitting at the table, was a girl – Lucy Grove. Alfie knew her from school, but not very well. Her mum cleaned Mrs Bowtry’s house, but he’d never seen Lucy here before. Heat flooded his cheeks, and he stared at the worn toes of his socks.

Peering up from beneath his fringe, he saw that Lucy was reading a book. It was the one about the Amazon jungle Mrs Bowtry had shown him when he’d first gone to her house with his mum. He’d loved spotting all the animals in the pictures. His mum would sound out their names in English and Spanish until he could say them. The book’s familiar musty smell filled him with a sudden warmth of happy memories. But, just as suddenly, an icy feeling swept them away.

Lucy looked up at him and smiled. ‘I found this when we were packing up the front room,’ she said. ‘When I was little, Mrs Bowtry read me stories from it, all about Amazon explorers and jungle legends. Some of them are quite scary.’

Alfie shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other. Lucy seemed friendly enough, but he didn’t want her here. He didn’t want to have to chat with her. He wanted it to be like it always was – just him, his mum and Mrs Bowtry. They left him alone. They understood how he felt.

Lucy flicked through the pages, stopping at the picture of El Tunche. The evil rainforest spirit had branches for limbs that dripped with moss and vines. Malevolent hollow eyes stared out from the creature’s tree-trunk body. Alfie stared back at them.

‘He’s as creepy as I remember,’ Lucy said, turning the page. ‘And what about *him*?’ She giggled, pointing to the eerie, goblin-like Chullachaqui.

‘He has odd feet. One is human and the other looks like a cow’s hoof. Or, it says, both of his feet can be human, but they point the wrong way, leading unwary explorers who follow him... to their *death*.’

She said the last few words slowly and dramatically before looking towards the kitchen where Mrs Bowtry was busy making tea. ‘You know Mr Bowtry went missing in the Amazon jungle,’ she said in a low voice. ‘Don’t you ever wonder what happened to him?’

Alfie shrugged and looked away. He’d not thought much about Mr Bowtry. He knew he’d been a botanist and he’d gone to study plants in the Amazon. Alfie’s mum had done the same, many years later. It’s where she’d met his dad. And just like Mr Bowtry, things had gone badly for her there.

Alfie didn’t sit at the table to drink his tea, and he was glad when Mrs Bowtry asked him to bring some cardboard boxes in from the shed. The branches of a young oak tree hung over the roof and he caught sight of a cynipid wasp hatching from an oak apple gall. As still as a statue, Alfie watched the tiny insect free itself from the brown, leathery casing and fly away.

‘What are you looking at?’ Lucy’s voice startled him.

‘A wasp,’ he said, pulling the galled twig towards him and examining the small hole where the wasp had emerged.

‘What’s that?’

He looked at Lucy. Her eyes were fixed on the oak apple.

‘A gall,’ he replied. ‘The wasps make them to keep their eggs safe.’ The words came out, slowly but easily, and Lucy waited until he had finished, seemingly interested. ‘Well, they don’t *make* them, exactly,’ he continued. ‘They drop chemicals on the leaf that makes the galls grow.’

‘That’s really clever,’ said Lucy.

‘Nature is clever.’

‘I suppose it is, in some ways.’

‘I hope they keep this tree when Mrs Bowtry’s garden gets built on,’ said Alfie, running his fingers over the rough bark.

‘I didn’t realise they were knocking down the houses at each end of

Belltop too,' said Lucy. 'It's awful.'

'The Phytology Society owns all of it,' said Alfie. 'Mr Bowtry worked for them, and Mum did too before I was born. I suppose that's how we got to live in our house. But now we've got to move.'

He opened the shed door and pulled out a stack of flattened boxes. Lucy took hold of one end of the stack but paused before lifting it.

'I'm sorry,' she said, 'for... for saying that about Mr Bowtry going missing. I forgot about what happened to your dad.'

Alfie looked at the ground and scuffed at the soil with his boot. 'How do you know about that?'

Lucy's face flushed red. 'Mum must have told me.'

She looked up at the iron-grey sky. 'It's starting to rain. We'd better get these inside.'

They carried the boxes back to the kitchen in silence. Raindrops wriggled down the window and a milky white mist hovered over the lawn. It covered the meadow and Belltop Beeches completely. Alfie wished it would stay there forever.

Chapter Two

THE JUNGLE ROOM

‘I’d like to get my husband’s study packed next,’ said Mrs Bowtry, reaching up to the top shelf of a wooden dresser. She took down a large key. ‘It’s exactly how he would have kept it forty years ago. I think it will break my heart.’

Sadness trickled through Lucy as they reached the door nearest the parlour. Mrs Bowtry shakily pushed the key into the lock. A slice of hazy light widened across the hall floor as the door opened, and a strange earthy smell escaped from the room beyond.

It was quite small inside. A wooden desk, big enough to play ping pong on, took up most of the room. It had a battered leather chair behind it with feet shaped like a lion’s paws. They had pushed deep rucks into the threadbare rug and, as she stepped forward, Lucy caught her foot and stumbled into the desk. A glass inkpot on the top trembled in its stand and a curved wooden blotter rocked noisily.

She froze and gave an apologetic grimace.

But Mrs Bowtry smiled. ‘George took that writing set with him on all his travels,’ she said. ‘It’s survived many adventures. I keep it set up just as he would have done when he was home.’

Lucy looked at the items on the desk. A pen and a sharpened pencil lay side by side in front of the inkstand next to a faded sheet of clean writing paper.

Behind the chair stood a tall bookcase with a huge climbing plant slumped across the top shelf. Its giant, dusty leaves flopped over a row of ancient books and strange roots reached out from its twisted stem as if searching for something to grab hold of.

‘That,’ said Mrs Bowtry, ‘is a Swiss cheese plant – *monstera deliciosa!*’ The name rolled from the old lady’s tongue like a spell. ‘It was sent back as a tiny seedling with George’s belongings and just look at it now!’

Lucy traced the plant back to where it scrambled over a glass-fronted cabinet and clung along the curtain pole. She found it bursting from a pot at the foot of the opposite wall.

‘Wow,’ she whispered, gazing at the wallpaper behind the pot. It was covered with birds, reptiles, and insects: pink and lime-green parrots swooped between looping vines; sapphire-blue butterflies hovered above red, trumpet-shaped flowers; and a fat black and white spider peered from beneath the roots of a tree. Its cluster of beady eyes seemed to look right at Lucy. Yellow snakes coiled around the tangled stems of plants that reached right to the ceiling. There was even a Swiss cheese plant. Unlike the real one in the room, its leaves were glossy and healthy-looking. A gleaming black and orange frog sat in the centre of one.

Alfie had found a collection of glass cases arranged on top of the cabinet and was closely examining them. One contained a beautiful butterfly with large blue wings, delicately edged in black. They shimmered beneath the grimy glass. Lucy peered into the case beside it and, to her horror, saw a huge brown spider with incredibly long, hairy legs. It looked very dead, but that didn’t make it any less creepy.

‘That’s a Goliath bird-eating tarantula,’ said Alfie quietly.

‘I’ll let you pack *that*, Alfie,’ said Lucy. She glimpsed a small smile at the corners of his mouth as he gazed at the monstrous spider.

Mrs Bowtry pulled a cloth from a large dome. It was another glass case. Sitting inside was a stuffed monkey. The creature had a broad, faded stripe down the ginger-brown fur on its back and its tiny front paws were cupped as if it was playing a game of catch. It had shiny glass beads for eyes, but the teeth in its angry open mouth looked very real. A little brass plaque on the wooden base read CAPTAIN.

‘I have to keep him covered up otherwise the sun bleaches his fur,’ said Mrs Bowtry, looking fondly at the grotesque animal. ‘He arrived here shortly after George went missing. He wrote that he had acquired a little companion. The poor thing must have died, and he arranged to have him stuffed and sent back here.’

Mrs Bowtry twisted her wedding ring around her finger, gazing at the pearly stone set into the gold band. She picked up a silver-framed photograph next to the monkey.

‘That’s George,’ she said, tapping the glass above the picture of a smiling bespectacled man wearing a wide-brimmed hat. ‘The man on the left is Robert Dubray, his expedition partner. It seems that, after Robert left to come home, George returned to the jungle on his own and must have become lost.’

‘Didn’t anyone look for him?’ asked Lucy.

‘The Phytology Society sent out search parties, but nothing ever came of it,’ said Mrs Bowtry. ‘And I think it was what George had discovered out there that they really wanted to find.’

‘What did he discover?’ asked Alfie.

‘A plant of some kind, I suppose,’ replied Mrs Bowtry. ‘Whatever it was, it must be very valuable. I don’t think they’ve ever given up looking for it. They even refused to give George’s diary back to me, hoping it might reveal something.’ She gazed around the room with tired, watery eyes. ‘I think I had better rest for a while. Perhaps you could label the boxes as you go.’

Lucy and Alfie made up the boxes, reinforcing the bases with packing tape. Lucy carefully lifted handfuls of old letters and notebooks from the drawers of the desk and placed them neatly inside one of the smaller boxes.

‘Could you grab the Biro from the front room, Alfie?’ she asked, finding herself trapped between the desk and a wall of cardboard. ‘We’ll need it to write on the boxes.’

Alfie disappeared into the hallway. He returned a minute or two later.

‘Can’t find it,’ he said.

Lucy spotted Mr Bowtry’s pen on the desk. ‘Oh, never mind,’ she said, picking it up and unscrewing the lid. It was an old-fashioned fountain pen. She went to write on the box, but the nib just scored the cardboard. She gave the pen a shake and some clear liquid flew out, splattering the wallpaper. She tried writing again, but the pen still wouldn’t work.

‘Maybe it needs some fresh ink,’ she said, peering into the inkpot on the desk. A black crusty substance had formed inside, like a pond in a drought. It was going to be no use at all. She’d have to find the Biro.

Alfie was soon engrossed in sorting through Mr Bowtry’s specimen cases, which suited Lucy perfectly – he was welcome to the crispy creepy crawlies. But as she squeezed her way out from between the boxes, a loud noise drilled through the house, making them both jump. It took her a moment to realise it was the doorbell. It sounded again and, remembering that Mrs Bowtry needed to rest, she called, ‘I’ll get it.’

A tall figure loomed behind the frosted glass panel in the front door. Lucy released the safety chain and opened it.

A man was standing on the step. He raised his dripping hat and smiled at her with kind, dark eyes. He held a brown paper parcel in his other hand.

‘Mrs Bowtry, please,’ he said in a soft, accented voice.

‘She’s resting at the moment,’ said Lucy, glancing back along the hallway. ‘Can I take that in for her?’

The man looked behind him. When he turned to Lucy again, she noticed he looked troubled – scared, even. He tucked the parcel under his arm before taking a pen and a small card from his inside pocket. He hastily scribbled something on the card and placed it on top of the parcel before thrusting it towards her.

‘See that Mrs Bowtry gets this,’ he said. ‘It’s urgent.’ He turned and quickly walked away, pulling up the collar of his coat.

Lucy closed the door and looked at the card, but before she could read what it said, she heard Alfie shout her name.

Puzzled, she hurried to the parlour.

Mrs Bowtry was slumped against the wall, her hand clamped to her chest as Alfie desperately tried to help her.

‘Mrs Bowtry!’ Lucy ran towards them.

The old lady crumpled to the floor.



DEV KOTHARI

Dev grew up in a sleepy hamlet near Mumbai where she read obsessively, daydreamed endlessly and wrote furtively. Her journey to graduating from the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa took a long-winded route that spanned two decades and two continents. It involved her getting an Engineering degree in India and an MBA from Oxford and working in the Digital Technology industry for sixteen years. It also saw her moving house sixteen times!

She now lives in London with her husband and two daughters and, although she still reads obsessively and daydreams endlessly, she's finally found the courage to write more openly. She won the Commonword Diversity YA novel prize in 2018. In 2020, she was longlisted for the Times/Chicken House competition and the WriteMentor Children's Novel award, and was also commended for the FAB Prize.

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About *Bringing Back Kay-Kay*

Set in contemporary India and written in second person, the novel tells the story of thirteen-year-old Lena who shares a special bond with her talented older brother, but struggles to grow up in his shadow. When he goes missing on an overnight train while returning from a summer camp, Lena's world turns upside down. Her parents fall apart and the police don't help, so Lena vows to find her brother herself. Her quest is fraught with treachery, apathy and danger and it reveals a side to her brother she never knew. She risks her life to find him, but will she succeed in bringing him back?



BRINGING BACK KAY-KAY

Day One

1

That morning, before I found out you were missing, Kay-Kay, I was home alone feeling sorry for myself.

For the two weeks you'd been at camp, things had been so different for me. Ma cooked *my* favourite dishes for a change. Dad took *me* with him when he went shopping or to the club. And it was only a handful of times that either of them commented on what I did or how I did it – telling me how it wasn't the right way and how I should learn from you to do it properly. Towards the end of the fortnight, I felt like Ma and Dad were finally starting to see me. Like you see me. Of course, I'd missed you, but for the first time in a long, long time, things just felt so light and easy. It was as if I'd been sitting in the shade for too long and I'd finally stepped into the sun.

Pathetic, right?

I'm sorry, Kay-Kay. I think that morning, when Ma and Dad were running frantically up and down the platform at the railway station

looking for you, I was still in my pyjamas sipping *chai*, wishing you'd be away for a little while longer.

Careful what you wish for. Isn't that what Ma always says? I wish, I so wish I'd been more careful. Because without you, there's no sun, no warmth, no light. There never will be.

When Dad rang to ask if you'd come home, I said something like, 'Aren't you supposed to be picking him up?'

'Just answer the question, Lena,' he yelled. Then he swore. Dad, our dad, swore. Proper, proper swore. My heart dropped to my feet.

'No,' I whispered as fear creeped into my thoughts. *Where were you? What had happened?*

'Call me immediately if he shows up,' Dad said in a choked voice.

'Y-yes, but what's going o—'

He hung up without another word. I thought of calling him back but I knew he'd just get more upset. I kept opening the front door, staring out at the stairs leading up to our floor and checking to see if you were there. When the doorbell rang, I ran so fast to open it that I slipped and fell, banging my knee on the coffee table. But it was only the newspaper boy. I slammed the door in his face, poor thing, and threw the rolled-up Deccan Times across the living room. Immediately, I scrambled to get it like a dog chasing a stick in the park. God knows what I was expecting to find in it – news of a train accident, a natural disaster – who knows? After pacing up and down the living room about a hundred times and chewing my fingertips raw, it finally occurred to me to call Samir.

He didn't pick up but I kept ringing. He finally answered after the fifth time.

'Hello, Samir?' I said.

I heard muffled sounds on the other end. The phone being passed around.

'Samir, are you there? It's Lena.'

'Hello, Lena *beta*. This is Mrs. Pratap talking.'

Samir's mum! God, she is the worst of all the mums. I always

marvelled at how you could be so nice and polite to her. I can't even bear the sound of her voice – sickly sweet and so fake.

'Auntie, is everything okay? Has something happened?'

She tutted. 'Oh no, *beta!* You don't know? You poor, poor child.'

'Is my brother not with Samir?'

'I don't know if it's my place to tell you, if your parents haven't. What if they take offence?'

Yes, she actually said that. It took everything I had to not scream into the phone.

'Please Auntie,' I somehow managed to say. 'I'm really worried.'

'I don't know what to tell you. It's such a terrible tragedy. But Karthik is not with Samir.'

This time, I was not calm. 'What do you mean? What happened?'

'What to tell you, Lena? Karthik did get on the train with Samir yesterday evening, but then he disappeared. No one can find him. It's so...'

I don't know what else she said. I didn't hear her anymore. I didn't hear anything, except the pounding of my heart. A moment later, Kay-Kay, when it all sank in, I collapsed onto the floor in a crying heap.

15-year-old schoolboy goes missing from train

15-year-old Karthik Krishnan, who was returning home to Lamora after attending a summer camp in Goa, has gone missing under mysterious circumstances.

Rita Varghese, lead coordinator at Wildlife Adventures, said Karthik had attended a two-week camp with three of his friends, all from St. Vincent's School in Lamora. A camp coordinator accompanied the four boys to Margoa Junction on Saturday 12th May where they boarded the ERS-Lamora overnight express at 5:15 PM. When the train arrived at Lamora Junction at 6:43 AM the next morning, 53 minutes later than its scheduled arrival time, Karthik was nowhere to be found.

Samir Pratap, one of the group of four, said they had dinner together at 9 PM and had gone to sleep soon after. Mr. and Mrs. Krishnan, who were waiting to pick up their son at Lamora Junction, enlisted the Railway Police's help. Other than Karthik's rucksack, a thorough search of the train resulted in no other clues.

Karthik's distraught parents are desperate for any news of him. Mrs. Krishnan broke down in tears while speaking to the Deccan Times. She said, 'Karthik means everything to us. We love him so much. We just want him back.'

People in the local community have expressed their shock and concern over Karthik's disappearance. The Deccan Times spoke to Mr. D'Angelo, Principal of St. Vincent's School. The school suffered another tragedy in March when a fire in the Chemistry lab injured three students and one teacher. Mr. D'Angelo said he is praying for Karthik's safe return. He described Karthik as a top-ranking and talented student in Class 10.

The devastated family has filed a First Information Report (FIR) at the Lamora Central Police Station. Inspector Rana said the police are pursuing all avenues of investigation and has urgently appealed to anyone with any information to come forward.

After the newspaper article came out, the phone wouldn't stop ringing. We'd all rush to pick it up, but it was Dad who usually answered. Ma and I would look on anxiously at him but, within a moment or two, we'd realise it was just another so-sorry-to-hear-about-your-son call. Ma would go back to crying and I'd go back to sitting on the edge of the sofa.

Ma and Dad never asked me to do anything. Dad would nod his head when I made cup after cup of *chai*. Ma would give me a half smile when I'd cook something and give her a plate. But she'd just push her food around. Dad seemed to survive on tea alone. They'd shake their heads and tell me 'no news yet' after Dad had been to the Police station or Ma had spoken to one of the aunties. It was like I didn't exist.

I didn't really care about that anymore.

I'd look at them and see only lines – dark lines that appeared out of nowhere on Dad's face, wiggly lines of tears on Ma's face, criss-cross lines of their interlaced fingers. Before, their lives revolved around you. Now, their lives simply stopped. Most times I'd just go to my room and cry into my pillow.

It was hard enough as it was, Kay-Kay. I couldn't watch them too.

3

With each day, things got worse and worse. Ma spent more and more time locked away in her bedroom. Dad just stared at nothing for hours on end. It was as if hope was deserting them.

So many times, I wanted to take them by the shoulders and shake them.

‘Do something! Anything!’ I wanted to yell.

I swear, one time I almost threw my favourite mug (you know, the one you got me, the ‘Best sis in the world’ one?) at the wall, just to break the awful silence around us. I think that was the moment I finally realised I had to do something more than making *chai* or cooking food or doing chores.

I’m sorry, Kay-Kay. I wish I hadn’t waited so long.

The next day, when Dad got ready to go to the Police station, I was ready too.

‘What’re you doing?’ he said, as the question creased his forehead.

‘I’m going with you.’ I opened the front door and stepped out.

He opened his mouth to probably say ‘No, you’re not’, but instead he looked in the direction of the bedroom, where Ma had caged herself. Then he nodded and closed the door behind him.

The mid-morning sun blazed in the sky and traffic blared on the road. As Dad navigated the car carefully around the buses and tempos and scooters, I stared out the window wondering how the world could just go on like nothing at all had happened.

At the Police station, a round-faced constable with grey hair and moustache, asked us to wait in the corridor. Dad sat on one of the benches lining the grubby green walls. I walked up and down looking at the noticeboards, trying to see if I could gather any news. They were littered with grey posters of missing children and wanted men and yellow notices of government rules.

‘Inspector Rana, one minute please.’ Dad stood up as a policeman walked into the corridor. I raced to his side.

‘Mr. Krishnan.’ Inspector Rana sighed. He was a big man, with a wide face framed by thick eyebrows and a thick beard. His snug khaki uniform was starched and neat but discoloured by sweat patches.

‘Is there any news?’ Dad said.

‘Sir, please,’ Inspector Rana said. ‘Like I told you yesterday and the day before, if there is any news, we will call you.’

‘But it’s been five days!’ The words came out of my mouth before I realised I’d opened it. ‘You must’ve found something.’

Inspector Rana cocked his head to one side and said sharply, ‘Who’s this?’

Dad shook his head. ‘Sorry Inspector, this is Lena, Karthik’s younger sister.’

The inspector raised an eyebrow, then said, ‘Mr. Krishnan, go home. We’ll get in touch with you when we have some news.’ He put a hand on Dad’s shoulder. ‘Coming here every day is not going to solve anything, is it now?’

Dad’s shoulders sagged and he nodded slowly.

Anger bubbled up inside me. *Why was he giving up so easily?*

‘What are we supposed to do then? Sit at home and do nothing?’ My words came out much stronger and louder than I’d intended.

‘Lena!’ Dad snapped at me but Inspector Rana patted his shoulder as if to say ‘It’s okay. I’ll handle this.’

The inspector narrowed his eyes at me. ‘Yes. You *should* stay at home and let us do our jobs. For all we know your brother will just come back in a day or two.’

I inhaled sharply. ‘What do you mean, he’ll come back in a day or two?’

Inspector Rana let out a loud, impatient sigh and beckoned the grey-haired constable standing a few paces away. ‘Patil,’ he said to the constable, ‘how many children go missing in our country every day?’

Constable Patil shuffled his feet. ‘Hundreds, maybe even thousands,’ he said.

‘And what is the number one reason for their disappearance?’ Inspector Rana barked.

Constable Patil looked at me kindly and said in a quiet voice, ‘Most of them are runaways, sir.’

‘Karthik didn’t run away,’ I yelled. ‘He would never run away. Dad, tell them, please.’ I shook Dad’s arm.

‘Inspector, Lena is right,’ Dad said. ‘There’s no reason for Karthik to do something like that.’

Inspector Rana shook his head. Then he looked at Dad and said, ‘She *may* be right. But can you say with absolute one hundred percent certainty that your son didn’t run away? He’s a teenager, almost a grown

man. How well do you know him? Do you know absolutely everything that's going on in his life? Can you say confidently there's no reason, *not one*, for him to think of leaving home?

Dad blinked and opened his mouth but no words came out.

Inspector Rana sighed. 'Go home, please,' he said and turned to leave.

'There is no reason. Not even one. Karthik did not run away,' I yelled. 'You just don't care. You just don't want to do anything. You can't even be bothered to talk to us nicely. What kind of a policeman—'

'Enough! Do not raise your voice at me.' Inspector Rana glowered in my face.

Dad gripped my arm and said, 'Sorry sir. She's just worried about her—'

'Why are you saying sorry, Dad?' I glared at the Inspector. 'He's the one who should be apologising for not doing anything to find Karthik.'

Constable Patil looked at me pityingly as Inspector Rana's face twisted in anger. 'Mr. Krishnan!' he said through gritted teeth without taking his eyes off me. 'Go home and wait like I told you. Let us do our jobs.'

I felt Dad's hands on my shoulders, pulling me away.

'Sorry sir, please excuse us,' Dad mumbled as he gripped my wrist tightly and dragged me down the corridor. I turned around and glared at Inspector Rana. He was still standing in the same place. When he caught me looking at him, he yelled, 'Mr. Krishnan, I better not see your daughter at my police station again.'

He needn't have worried. I had no intention of going back there.

That was the moment I knew I had to look for you myself.

I was going to find you, Kay-Kay, even if it was the last thing I ever did.



CARLEY LEE

Carley is originally from the west coast of Canada but relocated to the UK in 2014 where she received an Undergraduate Diploma in Creative Writing from the University of Oxford. She had the immense privilege of completing her MA at Bath Spa University and writing *Leonora Bloom and the Hotel Andante* as a Scholar in Residence at the Kilns C.S. Lewis Study Centre. Her biggest regret while living at the Kilns was never finding the door to Narnia, but she did befriend a number of talking animals. In September this year, she made the move back to the wrong side of Canada where she now spends her time channelling her inner Anne of Green Gables while adventuring along the eastern coastline.

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About Leonara Bloom and the Hotel Andante

After a tragic fire destroys her home and kills her mother, twelve-year-old Leonora Bloom moves to the Hotel Andante where her father has been appointed Resident Musician. With songs floating around in her head, all Leo wants is to play the piano like Father, but he forbids it. Soon she discovers that his talent isn't entirely of this world – and neither are the hotel guests. Caught up in a tumult of magic and fairy tales come-to-life, Leo must reach deep within herself and find a way to break a deadly bargain that threatens to tear her world apart.



LEONORA BLOOM AND THE HOTEL ANDANTE

Chapter One

On the morning that changed everything, Leonora Bloom stared up at the stone face of the Hotel Andante, trying to calm the confused melody in her mind.

Maybe it was because the hotel looked like it had stepped right out of one of Mother's fairy tales, or maybe it was because this was the fourth time she and Father had moved in the span of a month, but the song in Leo's head was in a minor key, sad and insistent.

'I think we can be happy here, Leo.' Father smiled, though his eyes were filled with worry.

She turned to watch the carriage trundle off into the countryside. Happy? She swallowed. All the memories she had of happiness were tinged with pain she could taste at the back of her mouth – ash and smoke. She pushed a wayward black curl away from her eyes. Father was still looking at her, but his smile was gone.

Leo forced a smile of her own and picked up her threadbare carpetbag. 'Shall we go in, then?'

Father's face brightened. 'Think of this as a new adventure. A fresh start.' He let go of her hand and picked up the two peeling suitcases at his feet. 'I think you'll really like it here. From what I've been told, there are stables with horses, a lake with ducks and swans, grounds that go as far as the eye can see...'

As he carried on about topiary gardens, stone gargoyles, and historic galleries, Leo focused on Father's heels crunching rhythmically along the gravel path. She didn't know how he saw this as a fresh start when his contract was only for one month.

They approached the front steps and a man in a bowler hat nodded stiffly before opening the heavy oak door with a white-gloved hand.

Leo gasped at the gilded lobby that greeted them. A glittering chandelier hung from the vaulted ceiling, its light reflected in the marble tiles. Two swirling staircases curved upwards and disappeared into the floors above, while lush greenery spilled out of delicately painted vases in every corner. It was quiet except for the faint trickle of a hidden fountain and the important click of unseen shoes.

'Quite something, isn't it?' Father said as they made their way towards the bald uniformed man behind the reception desk.

Leo nodded. The Hotel Andante was impressive, but it was nothing like The Fox and Finch with its low-beamed ceilings, squashy armchairs, and crackling fires.

Fire. She stubbornly forced away the thought.

'It certainly is... different.' Looking around, she said, 'It doesn't look like there are very many other guests.'

Father shrugged. 'It's still early.'

The clock over Reception read eleven o'clock. Even at eleven in the morning, The Fox and Finch would be filled to the rafters with scholars and townsfolk. Leo longed to be surrounded by wisps of pipe smoke and the smell of gravy, not cold marble and metal. Still, she was glad no one else was around. She worried that she and Father would stand out like pigeons among peacocks.

'Ah, Monsieur Bloom, I presume?' The man behind the desk had

thick sausage fingers and spoke as though he had something stuck at the back of his throat.

‘Just Walter will do. Or Mr Bloom, if you must presume, Mr...?’ Father set down his suitcases and extended his hand.

The man’s upper lip lifted slightly, taking his moustache with it. ‘As you wish, *Monsieur*. I am Bertrand Marchand, concierge here at the Hotel Andante.’ His gaze wandered from Father’s flyaway hair to his fraying suit and scuffed leather shoes. He didn’t look at Leo. ‘We are pleased to once again have someone with your unique... *skill* join us here to serve our guests.’

Father dropped his hand into his pocket. ‘You are too kind, Mr Marchand.’

Leo didn’t think Mr Marchand was being kind at all. In fact, she decided she didn’t like him one bit.

Father put his hand on her shoulder. ‘This is my daughter, Miss Leonora Bloom.’

Mr Marchand looked down his nose at Leo, his face twisting into a barely concealed sneer. She saw his eyes dart from the loose threads hanging from the hem of her dress to the curls floating around her head like a lion’s mane. Leo crossed her arms and stared back until he looked away.

‘I was unaware you would be... accompanied.’ Mr Marchand sniffed. ‘I’m afraid the Hotel Andante does not, under any circumstances, allow chil—’

‘Nonsense.’ Father waved his hand. ‘My patron mentioned no such rule when the deal was struck.’

‘Monsieur,’ Mr Marchand said through gritted teeth, ‘you know as well as I that this is no place for a—’

‘There will be no further discussion, *sir*.’ Father straightened his jacket and looked Mr Marchand in the eye.

Leo had never heard Father speak to anyone that way before. She watched curiously as the two men stared at one another like two prowling tigers.

Father's eyes narrowed. 'Perhaps we should call on my patron to clarify the situation.'

Mr Marchand blanched and looked away. 'That won't be necessary, Monsieur.'

'I am glad we have an understanding,' Father said, returning to his friendlier tone. 'Now, onto more important details. Is it true you have a Steinway in this fine establishment?'

Mr Marchand nodded stiffly.

'Wonderful. I had a Bechstein myself back at The Fox and Finch, given to me by Karl himself. But, after recent, unfortunate events...' Father's voice trailed off and he seemed to deflate.

'Yes,' Mr Marchand said, raising one thick eyebrow. 'Quite the... *tragedy*. I heard almost nothing was salvageable.'

Leo's heart beat painfully against her ribs. She looked up at Father who was staring blank-faced at a point just beyond Mr Marchand's left shoulder.

Oh no. Not again. She took his hand and squeezed.

'What my father is trying to say, sir,' Leo said quickly, 'is that he would like to see the Steinway right away, if you please.'

Her voice startled Father back into the room. 'Yes... yes, quite right, thank you, Leo.'

The concierge stared at them for a moment before leading them wordlessly across the lobby into a richly decorated drawing room.

Vast windows looked out onto neat lawns that rolled into a sprawling lake. Gold-framed paintings lined the walls above rigid blue sofas and another chandelier dripped from the ceiling. There was no one else there, but it smelled like the rich ladies in church – like jasmine and pine and money. Set in front of the arched windows was the Steinway, its creamy white surface gleaming in the daylight.

Leo watched Father approach the piano. His suitcases lay forgotten on the floral carpet and his hands trailed gently over ebony and ivory.

Mr Marchand's moustache twitched. 'Perhaps you would like to get settled into your room and change into more suitable attire –

ahem – that is to say, out of your travel clothes before...?’

Father shook his head. Leo knew that look on his face. He was someplace else and nothing Mr Marchand said or did would bring him back now. He slid onto the bench and bowed his head.

Leo held her breath.

Father placed his long fingers lightly on the keys, hesitated for a second, then began to play.

It was tentative at first, like he was introducing himself to a stranger. A nod and a smile, a polite question and a timid answer. Then he launched into his story, moving seamlessly from haunting harmonies and tremulous trills, to dissatisfying discord and rousing resolution. His fingers raced up and down the keyboard, only to stop suddenly to tease out a lilting lullaby.

Leo heard Mother’s voice in the melody and her heart ached with each note. She didn’t want it to end. But when it finally did, something released in Leo’s chest. She caught Father’s eye for a moment, but he looked away quickly. There were tears in his eyes, mirroring the ones in her own. He nodded once and closed the lid over the keys with a soft *thump*.

‘This will do quite nicely, Mr Marchand,’ he said.

Leo turned to see the concierge standing stock-still by the door, seemingly unmoved by Father’s performance.

‘I am pleased you find it suitable, Monsieur,’ he said in a bored voice that made Leo want to stomp on his too-shiny shoes. ‘Allow me to show you to your rooms.’

Father collected his suitcases and followed Mr Marchand out of the drawing room. Leo trailed behind, turning to look at the Steinway once more. Her gaze wandered over the piano’s soft curves, and her mind stilled. Another song whispered in her ear. The quilted bench was tilted like an invitation and her fingers twitched, as if they were trying to conjure the melody from air. Maybe she could...

‘Come, Leo.’ Father’s voice floated through the door.

She sighed and picked up her bag. She had taken just two steps when

the back of her neck prickled. Looking over her shoulder, she felt like she missed a step: someone was staring at her through the window. A boy, pale as mist with hair like fire.

She gasped and blinked, and he was gone.

Chapter Two

Leo hurried across the hotel lobby to catch up with Father and Mr Marchand.

‘Sir,’ she said breathlessly, ‘you said there were no other children at the hotel, but I’ve just seen a boy with red hai—’

‘I’ll need to check what room we can put you in, now there’s *two* of you,’ Mr Marchand said to Father. He reached Reception and flicked through a large leather-bound book. ‘Ah, yes. There are adjoining rooms on the third floor in the east wing.’

Leo cleared her throat and spoke more loudly. ‘Excuse me, sir, there was a boy out—’

‘This way, if you please.’ The concierge plucked a key from a hidden drawer and tucked it in his breast pocket alongside a folded piece of parchment, before striding towards the staircase without a backward glance.

Clutching her carpetbag and clenching her teeth, Leo once again hurried to catch up. When she reached Father she whispered, ‘Why does he keep ignoring me?’

‘Don’t let it get to you, Leo.’ He nudged her gently with an elbow as they walked up the curved steps. ‘I think you’ve upset *Monsieur’s* sensibilities just by existing at this very moment.’

‘Doesn’t mean he needs to be so rude,’ she muttered.

Soon the red-headed boy was forgotten as they followed Mr Marchand up several winding staircases, through doors of every shape and size, and past wide windows revealing glimpses of the shimmering lake, long stables, and a spiralling hedge-maze. At the end of a wood-panelled corridor, they stopped in front of room 301 – two bedrooms connected by a sitting room with windows overlooking a rose garden.

‘This is the east wing, where some staff have their rooms,’ Mr Marchand said. ‘Guests stay exclusively in the west wing, but there should never be any need for you to enter that side of the hotel.’ His eyes flicked to Leo.

She scowled at him, but he ignored her, handing the key and parchment to Father.

‘A key for your room, and a list of rules for new employees,’ he said. ‘Please be reminded that dinner is served in the staff dining room at precisely six o’clock, and your first engagement begins at ten o’clock, Monsieur Bloom. Ten o’clock *tonight*.’ He turned on his heel and disappeared down the corridor.

‘Noted. I shan’t be late,’ Father said under his breath, swinging the door shut.

Leo wandered wide-eyed through the suite, marvelling at the velvety armchairs, gauzy curtains, and thick carpets that cradled her feet. She and Father had stayed in countless inns and hotels since leaving The Fox and Finch, but none were as luxurious as this. Still, Leo would trade all the luxury in the world to have things the way they used to be, even for just one night.

Father had already disappeared into one of the bedrooms, leaving Leo a room decorated in shades of green with a four-poster bed covered in more pillows than she had ever seen.

Dropping her carpetbag to the floor, she bounded towards the bed and burrowed face-first into the plush pile. The bed enveloped her, and she sighed into the lightly scented softness. Perhaps the pillows could swallow her up and take her back home.

She rolled onto her back, arms spread wide. Gold-painted leaves of every shape and size dappled the ceiling, painted to look like they were floating on an invisible breeze. Floating... or dancing? Leo raised a hand and conducted the song waltzing in her mind as if the leaves were obeying every wave of her fingers.

‘I hope you’re unpacking in there.’ Father’s voice drifted through the door, interrupting her symphony.

She sighed and rolled off the bed.

The strong cedar smell from the wardrobe made Leo’s nose wrinkle as she hung up her one spare dress and pinafore. Catching her reflection in the silver-framed mirror standing next to it, she grimaced. Her attempt

at a plait earlier that morning had disappeared in a halo of black curls, and the dark smudges under her eyes made her freckles stand out like notes across a stave.

She turned back to her carpetbag and pulled out a battered red notebook. The spine was worn and broken, barely holding together the sheet music tucked inside. Her hands trembled as she flicked through pages as fragile as butterfly wings, running her fingers along the pencilled note in Mother's swirly handwriting.

A place to write down your songs.

It had been almost a year since the fire and still the faint smell of smoke lingered on the leaves.

She closed the book and placed it on her nightstand.

The last item in her carpetbag was a wooden metronome with a large crack running along one side. She set it beside her notebook and unlatched the arm. It no longer swung smoothly in time and got stuck on the third click.

'Leo?' Father was standing in the doorway with her schoolbooks. 'I thought you might need these,' he said, handing them to her. 'We don't want you getting behind on your studies.'

She made a face as she laid the books on the bed one by one. 'I'd much rather learn music.'

'Leo—'

'And who better to teach me than you?' She turned around and clasped her hands.

'We've had this discussion—'

'But I haven't had a chance to play properly in ages! We've been moving around so much and—'

'When you focus on music, it distracts you from more important things,' he said.

'Like what?' she muttered, leaning against the mattress and crossing her arms.

Father picked up a grammar book and rifled through it. 'Things that will help you make something of yourself. More than I've managed.'

‘You’re the best piano player in the country – in the *world*,’ she said. ‘How can you say you haven’t made something of yourself?’

Sighing, Father closed the book with a snap. ‘This is not the life I would wish for you, Leo. Trust me, focus on your studies.’ He ruffled her hair and put the book into her hands, leaving her alone in her room.

As he shut the door, the metronome came unstuck, stuttering from side to side in the silence.



FREYA NORLEY

Freya Norley was born with facial paralysis, a twin, and a lot of curiosity. Inspired by where she grew up in Hampshire, she loves weaving together stories about the real and the strange, mixing past and present. She loves the sea and everything in it, history, and what people keep in their treasure boxes. She is a published short story writer, and a graduate of the Bath Spa MA Writing for Young People.

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About *The Ocean in the Lighthouse*

After Grandpa is rushed to hospital, eleven-year-old Gwen is determined to save his lighthouse home by finding a diamond treasure called the King's Pendant. The pendant, stolen from a local lord in the eighteenth century by smugglers, is wanted back by the lord's ancestor, and comes with a hefty prize for whoever finds it. When Gwen meets Toby, a strange boy foraging in the saltmarsh, she is drawn into the In-Between, a ghostly other place of stars where Toby can control the ocean in the real world. However, it is with this power that Toby hides the very same pendant—and he will protect it at all costs. Gwen must tackle her grief and fight to get the pendant, or risk losing Grandpa's home forever.



THE OCEAN IN THE LIGHTHOUSE

Chapter Two [...continued]

Gwen's arms fizzed as her bike whizzed along the road towards Sudhurst Saltmarsh. Either side of her the land rose higher than the road. Behind the high banks were farmer's fields, and the smell of the manure they'd spread across them made Gwen's nose itch.

A car rumbled past, and Gwen tried not to breathe in the hot exhaust fumes. She let out her breath in a whoosh once the car was gone, and the familiar eggy stench of the saltmarshes invaded her nostrils. Already, she felt lighter as she got further away from the school, from the village, from the rules and worries.

As she approached the end of the road, she squeezed her brakes. A seagull swooped and cawed in the air above her, disturbed by the noise of her bike. She hopped off and glanced along the road. There weren't many cars parked along it today, which was probably for the best since the saltmarsh was at high tide. Like this, it looked like a lake. Little waves rippled against the edge of the road and the water looked cool and calm. But Gwen knew what lay beneath the water;

sludge, mud, and deep seaweed that sucked at your legs if you got stuck there when the water was gone. Birds nested in the little patches of land too, and they could get territorial, especially when they had chicks.

To her left was the road up to the ferry; she could make the next crossing if she cycled fast. She patted her pockets for change.

‘Oh rats,’ she muttered. No money. Her watch beeped 16:00 and Gwen readied herself for the long trudge across the hook-shaped bank of shingle that was the Spit.

The Spit connected the mainland with Marshpoint Castle on the edge of the saltmarsh. There was something about standing in the castle’s shadow that made Gwen feel peaceful. She smiled at the thought of it. There was a feeling of history, the weight of all the other people who had stood in the same place. She liked to imagine they’d felt the same way that she did when she stared up at Marshpoint’s walls.

The ferry horn sounded and Gwen jumped, her wandering mind pulled back to the present. She gazed along the saltmarsh to the edge of the sea where the red and blue ferry trundled across the horizon. Just to the right of it were the two lighthouses. They stood proudly on the edge of the saltmarsh—the tall metal one was called New Light, with its top of red and white stripes, and further inland nearer the castle was Grandpa’s lighthouse. It gleamed white, like a tall tooth, in the slowly sinking sun. Although Grandpa’s lighthouse hadn’t been used since the modern New Light was built, Gwen still thought his was the best one.

She wiped the sweat off her top lip. Even though it was approaching the evening, the day was still warm. The longer she stood at the crossroads, the more her energy drained. Her calves ached, and her arms itched from the bumpy journey on her bike. The bruises on her knees and hands stung too, from the fight in the alley.

Better than landing in dog poo like Molly and Beth did, she thought, and giggled to herself.

Gwen wheeled her bike to the start of the Spit. To her right, the sea’s waves crashed and hissed, and under her feet gravel crunched as she pushed her bike up the slope. When she reached the top she paused

to catch her breath, and gaze across the long, wide bank of shingle that was the only thing protecting the calm marshes from the fierce sea. Then, she began her trek.

By the time Gwen descended off the Spit down the grassy path towards the castle, her arms were covered in goosebumps, despite her coat. The wind from the sea had blown headlong all the way there and her face felt stiff from the salt. She'd taken it slow so her heart could have a rest, and it was now past 16:30, but she wasn't worried. When Dad cooked dinner it was always an hour later than he said it would be, so she had until 19:00 or so. She got back on her bike and rode slowly along the small track.

At least it's flat here, she thought.

Marshpoint's walls loomed over her, and it was quiet apart from the *click-click* of her wheels along the ground.

Today, she didn't stop, and left the lonely walls of the castle be.

At Grandpa's lighthouse, the hiss of shingle being dragged from the shoreline was a constant background noise, *hsss shhhhh*, like the crackled breathing of a sick animal. A strange unease prickled through Gwen. It wasn't the same without Grandpa, like the lighthouse was missing the thing that made it home. She squinted up at the towering white stone walls. Here and there were streaks of red rust, like wounds. She shivered as the wind whistled around her. It felt like a different building.

A gull cried and Gwen jumped. It swooped above her, black-eyed and angry at her for getting too close to its nest.

'Shove off,' she muttered. Grandpa would usually shout at them and wave his arms in the air, but Gwen wasn't feeling quite as brave, even with her helmet and gloves on. Instead, she gave the birds a good hard stare, brushed off the gnats trying to land on her face, and scooped up the spare key from under the plant pot.

The door's lock was stiff; the hinges shrieked in protest as she shoved the handle, and she had to push her shoulder against it to open. Grandpa had only been in hospital for a week and already, without him to oil the joints, the harsh sea salt was corroding the metal.

He'd always said that the old lighthouse was falling apart. Gwen thought he'd just been joking, until now. There was a pang in her chest.

'Grandpa,' she whispered. 'You've got to hurry up and get better.'

The door swung shut behind her with a *clunk*, and then everything was quiet and still. She couldn't even hear the waves. The ground floor, which usually smelt like shoe polish and wet coats, smelt of damp stone, like a cave.

By the door were Grandpa's wellingtons. There was a little cobweb across them, like the lighthouse had been deserted for hundreds of years. Gwen brushed it off. Next to the boots was the cane he used for treasure hunting. Gwen grasped it in her hand and smoothed her thumb over the dent where Grandpa usually held it. She felt a lump in her throat and swallowed hard.

She put the cane back and climbed up the stone stairs to the kitchen. When she reached it, she stopped to catch her breath. Dust shimmered in the air. The walls were gold, like she was standing in a drop of honey. But, like downstairs, everything seemed tainted. Without Grandpa in the lighthouse, it was just an old spire filled with stuff. The kettle was cold. The biscuit tin was empty of chocolate digestives. The draining board was clear of Grandpa's cups.

Gwen flicked a dead fly off the kitchen table and looked out of the window at the orange clouds and pink sky. It seemed like it had been blue not long ago. The water of the saltmarsh reflected it, its own sort of sky for the creatures that lived underneath the surface.

Sky, saltmarsh, shingle...

And a boy.

Gwen shook her head and stared. A cold tingle ran across her chest and into her stomach.

There was a boy standing in the saltmarsh.

Chapter Three

‘Eggs,’ the boy said. He held up his cupped palms where two speckled eggs nestled. ‘Want one?’ He had a different accent than Gwen was used to hearing. ‘Want’ sounded liked *won*, and ‘one’ sounded liked *wan*.

Gwen folded her arms across her chest. She squinted at the boy out in the water. She could just make out the little oval shapes in his hands. They had a pink sheen to them, like pearls, as they caught the sinking sunlight. ‘No,’ she snapped. ‘You aren’t meant to interfere with the birds at all.’ She felt prickly with anger. ‘How’d you get all the way out into the saltmarsh anyway?’

The boy shrugged. ‘The usual way.’

Gwen snorted. A wave lapped at the shingle she was standing on and touched the tips of her shoes. The water made her toes cold. She stared at the boy, who was shin deep in the murky water. He wore strange clothes, brown and stained and puffy-sleeved, like someone had sewn sacks together. The wind lifted his long hair, and Gwen tried her best to keep from staring too hard as she saw that the right side of his face was lower than the left. Only his left eye moved, and the right side of his mouth tilted down, so it looked like he was sneering at her.

But he’s not, Gwen thought. He’s just got an uneven face, like I do.

The boy sighed and lowered his hands. ‘Suit yourself.’ He carefully placed the eggs in his trouser pocket. ‘More treasures for me.’

‘You should put them back,’ Gwen said. ‘Those are oystercatcher eggs. They’re protected.’

The boy narrowed his left eye at her. ‘Put them back so *you* can go and steal them?’

Gwen shook her head. ‘I don’t need eggs. I’ve got loads at home.’ She contemplated wading in to where he was, but didn’t trust her trainers to withstand the mud. ‘Anyway,’ she said, ‘I’m looking for *proper* treasure.’

The boy grinned. ‘Like what?’ He lifted his legs out of the water in big strides as he made his way towards her to shore.

Gwen had to raise her voice over the loud squelch and slosh of the mud that slopped off him. ‘You know, old coins, clay pipes...stuff from the castle or washed up from shipwrecks.’

She jumped out of the way as he stumbled onto the shingle. The boy wiggled his foot in the air and mud and seaweed slid off it. Gwen wasn’t sure he’d heard her.

‘My grandpa’s looking for a diamond pendant from olden times,’ she continued. ‘It was stolen by smugglers, and no one’s ever found it.’

She waited expectantly and watched as the boy found his footing on the stones. Usually when she boasted about Grandpa, people got excited and sometimes told her about their own treasures. Even if they didn’t like her, people always liked treasure.

‘He thinks the smugglers’ ship sank,’ she said, ‘and the treasure too.’

But the boy didn’t reply. Instead, he scooped up a handful of shingle and rubbed his legs with it. Splatters of sludge speckled the ground. ‘Phew!’ he said. He patted his pocket where the eggs were hidden. ‘Can’t put them back now, can I? Tide’s come in.’

Gwen squinted out at the saltmarsh. Small waves rippled across it, more like a sea than a marsh now. Only the bigger patches of marshland were above water level, like tiny islands.

‘What are you going to do with the eggs?’ she asked.

The boy shrugged, grinned. ‘I hadn’t thought that far ahead when I hooked them.’

Gwen shook her head. ‘Well, what was the point in taking them, then?’

The boy rocked back on his heels. He looked surprised. ‘You never just taken something because you wanted it?’

Gwen paused. She *had*, but never living things. To find something, it had to be lost first. Shells, bones, fossils—those were lost, dead. Living things, however, were firmly attached to exactly where they should be. A petal plucked from a flower hurt the plant, a starfish pulled off a rock dried out, and oystercatcher eggs stolen from a nest meant that the oystercatchers might disappear altogether.

‘Treasure hunting is not about stealing, it is about *finding*,’ Gwen said firmly. ‘That’s what my grandpa says.’

The boy shrugged.

Gwen felt her shoulders hunch. This boy was strange, and he certainly didn’t like answering questions. The wind changed direction, blew under her coat and stung her skin. If she was cold, the eggs would be too.

Grandpa isn’t here to look after the saltmarsh, she thought. I’ve got to do it.

She felt responsible for the eggs, even though she hadn’t been the one to steal them.

‘Come on,’ she said to the boy. ‘Give me them. They’ll die without protection. And then we’ll be in trouble.’

He sucked in a breath. ‘I didn’t think about that,’ he whispered.

Gwen tapped her foot on the ground to help her think of what to do. Dusk had begun to settle around them and the gnats were out in full force. She looked at her watch. 17:47! She would have to leave soon if she was going to make it home in time for dinner.

‘Don’t worry, we can put them somewhere warm and safe.’

The boy’s name turned out to be Toby. Gwen let him stand on the ground floor of the lighthouse while she searched for a box and scraps to make a nest for the eggs. It didn’t take her long; in the kitchen alone, there were three different drawers filled with bits and bobs and odds and ends. When she’d gathered enough stuff, she clattered back down the stairs.

Toby peered at Gwen’s armful of old rags and torn up newspapers and sniffed. ‘They’re eggs, not precious gems.’

‘Same difference,’ Gwen replied.

They worked on the nest in silence. So close to Toby, Gwen had to breathe through her mouth. He stunk of mud, seaweed, and a weird smell she couldn’t put her finger on.

Then the nest was ready, and he gently placed the eggs in the

makeshift home and smiled a lopsided smile at her.

Gwen smiled back. His face didn't seem so different, now that she was used to it. She stood up and lifted the box carefully. 'I'll put these in Grandpa's airing cupboard,' she said, remembering how she'd taken secret naps in there when she was very little. 'It's cosy as can be there. We can return them to their nest tomorrow.'

'Aye.'

The airing cupboard was in the bathroom, back up the stairs. Gwen's legs ached with each step. Once there, she wiggled the box between the boiler and Grandpa's cleaning supplies. She hoped the eggs would be okay.

Then, she rushed back downstairs, only...only there was nobody there. Just a trail of muddy footprints. She blinked, stared. For a few moments she listened to the sound of air whistling in and out of her nose before she whispered, 'Toby?'

There was no answer.

Toby had vanished.



LUKE REDFERN

Luke studied art and design before going on to work in several different jobs, the highlights of which included working on an international opera, building a robot dog, and designing a toy Christmas sprout. At some point on this journey, his creative urges drove him beyond the drawing board, and he began to write. He was awarded this year's United Agents MA WFYP Prize for Most Promising Student, and in his spare time likes skateboarding, drawing and blogging. He lives in Gloucestershire.

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About *Palace of Machines*

In a lavish French palace, twelve-year-old orphan Cataline maintains the mechanical animals and hidden tricks built by her father. But when the Duke asks her to leave, Cataline suddenly faces losing everything she has ever known. Desperate to keep her home in the palace, she makes a deal with the Duke: if he lets her stay, she'll build her father's most incredible design yet, a mechanical human called the Host. Cataline is determined. If she fails, she knows she won't survive in the brutal and impoverished outside world, but building the Host isn't her only challenge. Beadon, the scheming palace physician, is making things difficult for her. Is he trying to spoil her work because he's worried about the Duke's wasteful spending, or is there something more treacherous lurking behind his efforts?



PALACE OF MACHINES

Chapter 1

The servant found Cataline at the mouth of the palace maze.

She was kneeling over a mechanical armadillo, replacing one of its axles. The armadillo was one of the oldest engiens in the palace and often needed repairing.

‘Are you the engieneer’s apprentice?’ the servant asked, out of breath.

‘Yes, Monsieur,’ said Cataline. ‘That’s me.’

‘You’re to see the Duke.’

‘The Duke?’ Cataline almost dropped her elephant wrench. ‘Me? Are you sure?’

‘Yes, of course I am!’ A bead of sweat ran down the servant’s forehead. All servants wore stiff frock-coats and powdered wigs, even on warm days like this. ‘You’re to see him in the cabinet room at six o’clock.’

‘What time is it now?’

The servant took out a pocket watch. ‘Ten minutes to six o’clock.’

‘What? So soon?’ Cataline asked. ‘An appointment to see the Duke in ten minutes? That’s no time at all!’

‘You would’ve had more notice if you hadn’t been so difficult to find, girl!’ the servant said, before strutting away across the lawn.

Cataline's hands shook. There could only be one reason why the Duke was summoning her: she was to be sent away from the palace. Since Father had died, she'd kept all the palace's engiens running in the hope that the Duke would be happy. But now she realised that her efforts had been for nothing. Father had been the master engieneer. She was just an apprentice, and the Duke would only tolerate an apprentice working without a master for so long.

She put down her wrench and let the cogwheel on her bracelet fall into her hand. The bracelet had belonged to Father. It wasn't meant to be pretty; it was a simple leather band which he'd used to carry spare parts. Whenever he was working on an engien and needed a new cogwheel, he would pluck one from the knotted string that hung down from the bracelet. Even though the string now only had one cogwheel left on it, Cataline still wore it. The feel of the cool metal of that single cogwheel against her palm always soothed her.

Now feeling a little calmer, a little stronger, she finished the job of fixing the armadillo, tightening the axle, then winding up its mainspring. Once she'd closed the hatch in its belly, the armadillo twitched its head and kicked its legs.

'There you go,' said Cataline, putting it back on its feet. 'All better.'

The mechanical creature trundled away through the maze letting out a *click-squeak* sound with every step. Cataline imagined it was saying *thank you*.

She set off into the maze, her tools clanking in her apron pockets as she ran. Although the maze covered several acres of the Duke's gardens, Cataline couldn't ever remember getting lost among its leafy walls. It might have been a delightful mystery for the Duke and his guests, but to her, it was just another route across the gardens, and she made her way swiftly along its lanes, darting through crossroads and U-turns. When she reached what appeared to be a dead-end, she kept going, walking up to the hedge that blocked her path and sinking her hand into the leaves. She pulled a concealed handle, and a small section of the hedge swung towards her. This hidden doorway had been built so servants

could bring food to any hungry guests who got lost in the maze, but for Cataline it was a shortcut.

On the other side of the hedge-door, an immaculate lawn stretched out before her. At the far end, beneath a cedar tree, were two figures holding rapiers, their faces hidden behind bulbous protective masks.

'En garde!' cried the figure on the left in a squeaky voice.

He was half the size of his opponent, and Cataline guessed he was the Marquis, Phillipe. She'd heard that the seven-year-old would sometimes, without warning, summon the nearest servant to practice his swordsmanship with him.

Cataline watched as Phillipe thrust his sword out, and the servant (deliberately flailing and clumsy, Cataline thought) took a hit and fell.

'Victory!' squawked the Marquis. 'Now get up. Let's go again.'

Cataline had been planning to take the pathway close to the cedar tree, but now she turned and took a route along the outside of the maze. Although she'd never met Phillipe, she'd heard stories about him having a very short temper, and she didn't want to be blamed for distracting him.

Soon Cataline reached a sculpture garden, and now that she was out of sight of the Marquis, she picked up her pace again. As she ran, she skipped and jumped to avoid individual slabs on the path. Although these stones looked identical to the others, they concealed switches that would trigger prank engiens. This stone here triggered a jet of water to shoot out at her from the statue of Zeus; that stone there made the statue of Poseidon lower his trident, blocking the pathway ahead. Cataline knew these tricks as well as the stable-hands knew the Duke's horses. She'd helped Father build them all.

At the end of the path, a squeaky gate led her into a courtyard. As Cataline crossed the dusty cobbles, the sounds of clanging pots and chefs barking orders rang out, growing louder as she descended the steps into the palace's basement. She jogged along the hallway that ran alongside the kitchens and, after narrowly avoiding a servant carrying a tray laden with a cloche-covered plate, she reached the door to the artisans' quarters.

Most of the artisans were having their evening meal, she guessed, because the candle-lit hallway was quiet, and she heard none of the sawing, grinding or cutting that usually reverberated from the workshops.

The first door she reached was that of her own workshop. It was the place where she slept, ate and, of course, worked. But she didn't stop. She needed to change her clothes before seeing the Duke, and her workshop wasn't the place to go for that. The things she was wearing, her apron, blouse, dress and boots, were the only clothes she owned, but to see the Duke, she needed to be clothed properly. It didn't matter that he would be asking her to leave. It didn't matter that this was the last day she'd spend in the palace. He was the Duke, and she would need to be dressed like a lady.

After passing the workshops of the Duke's jewellers, architects and painters, she came to one with the words *Dressmakers and Outfitters* written on the door.

She caught her breath, then knocked.

Chapter 2

Gustav, the master outfitter, opened the door frowning and chewing on food. He wore a striking purple and gold gilet that would rival any wealthy nobleman's outfit, were it not for the hundreds of dressmaking pins he kept in the sleeves.

'Monsieur,' said Cataline. 'I've got an appointment to see the Duke.'

Gustav shrugged and grunted in a way that said, *what's that got to do with me?*

'The appointment is now!' Cataline gestured at her apron. 'I need something to wear!'

Gustav let out a sigh and muttered for her to come in.

The workshop was filled with elaborately dressed mannequins: ladies in colourful, bell-shaped dresses, and men in striped velvet culottes and floppy hats. Cataline imagined this scene of ladies and gentlemen standing proud in their finery was what the Duke's grand palace balls must look like.

'Son?' Gustav said, as he returned to the family at the dining table. 'This one's for you.'

The family were all eating and talking, sitting around a table beneath the workshop's skylight. Estienne sprang from his seat, leaving his father, mother, sister and grandfather all squabbling about something to do with cotton weaves. To Cataline, their arguing seemed to be a very unsettling way to spend mealtime, but even so, she felt a knot of envy in her stomach. She had only ever eaten her meals with Father. Now she ate alone.

'Cataline! Greetings!' Estienne bounded over to her. 'I haven't seen you in such a long time!'

Estienne was twelve years old, the same age as Cataline, but stood half a head taller than her. He was slim and wore the same colours as his father but in a much more fitted style. 'What brings you here?'

'I need a dress.'

'Excellent. This way, please.'

Although she hadn't visited the dressmakers for a long time, she knew the workshop well. When she'd been too small to care for herself, the family had sometimes minded her for an hour or two when Father visited the Duke. Now, as they made their way to the back of the workshop, the smell of cotton brought back memories of playing with Estienne among the piles of scraps and offcuts.

'I don't have much money,' Cataline said. 'I just want to borrow a dress for the evening.'

'Well, that won't cost you a penny,' said Estienne, holding a door open for her. 'You're a friend! What do you need a dress for, anyway?'

Cataline stepped into a small room full of children's outfits hanging one above the other from floor to ceiling.

'I've been summoned to see the Duke,' she said.

'The Duke?' Estienne's mouth hung open. 'Really?'

'Yes!' said Cataline. 'And he wants to see me now, so I need to hurry!'

'Do not fear!' Estienne reached up and took two dresses from the rack. One was gaudy orange, the other blue-green. 'Which one do you want to try on first?'

'I haven't got time to choose.' Cataline snatched the blue-green dress off him.

'Teal,' said Estienne. 'A wonderful colour!'

He quickly found her a pair of matching slippers, then reached for another hanger, this one draped with all the white undergarments that shaped the dress. 'You can get changed here,' he said, gesturing to a curtained-off corner of the room.

Cataline took the clothes inside, closing the curtain behind her. After hanging the dress and undergarments on a hook, she took off her apron and carefully folded it in on itself, so that none of the tools would fall out of the pockets. Then she began to take the undergarments off the hanger. She looked in bewilderment at the petticoats and the odd pillow-thing that was draped from the hanger by a string. Were all these garments necessary? There seemed to be so many of them!

'I haven't seen you at any of the apprentices' meals in a long time,'

Estienne said from the other side of the curtain. ‘Why don’t you ever come along?’

‘Because I’m busy,’ Cataline said, trying to untie a knot on the pillow-thing. She thought it was supposed to go around her waist, but she wasn’t sure.

‘Too busy to eat?’ said Estienne.

‘Usually, yes.’

‘You must always find time to eat!’

Cataline tugged at the knot again but couldn’t get it undone.

Palaces rules stated that apprentices must serve any requests from other children of the palace as seriously as their masters served their customers. Estienne was an apprentice too, so that was why Gustav had told him to deal with Cataline. She understood why this rule was in place, but right now she needed help getting changed, and that was something that Estienne most definitely could not help with.

‘Estienne,’ she said. ‘I’m going to need Beatrice’s help.’

‘Certainly.’

A moment later, Estienne’s older sister pushed through the curtain and smiled. ‘How can I help you, *ma fleur*? Oh—’

She must have noticed the worried look on Cataline’s face because she didn’t ask another question. She just made gentle, soothing comments like ‘there we go,’ and ‘très bien,’ as she helped Cataline put on the pillow-thing (called a pannier, Cataline found out, and it *did* go around her waist), then the petticoat layers, and finally the dress.

‘Thank you,’ Cataline said.

Beatrice winked, then held the curtain aside for her.

‘Wonderful!’ said Estienne as she stepped out. ‘Are you sure you just want to borrow it? I can talk to Father about a good price if you want.’

‘There won’t be any point in keeping it,’ Cataline said. ‘I’m not going to be here much longer.’

‘You’re leaving?’ Estienne’s smile vanished.

‘Why else would the Duke want to see me?’

‘Maybe...maybe he...’

Cataline didn't wait for Estienne to think of something kind to say. She strode across the room towards a floor-length mirror. Looking at her reflection, she tucked her fingers into the lace of the collar and frowned.

'I look—'

'Marvellous!' said Beatrice.

'I was going to say ridiculous.' The dress was so hot and uncomfortable. Why did the waist have to be so tight, and the skirt so big?

'Let me plait your hair for you,' said Beatrice.

'Thank you,' said Cataline, 'but there's no time. I have to go now,' and she gathered up her apron and boots, said thank you again, and hurried from the dressmakers'.

She couldn't run now; the dress made it impossible. But once she'd dropped off her clothes in her workshop, she found that by holding the skirt up at the front, she could manage a brisk walking pace. She made her way along the artisans' hallway and then up one of several gloomy stairways that led to the palace.

When she reached the door at the top, she stopped and looked up at the bell mounted to the wall. It was the bell that rang to let the artisans know they were allowed to go into the palace. Cataline had stepped through the door many times before, but only ever after the bell had rung. Now things were different. Now she was going into the palace not as an artisan's apprentice, but as a guest of the Duke. She felt Father's cogwheel hanging down from the bracelet, resting against her palm, and she gave it one last squeeze. Then she tucked it into her sleeve, took a deep breath and opened the door to the palace.



MEGAN SMALL

Megan's head has always been full of stories. Over the years, she's wandered between YA and Middle Grade, fantasy and horror, superheroes and sci-fi adventurers (and, one time, ghost horses). Even though she was a scaredy-cat with a very overactive imagination when she was little, she's always been drawn to scary things. The idea of spooky stories for children has fascinated her for some time now. And so, while working on the manuscript for her MA in Writing for Young People, she finally settled on this, a Middle Grade paranormal adventure.

When she's not writing, Megan can be found tending to her ever-growing collection of succulents, singing loudly in the kitchen while she bakes, or spending far too much time playing video games.

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*About The Afterschool Club Investigates:
The Spine-Chilling Story of the School Ghost*

When Emmy's mum forces her to join the school newspaper club, Emmy doesn't know what to expect. She'd quite like to fade into the background and be forgotten – talking to people has never been her strong suit. Making friends feels impossible.

But *The Afterschool Report* isn't like other school newspapers. Instead of reporting on school news, they spend their time investigating the weird, the paranormal, and the supernatural. When Emmy accidentally breaks an odd Victorian locket and finds herself being targeted by a rather nasty ghost, the club is her only hope of getting rid of it.

So much for going unnoticed. People are scary, but this ghost might be even scarier. As it gains strength and turns its attention onto the club, and possibly her entire school, Emmy must act fast. Will she be able to overcome her fears, or will this ghostly threat destroy everything?



THE AFTERSCHOOL CLUB INVESTIGATES:
THE SPINE-CHILLING STORY OF
THE SCHOOL GHOST

September, the First Day of School

During the summer, Gastford Secondary School is still and quiet. Summer sunlight floods the empty classrooms. Summer storms turn the empty field into a sticky, oozy quagmire. The only things that notice are the birds, the bugs, and the occasional stray cat.

During the summer, the thing that lives in the school sleeps. There's no fun to be had in an empty school, so it spends those long, slow weeks drifting in a dream.

Until, that is, the first day back. When the buses arrive, and the students pour out, and the school is empty no more.

When the school isn't empty, the thing that lives there begins to stir.

One

The field was quiet. The people in the sports clubs hadn't finished changing yet. The only sounds were the distant squawks of seagulls and crows, the rumble of passing cars, and the nervous thunder of Emmy's heart.

She took a deep breath. Then another one.

The old schoolhouse loomed over her. Tucked at the far end of the field, it was made of prickly orange brick and had a dark, sharply sloping roof. The front doors were tall, their blue paint cracked and faded, and they had large, dark iron rings for handles.

If this was a videogame, it would definitely be haunted.

But it wasn't a game, and the schoolhouse wasn't haunted. The only thing to be scared of was the living, breathing people inside.

Emmy probably would have preferred ghosts.

'Are you going in?'

Emmy jumped. She whirled around and stumbled, her backpack bumping the doors which gave a low clank of protest.

There was a boy standing behind her. Right at the edge of the field where the grass gave way to old, mossy paving stones. He looked about her age, but she didn't recognise him. They *had* only been at this school for two weeks, though. His eyes were soft and brown like a golden retriever's, and they glittered with mischief as he grinned.

'Sorry, did I scare you?' he asked, even though he obviously knew he had.

For a moment, Emmy couldn't remember how to make her tongue work. 'Um... I...'

'I'm Liam,' the boy said, like she hadn't made a sound. 'Are you joining the club, too?'

His name. He had a name. She had one, too. What was it again?

'I'm, um, Emmy,' Emmy replied stiffly. Her face was heating up. Soon, her whole body would be hot and prickly with embarrassment. 'And... yes.'

It was unfortunate, but it was the truth. Yes, she was joining the club. The school newspaper club, to be precise. It was the only one that had seemed kind of bearable when Mum had forced her to join one. Weird, but bearable.

‘Cool!’ Liam’s grin shifted, going from mischievous to cheerful. ‘I am, too. Obviously.’

‘Right...’

‘Are we going in, then?’

Emmy blinked at him. That was right, she still had to go inside.

‘I’m gonna go in, okay?’ Liam said, stepping off the grass and moving toward her.

She skittered out of his way. He gave her a weird look and her cheeks flared even hotter. She looked at her feet, wishing the mossy old stones of the ground would crack open and swallow her up. If she ran away, right now, nobody would have to know. Mum would never have to know. Emmy could just say she went. She could just lie.

She couldn’t lie. If she lied, she would have to keep lying, and keep lying, until she was tangled in a web with no way out.

Liam heaved one of the doors open. The hinges creaked, low and sleepy like a yawning giant.

He glanced back at Emmy. ‘Coming?’

‘Oh, um... Yeah.’

She didn’t want to. She really didn’t want to. But if she ran, she’d have to lie. And Liam had already seen her face. He would always know, and she would always know he knew.

There was no choice. Emmy hunched her shoulders up to her ears, tucked her hands into her sleeves, and followed Liam into the old schoolhouse.

The door gave a very heavy, very final-sounding *thunk* as it closed behind them. Emmy found herself in a small, grey entrance hall. Grey stone walls, a worn grey floor, and a tall ceiling held up with dark beams. There was a doorway on the right and a corridor on the

left. After a moment of standing still, uncertain, Emmy heard a voice. No, two voices. Three voices? Her insides squeezed.

‘Hello?’ Liam called, his voice echoing up to the ceiling. He glanced back at Emmy and grinned. ‘Let’s go.’

Emmy swallowed the urge to shake her head and walk back out the door. Instead, she followed Liam as he bounded confidently into the corridor. It was thin and cramped, filled with stacks of boxes, old PE equipment, and even a couple of broken-looking desks. There was a very narrow, very precarious pathway through it all.

Emmy tucked in her elbows and placed her feet with care. Ahead of her, Liam moved with no caution at all. She winced every time he bumped something and threatened to bring all the junk crashing down on their heads.

At the end of the corridor, there was a door. It was ajar. As they got closer, a girl poked her head through it. She grinned when she spotted them and, for a second, Emmy wished Liam *had* knocked a pile of junk onto their heads.

The girl yanked the door open and stepped into the doorway. She was wearing a dark blue blazer and matching skirt: the non-regulation suit of a sixth former. Emmy was almost as tall as her, although the girl’s hair – a dark mass of glossy corkscrew curls – made her a few inches taller. She had ladders in her tights, which Emmy noticed as she dropped her gaze from the girl’s face to her shoes.

‘Hey,’ the girl said. ‘Here for the club?’

‘Ye—’

‘Of course you are,’ she continued, cutting off Liam. ‘Why else would you come all the way out here?’

‘I’m—’

‘Hold that thought.’ She cut Liam off again. ‘We can do introductions inside. Come in, take a seat.’

She vanished from the doorway with a grin and a wave, and Liam went after her without hesitation. Emmy halted just outside. This was it. The point of no return.

She crossed her fingers. ‘It’s going to be okay,’ she whispered. ‘It’s going to be okay.’

Maybe it would even be good. Maybe if she, and Mum, said it enough, it would come true.

‘Are you coming?’

Liam’s head popped back into the doorway and Emmy jumped. Again. Flustered and flushing, she stepped through the door. She didn’t process a lot of the room – high ceiling, dark beams, rows of benches like church pews – as she hurried to sit down. If she was sitting down, she was less obvious. She sank down onto the first bench she saw, the dark wood smooth and cold underneath her.

Liam sat next to her and she thought her heart might stop. Why was he sitting next to her? Why hadn’t he chosen a seat literally anywhere else? Did he want something from her? Was he expecting her to talk?

‘Alright.’

A voice and a sharp clap startled Emmy out of her panicked thoughts. The sixth form girl was at the front of the room, standing behind an ancient-looking lectern. There was a grubby blackboard next to her.

She grinned. ‘Let’s get started then, shall we?’ she said, her voice clear and bright. ‘It’s so great to see some new faces. I’m Hilly, your president. Welcome to the School Newspaper Club.’

Two

Emmy was pretty sure the Gastford Secondary School newspaper wasn't like other school newspapers. It was called 'The Afterschool Report' and, for one thing, it barely reported on any news. Not from school and not from the local area. There was usually one page, right at the end, with all the news crammed in and cut down to one line per event.

The rest of it was filled with stuff about the paranormal. There were stories and photos and drawings. Deep dives into the history of folktales. Explorations of the origins of monsters around the world. And more.

When Emmy had realised Mum was serious, and she was going to be forced to join a club, she'd gone to do research. She had found some old copies of *The Afterschool Report* in the school library and spent a rainy lunchtime reading through them, surrounded by the smell of hot dust and the whir of computers.

She had thought it was a joke, at first. The first copy she'd opened had been all about trolls. *Trolls*. Not the internet kind. The lives-under-a-bridge-and-eats-people kind.

Then the next one had been about werewolves. The next about fairies. And Emmy had realised it wasn't a joke. This was really what her school newspaper was all about.

Once she'd realised that, she had been sold. If she had to join a club, she was going to join the one that spent their time researching mythical creatures and writing fantasy stories. Maybe she could research the draugr from *Skyrim*. She could look into the Hobbes from *Fable*.

'Welcome to the School Newspaper Club,' Hilly said, standing at the lectern, 'where we investigate all things weird, paranormal, and supernatural.'

There was movement next to Emmy as Liam put up his hand.

'Oh, a question already?' Hilly grinned. 'Go ahead.'

'Are you the only person in the club?' he asked.

Hilly laughed. 'No, I'm not. I'm the only sixth form at the moment,

but we have a photographer and illustrator as well. They'll be at the next meeting.'

Liam gave a sceptical hum, but he sat back and put his hand down. Emmy squirmed, annoyingly aware of his presence next to her. They weren't even touching, but her whole right side prickled. She tried to shift away, ever so slightly.

'Um...'

A new voice spoke, and that was when Emmy realised there were two other people in the room. There was a vaguely familiar woman off to the side near the front. She had hair the colour of a shiny fresh conker and she was reading a book with a cracked spine and faded cover.

The other person was someone Emmy recognised right away. It was Jas Kumar from her tutor group. They sat on opposite sides of the room and had never talked. Jas looked the same as usual, her long dark hair pulled into a plait with a pink butterfly clip on the end, her tie perfectly tied, and a notebook balanced on her knees.

She was also the person who had spoken. Her hand was halfway in the air, swaying tentatively.

Hilly leaned her elbows on the lectern, her grin never wavering. 'What's up?'

'When you say the *paranormal*...' Jas paused and dropped her hand. 'Is this not the school newspaper?'

'No, it is,' Hilly replied. 'We're just not interested in school news.'

'Oh.' Jas seemed confused. 'How does that work?' she asked. 'Is it... even allowed?'

Hilly shrugged. 'Nobody's complained yet.' She laughed again. 'And it's not like we don't do *any* school news. In fact, if that's what you're interested in, a case could be made for you to take over that segment.'

She said it like the school news segment wasn't one page long and stuffed at the back. Jas didn't know that, though.

Emmy frowned. Who chose boring news over the weird stuff the newspaper investigated?

'I want to hunt monsters!' Liam said, his hand shooting up again.

‘Do you do that? Hunt monsters?’

‘We’ve been known to take a trek into the woods, now and then,’ Hilly said. She tapped a rhythm against the lectern then straightened up. ‘But first: introductions. You know me, I’m Hilly, the president. Do you newbies want to introduce yourselves? Monster hunter, you go first.’

Liam actually sprang to his feet. His grin could have been the sun, it was so bright. ‘I’m Liam! I want to hunt monsters. I like rugby and I *hate* bugs.’

‘Okay, great,’ Hilly said. ‘And you, next to Liam?’

Emmy’s thoughts scattered like a handful of dropped marbles. She had known there would be introductions. Obviously. She had rehearsed one. Hadn’t she rehearsed one? She couldn’t remember. Shouldn’t she copy Liam’s, anyway? They needed to be consistent. But she hadn’t practised for that and her thoughts were all over the place and she wasn’t sure she could even speak and—

‘Emmy!’ She shot to her feet with a squeak. Her voice echoed up to the rafters and a full-body blush burned through her. ‘I, um, I’m Emmy. I like...’

What did she like? What did she hate? It was too late. Everything was scrambled. Everyone was staring at her. What had Hilly said? What had been in the newspaper?

An image popped into her mind. A bridge at sunset, the thin stream beneath it glittering with pretty orange light. The front cover of the troll issue.

‘Photography!’ She was still squeaking. She couldn’t help it. Her throat had squeezed so tight her voice wouldn’t come out properly.

‘You like photography?’ Hilly repeated.

‘I mean... I... um...’ Emmy squirmed. She knew what she looked like, standing there with her knobby knees and her bright red face and her tall, gangly crane body. Stupid. She looked stupid. Like the most stupid person they’d probably ever seen. ‘I could... try it?’

She had taken photos before. On holidays, and on birthdays and

stuff. But only with phones or those red-and-yellow disposable cameras. She didn't hate it. She could give it a try.

Mostly, she wanted to melt into a puddle and never be seen again. But Hilly grinned again and Emmy's heart fluttered. It was a new grin. Softer. Like she *didn't* think Emmy was the stupidest person she'd ever seen.

'That's great,' Hilly said. 'Nat will be thrilled. Nat's our photographer. You'll meet him next time.'

In a flash, Emmy went from furious blushing to icy cold dread. Another person. She had to meet more people. Who was 'Nat'? What was he like? What was she going to say to him?

Her knees went shaky and she dropped back onto the bench.

'And last but certainly not least...' Hilly turned her attention onto Jas, who stood up and fiddled with the end of her plait.

'I'm Jas,' she said, craning around to look at Emmy and Liam. 'Nice to meet you. I want to be an investigative journalist, so... If I can report on actual school news, I'd like that.'

'Great!' Hilly said, again. She looked between them all. 'What a lovely mix we have this year. I'm so excited, you guys!'

She really looked it, too. Next to Emmy, Liam bounced eagerly in his seat. Emmy didn't get it. She never did. Weren't they nervous? At all? Why was it just her who had to make a total fool of herself?

Every time. She never learned. She thought of her squeaky outburst and wanted to sink into the floor even more.

As always, she was off to a great start.



MICHELLE SMITH

Michelle Smith was born in Scotland but now lives in Bath with her partner, two small folks and a huge hound. She draws inspiration from many years as a liveaboard boater to colour her stories and can often be found gongoozling on The Kennet and Avon Canal. Michelle completed her BA in English Literature and Creative Writing in 2018 and the MA in Writing for Young People in 2020, (cough) at Bath Spa University. Her other interests include running around the Bath hills like a lost haggis, growing mostly edible veg, sticking her head in hedges to photograph flowers and trying to remember how to write poetry. Wrenna Boe is her debut novel.

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About *Wrenna Boe*

Wrenna Boe is living her ideal life on her boat *Sundancer* with her parents, and all is well on The River Sas except for gossip and rumours of dark goings-on. But when Wrenna travels upriver to take part in a ceremony called The Choosing, which will see her life taken up in service to Gaia, she is transformed into a dragon and her life changes forever. Wrenna doesn't understand the magic she has been granted and nobody in authority will teach her to control it for fear she is tainted. To further add to her problems, her parents have disappeared without trace and she is forced on an adventure aboard *Sundancer* with her best friend Will. Wrenna's control over her newfound power is tested to the limits by attacks and treachery as she seeks to unravel the mystery of her missing parents.



WRENNA BOE

Sundancer

Wrenna shifted slowly in her bunk and pulled the cover over her head to block out the sunlight streaming in through the porthole. As she shook off sleep, she became aware of her mum rattling a pan on the galley stove.

Ugh! Morning, she thought as she wriggled in deeper. She tried to ignore the sounds, but her nose twitched as she picked up the faint smell of toast and coffee. Wrenna had slept badly throughout the night, but toast made from her mum's or dad's bread was always worth the effort of getting out of her cosy bunk.

She threw back the cover but lay for a while, staring at the golden play of sunlight reflected by water on her ceiling. She loved to watch it; it always made her think of the magic that lived in all of Gaia's creatures. The shining display began to fade as a cloud covered the sun and Wrenna's thoughts drifted back to her broken sleep.

Over the past month, she had kept getting jolted awake after seeing a vision of a child that looked wrong somehow. She'd surge upright in her bunk, gasping, with the sound of blood swooshing in her ears and

an almost imperceptible whispering that terrified her for a reason she couldn't understand.

'Wrenna!' Mum's voice broke across her darkening thoughts. 'Breakfast is ready.'

'Okay, okay,' shouted Wrenna. She sat up and swung her legs out of her bunk. 'I'm coming.'

She hunted through the storage lockers above her head and tugged out a large, woolly grey jumper that looked as though dogs had attacked it, and pulled it on over her green pyjamas. She shivered as she jumped to the chilly floor and rootled around in a pile of assorted boots and shoes until she found a pair of battered slippers, then padded off down the cold, narrow corridor and into the warmth of the galley.

'Morning love,' Mum kissed her on the forehead. 'Did you sleep well?'

Wrenna frowned and flumped into the little booth that served as a dining area. She wasn't always grumpy in the morning but she felt annoyed by her gritty eyes and fuzzy head.

'Was it the dreams again?' asked Mum. She placed a mug of tea and some toast in front of Wrenna.

'They're not dreams, Mum,' complained Wrenna. She'd already said this more than once but no one listened. Sometimes she caught Mum and Dad giving each other looks that made her think of deer she often startled in The Northern Forest. In the end, she had settled into the idea that they thought maybe she was just going mad from worry at the idea of leaving home.

She munched on her toast, but partway through she looked up sharply and said, 'Where's Dad?'

Mum slid into the booth opposite her and tucked her long, curly red hair behind her finely pointed ears. Wrenna thought she was beautiful and hoped one day to be like her.

'He took the tug out in the early hours to help Sara,' said Mum. 'She got her tender stuck out on the river with a fouled prop.'

'He should've woken me,' said Wrenna. She frowned, disappointed but shivered at the same time. She had untangled ropes from *Sundancer's*

propeller in the past and it was a cold, wet and messy business. ‘I want to help with the rescues now, especially since more and more folks seem to be in trouble. Where do they keep coming from? And what was Sara doing out there anyway?’

‘A nightjar came in with the news at four this morning,’ said Mum quickly. She didn’t look Wrenna in the eye as she normally would. Those golden eyes often rooted Wrenna to the spot when she was in trouble, but today they were everywhere else but on her. ‘Your dad didn’t want to wake you. He knows you have a big day.’

Yeesh! All thoughts of pressing Mum for more information fled. *There’s that! Why didn’t Dad wake me? I’d rather be out on the freezing river doing something useful than messing around with a bunch of weird Elder!*

‘I’ve told you already, Mum,’ said Wrenna. ‘I don’t know if I’m ready.’ This wasn’t strictly true. Wrenna was one of the most capable of her peers at handling the rigours of service to Gaia. Out of all of the aptitude tests the Elders had set, there was only one she consistently failed; understanding of the magical kingdom and its orders.

Wrenna could make fire from almost nothing, find water in the driest of places, hunt and forage food, and mix medicines without poisoning anyone, but to this day she hadn’t met any magical creature besides the elves she lived and worked alongside. She’d blamed her parents for a while for never leaving the Sas. Until, that is, Dad pointed out there were plenty of books on the subject, so she shifted the blame and complained that they already kept her busy enough with all the work on *Sundancer*. The fetching, the carrying, the foraging...

Her parents then gave her time to study but she could never concentrate on the books. *How can I care about something I know I’ll never see?*

Then, even with all of that, Wrenna got distracted by all the weird goings-on lately. Most of the Elder she had met before were unsettling, but a few new Elder had arrived and they elevated unsettling to terrifying. The only Elder that hadn’t unsettled her was Harver.

He was a kind man who looked withered at first sight but had the power to calm all tense situations by just a movement of his bony hand. He had guided her through the tests, only raising his eyebrows at her utter ignorance of the magical kingdoms.

Wrenna had also heard strange tales at the local village of Tarwool. Not that they didn't always pass around strange tales, but these unusually featured the Elder in furtive whispers and the new head Elder, Ras. No one on the Sas had seen her because she hadn't made an official visit like previous leaders and gossip was rife.

Mum reached across the table and cupped Wrenna's chin in her hand.

'Very few get chosen for this and you have worked so hard. Harver will look after you,' she said. 'But talking of hard work, you have chores to do.'

Wrenna rolled her eyes. *Surely on a day like today, you could give me a break.* She hauled herself out of the booth and went back to her cabin to get dressed.

Wrenna put on her thickest cold weather clothes, which consisted of handspun, knitted woollies her mum had made. Helena Boe was a fine crafter of woollen goods and usually worked with another boater called Clare who was an expert at spinning and carding wool.

Boaters and villagers came from all around to purchase their wares and it was that which enabled them to keep paying their tithe to the Elder council and buy extra supplies. Folks always grumbled about the tithe but, as it was never more than the person paying could afford, they always paid. Who could argue against the Elder's protection of Gaia?

'Be back soon, Mum,' yelled Wrenna as she jammed a hat on her head. She ascended a set of much-scuffed purple steps and pulled back the hatch to emerge into the bright morning light on the back deck of *Sundancer*.

Sundancer was a brightly coloured rust bucket as far as Wrenna was concerned, but Dad was always going on about how she was 'a beautiful *Tjalk*,' and 'over a hundred years old,' and 'made of iron,' and

‘put together with rivets,’ and ‘how she’d outlast them all,’ and so on and so on.

Wrenna looked up at the mast which stood stark against the cold blue sky and saw a black-headed gull perched on a spar. It squawked at her and ruffled its feathers importantly. Gulls and other river birds could make an awful mess of a boat’s paintwork and it drove Dad mad, so another of Wrenna’s jobs was to make life as uncomfortable for them as possible. Wrenna gave it one of Mum’s best guilt-giving glares and held it.

The gull shuffled nervously under her gaze, then flapped off to find a more welcoming perch.

Wrenna grinned as she watched it fly away from their mooring on Winter’s Bolt and out onto The River Sas. Winter’s Bolt was a sheltered creek many roving boaters used in the wilder period of the year when the Beasterly winds scoured the main channel of the Sas. Wrenna loved it there because she got to catch up with friends that had explored other waterways during the roving seasons and listen to tales of strange people, places and, her favourite, dragon sightings.

Mum and Dad stayed on The River Sas due to Mum’s trade in woollies, Dad’s unofficial river rescues and Wrenna’s impending initiation into The Protectors of the Light. The local villagers and the authorities would deny them official status as members of the villages of the Sas, but they never sniffed at the family’s usefulness.

Wrenna stepped onto the slippery steel of the deck, avoiding the icy patches the sun hadn’t quite reached yet and picked up a deep wicker basket with shoulder straps. She checked the hatchet was inside before making her way carefully to the gangplank. She could see Dad’s footprints on it, etched in new furry ice, and placed her feet where he had trodden earlier in the morning.

Once ashore, she heard an excited voice calling her name.

‘Wrenna! Wrennnnnnaaaa!’

Changing Tides

Wrenna tutted. She liked Will, but he was always so excitable, especially first thing in the morning while she struggled to wake up.

Will ran at her with flying black hair and sparkling violet eyes. He lifted her in a bear hug, forcing air out of her lungs. Will was much bigger than Wrenna but always made her think of a mastiff puppy that was unaware of its strength.

‘Have you had any word from your mum?’ she said, after he safely deposited her on the ground again.

‘Well, no,’ said Will slowly. ‘But your dad went out for her, so she’ll be fine. They’ll be back when the tide comes in.’

Sara was Will’s mum and was just like Will in nature and stature. They both laughed at almost everything and could work all day without complaining, even with toilsome work like scraping barnacles off the bottoms of boats. Wrenna envied them sometimes. She’d never been able to get through a day of barnacle bashing without moaning and Will often laughed at her for ‘being too serious.’

Will would deny it, but Wrenna could tell he was worried about his mum. His mouth always pulled down on the left side when he worried.

‘What was she doing out there?’

‘Oh, she went off to get some tar from the wood elves up Pintar.’ Will waved a hand in the direction of *The Firefly*, his home. ‘All the snow on the decks has caused no end of leaks down below. I swear Mum has used every pot, pan, saucer, mug, bucket and bowl in the place and there still ends up being one right over the bed.’ He frowned. ‘I’m not sure why she didn’t just go to Tarwool. It’s way closer.’

‘Why didn’t you say?’ Wrenna asked. ‘Dad’s got loads of tar in the hold. Mum went mad at him and said we’d never get through that much of it, but he said it was a deal he couldn’t pass up.’

‘Just like your Dad,’ said Will. ‘But you know what Mum’s like about asking for help. She’s going to be just as bad after I join the service to Gaia.’ He sighed and looked at his feet.

‘Well, seeing as you’re here,’ said Wrenna brightly to change the subject, pushing the hatchet into his great, snow-reddened hand, ‘You can help me gather the windfall.’

‘When are you going to give me a hand with some of my chores?’ Will pouted, which made him look more like a ten-year-old. ‘I’m always helping you with your stuff.’

‘You don’t do any chores! Everyone knows you’re a layabout,’ retorted Wrenna. She grinned.

Will’s sun-browned face broke into a guilty grin. ‘Mum hasn’t let me touch a thing for the past two weeks. You would have thought I was made of glass or something.’

Wrenna and Will set off up the Sas Way and turned off onto the now winter-yellowed meadows. They crossed them to the dark and ancient Northern Forest. There, under the eaves, the windfall wood was plentiful and there were hundreds of broken up branches just the right size to fit in the stove. Another of Wrenna’s chores was to go out every other day in the colder months to keep *Sundancer’s* wood supply topped up.

They quickly got to work, while chucking handfuls of leaves at each other. It wouldn’t be long before they went their separate ways and they both knew it. Wrenna knew for sure that she would miss Will. He always managed to cheer her up when she felt down and her grouchiness didn’t offend him in the slightest.

‘Wrenna, come look at this,’ he yelled from a hollow. ‘Honey fungus.’

‘Oh, wow, Mum’ll love these,’ said Wrenna. She peered around at the large clusters of yellow fungi gathered at the base of a massive beech tree. ‘Let’s gather some up.’

Along with windfall, nuts and game, mushrooms were always welcome, especially in the winter months when food became harder to find. Wrenna’s mum could do amazing things with mushrooms and, despite her full stomach, Wrenna salivated at the very thought of mushrooms on toast. They gathered up a good haul in their hats and carried on gathering the windfall.

Wrenna bent to pick up a branch when she noticed Will slumped against a large oak.

‘See, layabout...’ she trailed off as she came level with him. At the bottom of a small depression, a black smear marked a place where a huge bonfire had been. Wrenna saw with dismay that nearby trees had been clumsily hacked and half gnawed deer bones littered the edge of the hollow, carelessly tossed aside.

‘Imps!’ spat Will, his jaw clenching. ‘Folks in Tarwool have been saying they’ve been about but I’ve just ignored them on account of them also saying they’re in league with the Elder.’

Wrenna just stared. Such clumsy violence to nature that had no way of fighting back always made her feel sick. She had heard the same things as Will but didn’t believe them. The Elder would never work against Gaia. It was against their sacred vows. Still, the tales had filled her with a deep unease, which only intensified at the sight of an imp bonfire on Elder protected lands.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘We better sound the alarm back at the boats.’

OLDER READERS



AMARA BENNINGTON-MANNINGS

Amara was born and bred in Bristol, where she currently lives with her fiancé, Barney, and their two dog-sons, Albert and Desmond (who she's obsessed with). True to the Bristolian stereotype, she's an avid yogi, a zealous vegan, and practices sustainable living to the point of panic. Amara is also a slightly neglectful (but no less loving) plant mum, and when she's not writing, can be found working in a historic tearoom, being that over-attentive, annoying waitress that never remembers the ketchup you asked for an hour ago. She earned a distinction for her MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University, where she wrote the first drafts of *Being Liked*.

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About Being Liked

Almond Brown has been an influencer for the entire sixteen years she's been alive, all thanks to her D-List celebrity mum, Eve Fairchild. Somehow, Eve's managed to shove a filter and a Facetune over Almond's unhappiness to land them the ultimate brand deal with wellness, beauty brand, VeGlow – turning the pressure dial all the way up for Almond.

You can't filter real life though, something Almond knows all too well, as she tries to balance the world of #ads and pleasing her 3.5mil followers with her parents' looming divorce and a best friend who's fed up with living in @almondhazelbrown's shadow.

In an attempt to understand her nose-diving mental health and the severe skin-picking disorder she's developed, Almond is enrolled in the Teen Tranquillity support group to work through her issues. Here she meets actually relatable (and not just #relatable) friends in Joss and Heather, who help her to accept the skin she's in.

But, when obsessive troll, AnRKey_Incel47's messages take a sinister turn, whoever's hiding behind the keyboard threatens to shatter the screen between Almond's online and offline life forever.



BEING LIKED

1

almondhazelbrown

1079

Posts

3.5M

Followers

98

Following

ALMOND BROWN

Public Figure

Contact: Spencer@bigstarpr.com

Vegan living | Cruelty-free beauty

Follow [@evefairchild](#) for more ♀

[Settings](#). [Account](#). [Delete my profile](#).

When the end credits for *Unsolved Mysteries* are done rolling, Netflix asks me if I'm still watching. To be honest, I find this rude, but also invasive and problematic as hell. Not only am I being fiercely reminded that I've spent not just this whole Thursday, but the entire week since

school ended, in bed, alone, watching Netflix, but the black screen throws my reflection back at me too. Low angle, double chin, greasy skin, blotchy and red from crying. I look like a decaying rooster potato, my curls matted and piled on top of my head like mangled roots. I close the lid of the laptop, 'cus no, Netflix, I haven't been watching. For the last twenty minutes I've been doing this little thing I like to do at least thrice a week called: having an existential crisis over deleting my social media.

I go back to my phone.

Do you want to permanently delete
almondhazelbrown?

Yes

No

My thumb hovers over the screen, the words a blur, my body heaving with that annoying, gaspy kind of breathing that always comes after a breakdown. It's my third this week. It's OK, nobody can hear me hyperventilating. Mum gave up knocking on my door a while ago and I heard her leave without me. I sit up, drawing my knees up under my chin to pick at the crusty edges of a scab on my leg, wondering what story Mum'll make up about why I'm missing another campaign meeting.

Course, if I press **Yes** now and permanently delete my account, there won't be a campaign or a launch party. Or followers inside my phone that zizz like mosquitos against the glass screen, trying to suck the fucking life out of me. But no ad campaign means no money. And I have life-alteringly important plans for this money.

Money gets me three hours in the salon, it gets me looking incognito so I can book an Uber-train-Uber to the airport, pay *whatever* the price for connecting plane tickets, and then that first meal I'll order in the departures lounge without having to check the carbs, the calories, the saturated fat. Money means freedom. It means getting the hell away to anywhere sunny with no internet connection.

Hmm. My eyes flick between the Yes and the No.

Can I wait until I get that bank transfer though? Until after Eve&Almond XVe-Glow gets released to the public? After the press, the interviews, the meet and greets, the self-promo, the endless *Can I get a selfie with you?'s?*

My god, no. Just fucking do it already, delete everything.

I sigh, throwing myself back on the bed, wishing somebody would flick the off switch in my damn *brain*, and then the decision would be made, this part of my life would be deleted. I would be deleted. The thought sits comfortably heavy in my head for a minute.

Speaking of. I go to the internet, click history.

Today

14:38 Sad songs playlist

14:19 Least painful ways to die

14:17 Medically induced coma. optional

14:15 Can you cry yourself to death

14:09 Why can't I stop crying

14:01 Sertraline 100mg side-effects crying

How Tumblr of me.

Clear browsing data: last hour

My phone screen dims and I let it. I just sit there until it goes off and leaves me in the dark.

2

Mum's tit's about to go in her coffee.

I slather my toast with butter, my eyes on the outline of her bra showing through her top as she hovers over her mug, phone in hand. I don't say anything, just turn the page of the magazine on my lap.

"Light's not ideal here," she mutters, leaning further over the marble table on tiptoes, straining her neck to see her phone screen and check everything's in shot.

Ugh, enough with this bullshit, I'm starving. I watch Mum's eyes flicking from the screen to her breakfast spread – cashew butter crumpets, *cubed* avocado, fresh organic fruit, and overnight oats. She stretches forward even further to nudge a satsuma wedge centimetres to the left, and that does it, she's bent too low. Black coffee bleeds into her white, silk blouse.

"Ow, fuckety, ow, that hurt."

"Can I eat now?" I say, reaching for the plate of mushy, geometrical avocado.

"One more."

It's actually three more. She tuts as the flash goes off for the last photo before sighing. Finally, she sits down, already pinching and zooming on her phone with her thumb and finger, swiping through filters. After a few minutes of silence, she sighs again and snicks the lock on her phone.

"You ok?" I say, not looking up from pretending to read an article about *Fabulous foods that boost your metabolism*. I can feel her staring at me. "How was the Khiel's launch last night?"

"Mmhm. Fine, it was fine."

"Ok..."

I know something's up because (A) she's not vlogging, and (B) usually she'd be launching into the prosecco-fuelled antics that her and some noughties *Big Brother* contestant or footballer's ex-wife got up to last night. So, what is it now? Please don't let her be considering taking *Woman's Own* up on their offer for the full scoop on the divorce.

Wait for it. Three. Two. One.

“They’ve turned St. Bart’s into a wellness centre, you know, Almond.”

Oh. I blow at a loose curl falling over my face and look at my Mum, perfectly made-up and ironed out at 7:45 in the morning (sans coffee-stained boob). As she babbles on about the old church renovations by the Downs, her tidy, nip tucked chin bobs against her interlaced fingers. She’s gone for a middle parting today, her blonde hair scraped back into a low bun. It’s sprayed and secured so tightly it almost looks like that’s the reason her blue eyes are bugging out of her face, or why the skin on her forehead doesn’t move when she talks. But obviously it’s not. That’s Botox.

She lifts the lid of her MacBook, taps at the keys for a second then tilts the screen towards me. I take a bite of my avo toast, realising she’s expecting me to be interested in the church’s new website for some reason, but I haven’t been listening properly, so I’m not sure why. It’s a homepage that’s all pastel pinks and greens with words like *Cleanse*, *Horizons*, and *Friendships* in big, bold fonts.

“Yeah, nice. Looks... holy.”

“I’ve signed you up.”

“What?” I say, spraying crumbs.

“I have signed you up for some classes—”

“What classes? We’re not religious.”

“It’s a wellness centre now, *listen* darling. They have all kinds of classes. If you just have a look there might be something else you’d like to sign up for. Hot yoga? Ooh, tai chi?” I slide the laptop back towards Mum and cross my arms.

She sighs. *Again*. “Look, it’s six sessions, that’s it. I’ve signed you up for six measly sessions with this organisation called Tranquillity. It’s, you know – self-help, group therapy, counselling.”

“You think I need counselling?” I rub at the rough patch of skin on the back of my neck.

“Quite frankly, yes, I do,” she says, peeling off her coffee-stained shirt, sitting perfectly chill at the dining room table in just her bra.

“What about Dr Wallace?”

“Who do you think wrote your referral? This program isn’t just for any old kid who cries depression on the internet, darling” – Jesus *fuckin*g Christ, Mum – “it’s exclusively for young people *already* receiving treatment. Dr Wallace thinks a group environment is what’s best for you right now.” I feel my nails dig sharp little crescent moons into my palm, imagining Mum having whispered phone conversations about me, with *my* doctor, making plans and predictions like managing my mental health is nothing but a business strategy. I guess to her, it is. “You never come out of that room. I hardly see you. It’s summer, darling, where are your friends? I know things didn’t work out with Levi” – my god, please just *shut up* – “but what about Callie?”

I swallow, my throat Sahara-dry. “What about her?”

“Well, you say the two of you are fine, but I haven’t seen her in months.” Mum scrapes her chair back and strides over to the new mirror – gold, gilded and nearly covering the whole wall. She stands there in her bra, wide-leg black trousers and fake snakeskin heels, looking out at me through the reflection while she unfastens the white-gold hoops from her ears. “You used to be inseparable, darling. She was here so much I should’ve been charging her rent, for God’s sake. It’s obvious you’ve had a falling out, and with everything going on with your dad and I—”

“Please. Can we *not* talk about that anymore?”

When Mum leans in closer to the mirror, fiddling with the clasp on her earring, I pick at the scab at the corner of my mouth, wincing as I rip off a strip of skin. She marches off into the back of the house, shaking her head and mumbling something about today not being a hoop earring kind of day, as I flake off another scab behind my ear, feeling tears prick at my eyes like I’ve had them open too long. I’m not crying, I’m *watering*. It’s just what happens when I’m late for something, or I have to book my own doctor’s appointment, or I’m being told off by a teacher. Dr Wallace says it’s a stress reaction.

“See, what are you doing right now?” says Mum, having done a

loop around the ground floor, striding back into the dining room through the open plan kitchen. She's buttoning herself into a new shirt. It's champagne chiffon, jabot collar. I look down at myself, slouched in one of Dad's old basketball jerseys and flannel pyjama bottoms. "Why are you picking at yourself? Don't *do* that," she says.

"I'm not."

"Almond." Mum walks over to me, the echo of her heels bouncing off the high ceiling. She goes to kneel at the side of my chair but thinks better of it. Straightening the ironed crease in her trousers, she stands over me instead, her perfume chokingly strong. "We've got a huge, huge opportunity coming up and I need you to be with me on this one, OK? The Ve-Glow ad goes live *tomorrow* and then there'll be all sorts of press events before the product's release date." She actually squeals. "Meet and greets, interviews, maybe TV adverts? *TV*, darling!"

I can feel my head shaking but she keeps on talking and talking, her eyes shining, pupils dilated. That's all she cares about now: money, ads, #spon, numbers and stats, brands and labels. I scratch at the sore skin on my thigh through my pyjama bottoms, feeling panic prickle over me. Basically, Mum's saying if this elusive 'product' we're slapping our names onto (spoiler alert, it's a vegan and cruelty-free 'corrective' cream for *all* skin types with zero-waste packaging, that neither me nor Mum had any creative control over) sells and Ve-Glow sign us as ambassadors, I won't just be famous inside a phone anymore. We're talking ads everywhere, and I'll be Almond Billboard Face, Bus Shelter Face, Side of the Fucking Building Face.

"You know Fleur Couture?" Mum snaps her fingers inches from my nose as I take a deep breath to keep from screaming. I nod. "Did you see she's just hit five million? She sent her son on this Tranquillity course for teens up in London last summer, after she found My Little Pony porn on his internet history – can you imagine, darling. He's just signed a five-figure deal with Topman now. He's doing well. That could be you if you apply yourself."

I breathe in deeply again and count to five like Dr Wallace tells me to

do, feel my lungs inflate. Knowing Mum's watching me for my reaction, I dab my finger to my tongue and loudly turn the page of the magazine over. There's a shake in my hand. I stare at the pictures of glossy, elastic skinsuits, pretending to read, *Shapewear That's Shaping Our Futures*, before side-eyeing Mum's expression. It's unreadable, her forehead smooth, mouth permanently puckered. She tuts, picking out the crud from under her acrylic nails.

"I don't have time for this," she says, checking her phone. "I need you, Almond. Tomorrow at ten the post goes live on my profile and I need you to be promoting the shit out of it. You've been a bit absent on Stories and livestreams lately. Get some interaction going."

She's right, I used to reply nice things to followers: wish someone's nan a happy birthday, shoutout someone's small business start-up. But lately it all means nothing. I get tagged in selfies I don't remember posing for, where I'm smiling but dead behind the eyes, with people writing these long captions about me riddled with heart-eye emojis that say I'm inspiring or I've made their day, when all I did was breathe next to them, and it makes me feel strange, like someone I'm not. Hollow. 'Cus I'm not brave or empowering. I'm not beautiful. I don't know them, and they don't know me. They just think they do.

Mum's mouth has been moving, but I haven't been listening again. I nod and try to look like a concerned person, furrow my brow, chew my bottom lip.

"We need five hundred thousand likes to get signed for the autumn/winter season," Mum's saying. "Five hundred thousand people like that photo of us, and Paisley Parker says she wants me and you as the faces for Ve-Glow UK. I'm telling you, this correcty cream stuff's just the start, darling."

I feel bile, gritty and acidic at the back of my throat.

"Do you know how much they're paying us?" I manage to ask, licking my finger and dotting up the toast crumbs from my plate. *One, two, three, four, five*, I count over and over. I catch Mum in my peripheral, gazing into her front-facing camera, lips slightly parted.

“Big money.”

“And will they pay me this time?” I clear my throat, try not to sound too hopeful so she won’t suspect I already have ideas for that Big Money. “Like into my bank account? I’m sixteen now—”

“Look, I’ve gotta go,” she says, her mouth closing in a tight pout like a drawstring purse.

Mum leaves the room with her phone clamped to her ear, putting her posh, gooey, toddler voice on. She sounds happier than she has all morning.



ROSE BUTLER

Rose Butler is a graduate of Bath Spa University's BA in Creative Writing and MA in Writing for Young People. She is a writer, poet and photographer based in the South West, where she lives with her boyfriend, copious books and, hopefully one day, a puppy. She has performed her poetry at a variety of events, including the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and Bristol Harbour Festival, as well as twice representing her university at UniSlam.

Growing up in rural Spain, Rose found companionship in her books – generously supplied by relatives in the UK – which prompted her to begin creating stories of her own. The story that ended up becoming her undergraduate dissertation began life as a much worse draft eight years previously. Similarly, the idea for *The Swindle Witch* had been brewing in her mind for several years before she finally put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard) and began bringing sections to workshop with her MA peers. Under the guidance of her tutors, particularly her manuscript tutor Dr Joanna Nadin, Ailith and the other characters of *The Swindle Witch* have grown and begun to tell a story Rose was excited to see through to the end.

As an author, Rose prefers to write for a young adult audience, but also has a soft spot for picture books and middle grade, stemming from years of wanting to entertain younger cousins. In her writing, Rose enjoys playing with fantasy genres, but also finding the magical elements in the everyday.

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About *The Swindle Witch*

Ailith Foster arrives at the palace in the middle of the worst storm in a generation, and introduces herself as the new Royal Witch. She is welcomed, given rooms of her own and fine clothes, and allowed access to every part of the palace.

But Ailith has a secret – she isn't a witch. She has no magic powers, only a sharp mind and good hearing. This is the biggest trick she's ever pulled. But, she reasons, *what is magic anyway?* She settles into her role and quickly ingratiate herself to the members of the Court, telling fortunes (repeating gossip), providing charms (usually tea with dirt in it), and performing minor miracles of healing (something she actually knows how to do). For the first time in her life, she makes a friend and begins to feel at home again, healing the wounds of the past.

But Ailith's not the only one in the palace who isn't as she seems. Someone else is plotting something, which will have a much bigger impact than Ailith's ruse. Pulled into the plot against her will, she at first reacts only to protect her job and the comfortable life she has built in the palace.

However, as the depths of the plot are revealed, Ailith realises she isn't just fighting for her own best interests anymore.



THE SWINDLE WITCH

Prologue

Usually gambling went her way, but every so often Ailith misjudged her opponent. It was a surprisingly cold morning for early summer, and she cursed the loss of her cloak. This time her misjudgement had left her shivering. She shook her head to try to ignore the chill, and her hair settled around her shoulders as if it were imitating her lost item.

Turning her focus back to the road, Ailith saw a figure ahead. She couldn't distinguish much more than a shadow, but they seemed to be reclining beneath the trees. *Not the wisest place for a rest.* The roads in the kingdom, particularly through the woods, weren't as safe as they had been a few years ago, under the old king's reign. Common security no longer seemed to be a priority for the crown and, of course, it was the peasants paying the price. The traveller beneath the trees must not be from around here, else surely they'd have known better.

Ailith continued along the road towards the figure, but as she got closer her stomach began to sink. The figure didn't seem to be moving at all. *They could just be asleep,* she reasoned weakly. But they were completely still – no unconscious, gentle breath of a sleeper. Ailith swallowed as she drew level with them, and was left with no doubt that

it was indeed a body. A splotch of bright scarlet, darkening to brown around the edges, spread across the woman's midriff. Ailith's stomach plummeted further, until she was sure it would be somewhere around her knees, if that kind of thing were possible. She paused and bent over to examine the figure more closely.

Her heart stopped, just for a moment, then returned to beating with thunderous intent. There was something familiar about this girl's face that made Ailith tilt her head and look harder. She was definitely a girl, not a woman, barely a summer or two beyond Ailith's seventeen. *There was something...* Her breath caught in her chest as she realised what it was. She knew this girl.

Eawynn had left the hamlet years ago, when they were hardly more than children, encouraged to go and study her natural talent for witchery with someone more learned – an old witch beyond the mountains. They'd never been close, not enough to consider each other friends, but they had been kind to each other. Ailith recognised the girl with whom she had played chase, beneath the seven or so years of changes. Her hair was longer, her face older, although still with full, girlish cheeks, and her body – much taller than when Ailith had last seen her – was just beginning to cross that treacherous line from girl to woman.

The scarlet stain across her stomach pulled Ailith's eyes back. It looked recent, judging from how the shades of red and brown had spread across it. She steeled herself and reached out, holding her fingertips briefly over the girl's nose and mouth to catch a breath she knew would not be there. Her teeth clenched as she pushed aside Eawynn's brown hair to feel for a pulse at her throat. *Nothing.* Ailith brushed the rest of the hair away from Eawynn's face. Death had sucked all the vitality from it, leaving it limp and lustreless. She ran the backs of her fingers over the girl's cheek and mumbled a prayer to whoever might be listening.

As she straightened up again, she caught sight of Eawynn's pack, torn asunder with half its contents strewn across the grassy verge that edged the road. She glanced back at the prone form beneath the trees as

she stepped across to it.

Well, she won't be needing it anymore. Ailith dropped her own pack and crouched to filter through what was left on the grass. She was running low on provisions – what she hadn't used she'd lost learning how to rig games of dice. There was no coin purse, of course, and no food either. Whoever had set upon Eawynn must have been desperate. Ailith continued to search. As she moved one of the torn remnants of the bag, pushing aside Eawynn's few items of clothing, she noticed a loosely wrapped scroll tucked inside. She pulled it out and turned it over. On the other side was a cracked seal in deep blue wax; Ailith squinted at it for a moment before unrolling the scroll.

Her eyes grew wide as she read. *Recommendation of the Chamberlain... order of the Court... appointed to the role of Royal Witch...* She'd known Eawynn was talented, but she never would have thought she had the gumption for something like that. She'd never even known the girl talk back to her own brother. How was she meant to voice her opinions to the Queen? Unless she had changed even more than Ailith realised after leaving for the witch's home.

A spark of an idea caught light in Ailith's mind. It would be dangerous, but... *What was magic anyway? Predicting the weather, reading fortunes? Luck and cunning. Curing ailments?* Ma had taught her to do that when she was just a bairn. *How hard could it really be, right? After all, the letter didn't even have a name on it...*

She cast about among the objects strewn across the ground, and gathered up anything that seemed like it would be of use to a witch. She'd have to make this convincing if it was going to work. Thankfully, it seemed as though Eawynn had been carrying her whole supply with her. Ailith recognised the majority of the herbs stashed in small bags and jars, but the names of most of the stones and metals eluded her. She stacked everything she deemed useful into her own pack, and stowed the scroll deep in one of her skirt pockets.

Then, she shouldered her pack and turned to leave, a new destination in mind. Hesitating, Ailith's eyes fell once again on the dead girl by the

side of the road. She heaved a sigh, then shook her head to chase away any sentimental feelings.

‘I’m sorry there isn’t more that I can do,’ she said.

Then, with one more mumbled prayer for Eawynn’s safety on the next part of her journey, Ailith walked on, forcing herself not to look back, as she stepped into a life never meant for her, but that she would make her own.

One

At mid-afternoon the sky was as black as night. Thunder rolled and sheet lightning split the gloom as the rain bucketed to the ground. The wind tore at the trees, and found its way through the tiniest cracks, so that even people safe in their homes pulled their blankets tighter around themselves.

Ailith turned her face to the sky, squinting against the downpour, and cursed the heavens. *Not much further.*

As she got closer to the looming structure, she saw two guards huddled against the outer wall of the palace, searching for any kind of protection from the storm as they stood watch over the main gate. Ailith could picture heavy raindrops ringing against their helms and dripping off their nose guards. She'd have felt sorry for them if she weren't so soggy and miserable herself.

Ailith struggled up the road, weighed down by the pack on her shoulders, heavier now than it had been when she set out. As she neared the palace gates, dark wood studded with iron nails, the guards stood straighter in an attempt to match their surroundings and pretend they hadn't been covering from the weather moments before. Ailith pushed soaking wet hair from her cheeks and planted herself in front of them. She fixed what she hoped was a stern expression on her face as they addressed her.

'Who are you?' called the guard nearest to her, a tall, heavyset man who had to squint through the deluge to make her out. 'What's your business here?'

Ailith ignored the tickle of nerves that ran down her spine. She rummaged in the pockets of her skirt and pulled out the wilted scroll of parchment, soaked at the edges and adorned with a cracked wax seal bearing the royal crest.

'I'm the new Court Witch,' she said, raising her voice over the pounding of the rain.

The guard took the scroll, inspecting the broken seal as he unfurled

it. He took a few moments to squint at it, then nodded sagely and passed it to the other guard – a shorter man with a brown, weathered face. This guard turned the letter the right way up and read it quickly.

‘On rec’mmendation of t’ Chamberlain and by order of t’ Court, the holder of this doc’ment is to be appointed to the role of Royal Witch.’ He shrugged and passed the scroll back to Ailith, who quickly stowed it back in her pocket. ‘What’s yer name, Miss?’ he asked.

A Northerner. You’re even further from home than I am. ‘Ailith Foster,’ she said, straightening. It struck her that perhaps she should have given Eawynn’s name, but it was too late now. A raindrop snaked down the back of her neck, distracting her from the thought.

‘Nice t’ meet ye, Miss Foster,’ said the guard. ‘If ye don’t mind waitin’, we’ll send for some’ne to take ye up t’ palace.’

She nodded. ‘Of course. Although, I’d like to be out of this rain as soon as possible.’

The guard grimaced. ‘You ’n’ me both, Miss,’ he said, reaching over and tugging on a bell cord set into the wall.

-

Sunlight was streaming through the window when Ailith woke up from the deepest sleep she’d had in a long time. She peered around the room, squinting at the brightness. Her few belongings were strewn around haphazardly: patched and faded skirts spilling out of her bag, rumpled in places by her purse, empty as it was, and the bags and boxes she had taken from Eawynn.

Ailith swung herself up to sit on the edge of the bed and rested her feet on the floor. Her soles touched warm wood, not cold stone or wet earth. She smiled, remembering where she was. It was definitely better than draughty barns and prickly bushes.

She went to the washstand in the corner, poured clean water from the jug into the basin and scrubbed her face. She winced at the feeling of the dirt beneath her fingertips. She’d never thought she would appreciate

the ability to wash this much, but she'd also never been this filthy before – the colour of her nails made her gag. She stripped down and scrubbed her underarms and feet, seeking out any vestiges of dirt from the road and washing them away. Then, shivering in the cool air of the room, she looked through the clothes she had been offered last night, neatly hung in the heavy wooden wardrobe.

Ailith took the time to appreciate them properly now: the thick, warm cloth and occasional splatterings of embroidered decoration. There was a cluster of plain linen dresses on one side, meant to be worn under the varyingly more elaborate gowns on the other. These were mostly made of wool, but there were a few silk and brocade, presumably for special occasions. Ailith dressed quickly, opting for the reliability and comfort of a simple, dark blue woollen frock over the linen undergarment. Then she crossed the room and threw open the window.

A soft summer breeze lifted her hair. The day was nothing like the previous afternoon – barely a cloud marred the bright blue sky. The sun was warm on her face, and much higher in the sky than she'd first realised. It was as if the worst storm in a generation had never happened at all. The courtyard was full of people, and snatches of talk and laughter floated up to her. Ailith watched them for a few moments, so far below they seemed little more than beetles. She turned away, leaving the window open.

Not in the mood for the inevitable hustle and bustle of the kitchens, Ailith settled back on the bed with the last of the food from her pack. *Hopefully stale bread and hard cheese won't be on the menu much after this.* She sat and listened to the strings of conversation that drifted in through the window as she ate, feeling unusually calm. Then she brushed herself down and decided it was about time to finish her unpacking.

Ailith paced as she waited outside the throne room for her formal introduction. Two servants rounded the corner nearest her. She turned

to look at them, her skirts swishing around her ankles – a welcome change from how they'd clung to her yesterday. The two servant girls jumped when they saw her and quickly stopped talking, but started whispering again as soon as they thought they were out of earshot.

Ailith tucked her hair behind her ears. She let her vision drift out of focus as she concentrated on the two girls.

'That's the new witch! Showed up in the middle of the storm,' whispered the first.

'But it were like devils banging pots together!' came the reply.

'I heard she walked straight through it like it was just a shower.'

'Bout time she got 'ere,' whispered the second.

'You know what they say, witches arrive when they're needed.'

'She's needed 'ere, what with the temper Lord Alvingham's been in.'

The first gossip sucked a breath through her teeth at the mention of the lord's name. As they rounded the corner and their voices drifted out of range of even her keen ears, Ailith brought her focus back to her immediate surroundings. *Lord Alvingham*. She filed the name away, feeling it might be important further down the line.

A few moments later, the door to the throne room swept open and she was ushered inside. In the moment before she was introduced, Ailith took in the room – high vaulted ceilings propped up by pale stone columns and enormous, pointed windows all along one wall, with a stained-glass rosette set high above the throne. The throne itself was simple and made of sturdy oak, carved with flowers and lightly gilded. It was not a pretentious seat, but still one with an air of authority. A figure stood in the shadows behind it, but Ailith couldn't make out their features, only the glint of a jewelled ring where the figure's hand rested on the back of the throne. The room was full of people, dressed in an array of finery, who all turned to look at Ailith as the page cleared his throat.

'May I present,' he said, projecting his voice to be heard throughout the room, 'Miss Ailith Foster who, by recommendation of the Chamberlain, shall henceforth serve as the new Royal Witch.'



ISOBEL CLARA

Isobel is a theatre producer and arts fundraiser who spent ten years at the National Theatre creating imaginative new worlds for children before leaning into her love of nature and moving to Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. She has a BA in Music and Drama from Manchester University and was awarded a distinction in her MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University. Now based in Chippenham, Isobel spends her free time hanging out with a black and white furball called Bay whilst ‘jigging’ in her pyjamas and belting out musical theatre as loud as she can. Isobel hopes to never grow up but, if she has to, she’d like to somehow grow into Bernadette Peters.

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About In Burley Wood

Fifteen-year-old Bede Shaw is a forest-born witch who wants nothing more than to stay at home with her beloved sister, Tabby. But when she is snatched from school and forced to take part in an ancient ritual – trying an unseen prisoner for revealing magick to the mortal world – she has just seven days to use her powers to uncover whether The Accused is innocent or guilty. If Bede fails, she will be exiled from magick permanently and never see Tabby again. Now, Bede must question how far she'll go for answers. Is she willing to break the rules to do what's right, or is being good and getting home the most important thing of all?



IN BURLEY WOOD

One

NEAR DAWN

The Den is an ants' nest. When I'd fallen 'sleep, it had been silent. Echo still. Now, everyone 'round me is chaos-makin', scramblin' 'round on top of each other, over each other, scrapin' wood 'gainst wood, wind-whistlin' their scraps of clothin' over their heads.

It hurts to tear my eyelids open. They is heavy like rocks, stones sinkin' into my puddle face. I is so tired, the heaviness plunges into me, tryin' to pull me under, but the ache of 'wake has already started its tide 'cross my body.

Don't help that Elsie Clements is pullin' the blanket off me, neither. I dig in, fingers feral, but I ain't no match really.

'Buzzard,' she squawks.

Through the haze of first sight, her eyes look like barn owl eggs, eager eclipses of bright white shell.

'The Buzzard's here. He's come a gatherin'.' She smacks me on the face, a hot coal fallin' onto my icicle cheek. 'Get up,' she hollers. 'C'mon, Bede, get up!'

We's been safe so far, cocooned by forest cover, burrowed deep in our den of decayin' foliage right in the middle of the oldest copse. We is forgotten so we can grow; least that's what Mother Minn says. But the Buzzard's here and someone's gettin' gobbled into his gnarled black carriage. My belly knows it.

The Buzzard disappears people. That's what they say. Makes 'em past not present. He's dangerous like holly berries: a spectacle that poisons.

Everyone files out to see him, though. When someone from the outside comes this far into the wood, we rush to see them. Always.

To remember.

To stay connected.

And cos if we don't, Mother Minn will whip us with branches 'til we bleed and beg forgiveness.

I push myself sideways, up, 'til I's sittin' on the edge of my cot, starin' out 'cross the carnage. I need to piss but there ain't time, so I use that fresh ache, a slow curdlin' type of pain, to spur me on. Ten toes all push down into the bark 'neath; they know the path of every root. And so, I rise, and reach for my clothes.

My tunic is the mottled wool of cobwebs, thick-spun black and grey. The fabric hangs off me all awkward, hand-me-downed for generations, but I don't care. If my hair stays like this, though – as big and as knotted as pondweed – I is gettin' thrashed, so I scrape it down and twist it up, pinnin' it tight 'gainst my grumblin' scalp.

The pins is Tabitha's. Tabby's... my sister's.

They's the most precious things I own.

I stride towards the tunnel, out into the shallow hours of day. I take six steps forward, maybe seven, 'fore Elsie reappears and grabs my hand.

'Come on, Bede,' she caws, and pulls me with her.

She can't be that cross cos she ain't callin' me by my proper name.

Obedience. Obedience Delilah Shaw.

I prefer the shorter version. Bede. Like beady-eyed.

My tongue's too tired to say I was goin' anyway, so I follow Elsie and take the path I planned to tread. I love the way our hands fit together.

Domes and dips. Soft flesh covered by hard skin and a gap in the middle for where the promises is kept.

Just like the way it was with you, Tabby.

Elsie and I stumble into each other and out 'gain as we run through the tunnel. Outside, the cold is in a stinging mood, as vicious as a willow's whip. I reach for the heat of Elsie's skin, wrappin' my arm 'round hers and restin' my chin on her bony shoulder.

Mother Birch is actin' alpha, usherin' us forwards, her hand sweepin' back and forth like a heron's wing. Whoosh, whoosh, she goes, pendulum-predictable.

'Get in place and let you be barnacles 'bout where you stand.' Her voice cracks in the cold, dry air.

We Den-cubs ain't never been too good at followin' rules in the forest. Witches ain't bound to much, but for the Buzzard, we try. We make flimsy lines 'cross our makeshift courtyard: a wobble of elders 'hind me and a kite string of young'uns out in front. Together, we become the breeze movin' through river reeds as we sway in hushed, forbidden chatter.

Bein' of a middle age, with fifteen years of flesh upon me, I is in the middle row holdin' on to Elsie for warmth. Liza, Finch and Charity bunch 'round us and nibble on the gossip. We's s'posed to be frightened, but most seem excited. Ain't often you get to see a tale come true.

I's silent, though. I bristle and glance west.

'What you starin' at?' Elsie asks, her brows scrunched up like caterpillars.

I point to the darkest shadows where Mother Minn is standin' with a stranger. 'Buzzard, o'course, like everyone else.'

Most of the Buzzard's head is obscured, but from 'neath his cocked hat peeks a nose as sharp as any beak. The Buzzard ain't just a name, then. 'Tis how Nature made him in her grand design.

Elsie pulls me in and mutters, 'What do you s'pose they's talkin' 'bout?' I shrug, but my stubborn pal ain't satisfied.

'Anyone got bat ears on?'

'Maybe they's talkin' 'bout what he wants,' Charity suggests, shiverin' with the cold.

Liza goes one step further. 'Who he'll steal 'way.' She's warmer than the rest of us, wise 'nough to bring a blanket with her. 'Tis wrapped 'round her body like some great cloak, only soil-stained feet peekin' out from 'neath its frayed and frozen hem.

I drift 'way from their words, breathin' down deep to read the air. 'Neath the smell of all us witches, there should be the scent of the day itself: of what's growin' or shrinkin'; of whether there'll be sun or sleet. But no matter how deep I dig this mornin', 'tis strangely absent. 'Tis not a bad, rotten thing. More like someone playin' a trick on us, keepin' the truth in their pocket 'til we ask for it all polite.

Mother Minn breaks from the Buzzard and motions for Mother Birch to join 'em.

Charity mumbles, 'Well, that ain't good.'

We each place a hand on her forearm, attemptin' quick comfort. We should knot ourselves up like a bramble bush, I think, tether ourselves together in a hundred places so we can't be separated, sproutin' stubborn spikes for spite.

'Hear that?' I say.

'What?' Elsie answers.

'Listen.'

She closes her eyes. 'Oh.' The dimples on her flushed cheeks crease. 'No birds. They ain't singin' like they should.' Her eyes fly open, starin' at me.

'Exactly.'

Every creature in this wood is waitin' with us, wantin' to know what's happenin', silent and scared.

As the sun's honeyed glow finally floods over us, Mother Minn turns and walks towards the group, cluckin' her disappointment at all our flaws. She starts cuffin' the young'uns 'round their ears, pushin' 'em back towards the Den. Unwanted by the Buzzard, it seems. Some of us middlin's go too, but Elsie, Charity and I is made to

stay, pushed into a circle with the older witches.

My worries scratch a little harder, my heart tick-tockin' in distress. But with two of my closest friends still out here, I can only do what's good and right. I lift my chin and stand steadfast beside 'em, pushin' all my panic out.

A baker's dozen of flustered, fearful girls who scratch at the dirt with their toes or boots, suddenly 'wait a verdict on their fate. All eyes is on our Mothers as they circle us, inspectin' their wards, herdin' us inwards like tremblin' sheep.

Opposite, the Buzzard finally emerges. He don't blink none, but his thumb teases the top of his cane as though caught in a thought different to the rest of him.

Freed from the gloom, I can see his breeches is black, but his coat and cape, his shirt, even his stockin's is as brown as Finch's treacle toffee. Somethin' 'bout his cape shimmers in the daylight too, makin' it flush from oak to gold.

Chest out, he walks towards us in a haughty display, eyes scannin' the ground as though searchin' for some delicious grub to eat.

One thing I know for certain. He ain't used to bein' in these woods. His shoes is too clean: the large buckles on the front is gleamin' silver, whilst everythin' here is layers of mud. What does he want, then? Why come here, so far from any town, with only the know-nothin' seeds of us Den-cubs on offer? Don't make sense.

What do you reckon, Tabby? Why is he here?

I ain't scared of the Buzzard exactly, but in his scent there's the friction of a thunderstorm: the breath 'twixt the crackle and the boom. I gasp when he whips his cape back, for in that swift flicker of movement, the fabric vanishes and I see feathers, a wing tilted back towards the sun. Then it disappears 'gain and I is left graspin' for Elsie, needin' her fingers to thread though mine.

The Buzzard pauses for a moment; his eyes brush over me 'fore dartin' back down. 'Tis like someone's walkin' on my grave, an icy scratch right 'twixt my shoulder blades.

‘What?’ Elise yanks me closer, nose twitchin’ as she senses my unease. I chew on my lip like yarrow root. ‘Does the day smell wrong to you?’ Her eyes narrow, but I get no answer for Mother Minn walks ’tween us then, pushin’ our hands and arms ’part with her bony hip, leavin’ me unmoored.

‘These is the sprigs that has bled,’ she declares.

Our tongues is stilled, taken ’back by the coarseness of her words. Every one of us cringes at bein’ exposed thus. Blood is a sacred, private thing. And worse; for me, that ain’t true. I’s still on the cusp of becomin’ a woman, and ain’t had to deal with no menstrual rags.

The Buzzard nods. I watch the spot on his skin where his tongue presses ’gainst the hollow of his cheek, squirmin’ it ’round all worm-like as he pushes into the centre of our witchin’ circle, still lookin’ down towards the ground.

He comes to a stop and removes his hat. Threadbare wisps of copper hair fan over his scalp like the warp of a loom. He tuts and reaches inside his coat, producin’ a long, thin feather with his right hand. He holds it by its pale, downy barbs, ’fore turnin’ it upside down and droppin’ it onto the earth below.

‘Do something interesting with this,’ he commands, finally lookin’ up.

We shuffle and fidget. I glance at Elsie who shrugs. Her skin is all flushed, yet mine is pure gooseflesh.

‘You.’ He points at Martha May, the oldest ’mongst us. ‘Begin.’

She stutters, pullin’ at her plaited hair. ‘What magicks may we use, sir?’

The Buzzard stares at Martha and I’s sure I hear the buzz of a hum as he contemplates his answer. ‘Interesting magick,’ he responds, his drawl despairin’ of us.

Martha purses her lips. She takes a breath and stares at the feather. Its silky vane is the colour of a painted ocean, neither blue nor green, but both. I ain’t seen a real ocean, only the River Key, but I’s seen one in books and it always glows bright as this, so an ocean it must be.

Martha’s chantin’ now, mutterin’ to herself as her hands weave a

swift gavotte, pluckin' the air as if playin' a harp. The feather hiccups into life, lurchin' left then right 'fore spirallin' up, hoverin' right by the beak of the Buzzard.

He frowns and snatches it, throwin' it back down onto the ground as Martha stumbles backwards. She wipes her nose with her hand, sad for failin' perhaps, or happy for the same.

'Next.' Each word seems like a chore fallin' from his lips.

We gawp at each other, not sure how we could possibly top what Martha's done already. And why would we want to? Who wants to be gobbled by the Buzzard and taken 'way from all they know?

'Now!' Mother Minn squawks, makin' Charity jump a yard high, lettin' out a screech as she does so too. Mother Birch is there in a flash, her hand pressin' down on Charity's shoulder, holdin' her cub firmly in place.

If it weren't for the fear of it, 'twould be an interestin' challenge. You can't use sophisticated magick, see. What good is usin' runes on a feather? Or readin' the stars? You can't use it with no paper nor wood. Perhaps you could use it in the hearth somehow, but there ain't no kitchen up here in the courtyard, so you's got to go with somethin' basic. Rely on your instinct. Use what's lurkin' in your gut to guide you. That's difficult for us Den-cubs; we's still learnin' who we is, let 'lone how to use it.

'Tis even harder for me whose magick don't emerge that often. I's an unpredictable beast in that regard. 'Cept when it comes to the forest 'round me. Here, out in nature, is where I shine most.

Charity makes her attempt. Hands kept low, she clicks her middle finger 'gainst her thumb and the feather slices through the air, a dagger thrown, kissin' the cheek of the Buzzard as it flies past him, beyond the edge of the circle and into the trunk of a thick, old oak. With a thunderin' *whump*, it buries itself into the bark, the earth judderin' 'neath our feet.

A thin trickle of blood seeps 'cross the Buzzard's skin.

We all tense, hearts drummin' fast and furious, claws scratchin'

inside of my chest. 'Twas a mistake, Charity meanin' no act of war by it, but there's no knowin' how he'll react.

But the Buzzard chuckles, perhaps amused by the darin' of it. He skims a finger 'cross the cut, sweepin' up the crimson, then clicks himself, the feather speedin' back into his hand 'fore I can blink.

He starts walkin' 'gain, ready to place the feather where he dropped it first. But thing is, I's next, and I find myself raisin' an arm, unfoldin' it, fingers stretchin' out towards the Buzzard and his test. All sensible-talk 'twixt my brain and body has ceased, I fear. But 'tis intoxicatin', this. The riddle of it.

RACHEL ELENA

Rachel has been writing stories ever since she was a teenager to escape things like mind-numbingly boring algebra classes. Inspired by a hot summer working in North Carolina and an unforgettable road trip to Monument Valley, she penned the first draft of *My Heart Belongs to Myrtle Key*. It's a contemporary YA romance with themes of friendship, messy families, love and belonging, mixed in with a sprinkling of kittens, manatees and hot tub kisses. When she's not scribbling in her notepad, Rachel is an enthusiast of wild swimming, whale watching and country music star Thomas Rhett.

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About My Heart Belongs to Myrtle Key

Sixteen-year-old Riley Thorne, a big-hearted vegan and fledgling animal rights activist from Michigan, is obsessed with scoring a ticket to CatCon NYC. Her estranged mom, famous for her big cat sanctuary, is booked as a special guest and Riley is desperate to make a connection with her. Riley plans to waitress at a cat café all summer—in between seeing her lead singer boyfriend, Jared—to save up for ticket money. Then she'll jet off to New York.

But when Riley is caught releasing experiment mice from the school science lab, she not only gets suspended, but her dad ships her off to her grandparents' quirky retirement community in Myrtle Key. Her life takes another rough turn when Jared says he wants an open relationship this summer.

In exile, with only thirty days till CatCon and only twenty-two dollars to her name, Riley's quest to earn the ticket money is complicated by a flirtation with tennis prodigy Nate and the sudden arrival of her boyfriend. Will she ever make it to see her mom? And which should she choose: old love or new?



MY HEART BELONGS TO MYRTLE KEY

1

‘If I get caught, I’m screwed,’ I say, clicking off the car radio. ‘Dad still hasn’t seen the F’s on my report card.’

‘Riley, you’ve got this.’ Missy’s voice radiates calm as she signals left at the crossroads. Her dreamcatcher, hanging from the rear-view mirror, sways as she turns the corner. ‘Tonight’s your last chance.’

Missy never freaks out, whereas my thoughts are a hot mess express. What if the alarm code got changed a day early? What if Principal Weller stayed late? What if the security guard does an extra check tonight?

Under the sickly glow of streetlights, a guy jogs along the sidewalk. He’s a dead ringer for Jared. Even though I’m pretty sure my boyfriend’s getting wasted and having a blast at his sixteenth birthday party, I twist around to double-check. No, it’s not Jared. But maybe it’s someone else from school. Someone who might rat on us later.

I tuck my long red hair under my hoodie: this way I’ll be less recognizable if the security cameras catch me. ‘Missy, I think that guy noticed us.’

‘What guy?’

‘That jogger. I swear he clocked me staring.’

‘Don’t get paranoid.’

The thing Missy doesn’t know is, I *accidentally* told Jared about our mice plans after a hot make out sesh under the bleachers at recess. What if he blabbed my secret to one of his friends? ‘Your bright orange campervan is hardly anonymous,’ I say.

‘Chill.’ Missy takes a right and parks down a side street. ‘My horoscope said today is gonna be lucky.’

My hands shake as I unlatch the seat belt. If tonight goes wrong, Dad might ground me for life, and I’ll be stuck with him and his latest girlfriend forever. Kandace is the fifth skinny blonde he’s dated this year. She claims to be allergic to cats and throws a hissy fit if I don’t use a lint roller on my clothes when I come home from my cat café shift. When Kandace asked me to quit my job, I told her to go to hell. Baking vegan cookies, petting kittens, and sneaking off for dance breaks with Missy is like being injected with a daily dose of serotonin.

Missy turns off the main beams. ‘Look, I know it’s *your* plan, but I’ll switch places and go in if you like.’

‘Seriously? You’ll do that?’

‘Sure.’ She smiles a little. ‘But you’d be more badass than me.’

I shake my head. ‘Remember that first day of junior year?’

‘When you chipped a tooth?’

‘Yeah, falling over in the canteen with broccoli soup.’

Missy switches off the engine. ‘How could I forget?’

‘My Save The Ocelot t-shirt got wrecked with snot-green soup and I stormed into the bathroom mortified. Hardly badass.’

‘You kinda looked like the Grinch.’ Missy chuckles, tugging her NYU beanie over her rainbow box braids. ‘So, am I taking over?’

I hesitate. It’s worse if Missy gets caught because she’s the one with a college future. My dad’s always banging on about how I’m too clumsy to become a vet, and the guidance counsellor gave me a shitty secretarial brochure and a smug smile when I mentioned applying to

study biological science. If I pull off this mice rescue, I'll be one teeny step closer to making the world a better place for animals. Like Mom.

'No. Wait,' I say. 'I've got this.'

Missy gives me a thumbs up. 'Let me check the grounds first. You stay here and keep an eye on the entrance. Call me if anything's wrong.'

She jumps out of the van, slinking up the path all ninja-like towards school. I stare out into the night, praying the security guard's not on the prowl. My phone buzzes and Jared's name flashes across the screen.

Jared: *Where are you?*

Me: *Rescuing mice, remember?*

His reply pings straight back: *Can't you rescue Stuart Little tomorrow?*

Me: *That's too late.*

Tomorrow, after the experiments, Mrs. Grunberg will donate the mice to a pet shop. They'll probably be fed to the snakes if I don't rehome them with Missy's friends. After all, my online petition to stop school animal experiments only got three signatures, and they were from total randos I met on Tumblr.

Missy bangs on the window and shines a flashlight.

'Oh my God!' I squeal. 'You scared the bejeezus out of me.'

Missy climbs back into the campervan, chuckling as she holds the light under her chin, the glow making her face look ghostly. 'Good news: the coast is clear.'

My phone chimes again.

Jared: *I can't believe you're bailing on my birthday for a bunch of mice.*

Shit. I feel like the worst girlfriend ever.

'Is that Jared?' Missy asks.

'Um, yeah.'

She shoots me that look. We've been best friends long enough that I know what it means: *Why haven't you dumped that loser already?*

'It's complicated,' I say.

'Shouldn't it be easy, though?'

'Sometimes it's amazing.'

Missy arcs an eyebrow as she passes over the flashlight.

‘Can we go to Jared’s party after saving the mice?’ I ask. ‘It’s gonna be lit.’

‘We can’t leave the mice alone in the campervan. They’ll be scared.’

‘I guess you’re right.’ I hate feeling like I have to choose between my best friend and boyfriend. ‘Let’s go back to yours first and treat them to your sister’s Malibu Barbie dream house.’

Missy grins. ‘For sure. They deserve a personal cinema, an infinity pool, and to be tucked up in a four-poster with a hunky Ken doll.’

A Twitter notification zings on my phone. Mom’s posted about rescuing a snow leopard for her Cedar Creek Big Cat Sanctuary. I know it sounds lame, but when Mom left home and became this famous animal activist, I thought working at the local Michigan Cat Cafe would give me some kind of connection with her. But while I’m cradling Ragdoll kittens, she’s in Texas protecting endangered leopards, cheetahs and jaguars.

I show the post to Missy. ‘How do I compete with that?’

What do I have to do to get my mom to rescue *me*?

‘Forget Twitter,’ Missy says. ‘We’ve got our *own* mission. Mice count too. Their lives matter.’ She rifles through her bag and passes over a ridiculously humongous metal key for the school. ‘I’m rooting for you.’

My eyes widen. ‘Seriously? It looks like a dungeon key.’

‘I got it from the janitor.’

‘He’s winding you up.’

‘He’s not. I had to offer him unlimited free Iced Es-purr-essos for an entire month. He gave me the alarm code too.’ Missy grabs a biro and writes it on my hand. ‘Don’t forget you’ve got to enter the code in two minutes before the alarm goes off for real. And that this is a super brave thing you’re doing.’

‘If you say so.’ I loop my rucksack over my shoulder and hop out of the car like it’s no big deal, even though I’m bursting to tell Mom about it already. I hope she thinks it’s cool, even if it’s just mice.

Missy pops open the trunk and I lift out the plastic cat carrier that used to belong to Pickles, Mom’s three-legged rescue cat. When Missy

winds down the window to wish me luck, I whisper, ‘See you on the other side.’

I hotfoot it along the path, clutching the carrier. The red-brick school looms in front of me, the old bell tower spooky in the dark. I pass by the water fountain in the empty courtyard and climb up the steps. Spotting a security camera above the Fairfield High School plaque, I duck and pray it’s not actually recording. I look at the double doors, thinking about how I could be dancing and knocking back shots with Jared right now. Maybe I should bail on the mission and head to his birthday. That’s what a normal girlfriend would do—make it back for the cake and candles—but then I imagine the disappointment in Mom’s voice if I told her that I chickened out for *a guy*.

My pulse quickens as I slide the key into the lock, and I have to jiggle it a few times before it finally twists around. Thank God, the janitor gave Missy the right key. I shove all my body weight against the door and skitter inside the dark entrance hall. The alarm starts beeping. My heart thuds as I shine my flashlight down the corridor and dart towards the alarm cupboard. When I open the door, I’m attacked by a bunch of cleaning mops that crash to the floor. Scrambling over them, I make my way towards the glowing control panel. I glance down at my wrist. Holy shit, the last number’s smudged. It looks like either a three, or an eight, or even a six.

Squinting, I type in the digits and stab a guess at the final number. The red error warning flashes across the panel. Fuckity fuck. I’ve not got much time. Sweat prickles the back of my neck as I punch in a different number. Eight. The warning pops up again and as the siren gets louder, my mind races at a bajillion-miles-an hour. Here’s what will happen if I don’t switch it off soon: a) the cops will turn up, b) Dad’s gonna kill me, and c) Mom’s gonna think I’m a total failure.

Missy would be the vision of calm in this situation. What the heck were those yogic breaths she taught me last night? Meditating, I inhale for five through my nose, then exhale out of my mouth. I punch

in the number six and a wave of cool relief washes over me as the beeping stops. I should thank Missy's lucky horoscope that I'm not gonna come home in a cop car, blue lights illuminating the driveway as Dad peeps through the curtains.

I sweep my flashlight down the empty corridor. It's eerily quiet without the lacrosse team hanging out by the lockers. As I go by the music rehearsal room, I feel guilty thinking about all the times I ditched Mrs. Grunberg's biology class to watch Jared's band rehearsals. But I tell myself it's okay to swoon over my boyfriend because Mrs. Grunberg just sits there and reads off boring slides though, right?

Shaking off thoughts of Jared, I race down the corridor, passing the gymnasium and all the junior classrooms to get to the science lab. As I open the last door, it creaks so fricking loudly. Oh, shit. I freeze for a second.

The beam from my flashlight scatters around the room, fixing on the experiment cage under a poster of the periodic table. I dash straight towards the cage and collide with the bookcase. A thud echoes through the room and I flinch. It's only a couple of textbooks, but my heart is practically leaping out of my chest. Calm the fuck down, Riley. At this rate, you're gonna go into cardiac arrest.

I un-bake my frazzled brain by counting out thirteen sleepy mice and petting their soft, warm fur. They smell like wet dogs, which makes me love them even more. Yesterday, I gave them nicknames like Anonymouse, Monterey Jack and Julius Cheeser, but now I just recognize Julius because he's the only brown one. If Kandace wasn't such a bitch, I'd adopt them all in a heartbeat.

'C'mon little guys,' I coo, unlatching the door. 'You're gonna be free.'

I pick up Monterey Jack, or is it Anonymouse? Whoever it is poops on my hand. Ew, gross! I flick off the teeny pellets and coax him into the carrier. After rescuing twelve of them, I've just got Julius Cheeser left. I'm leaning over to grab him when I drop my phone and it thunks to the floor. Honest to God, it's like Julius senses the opportunity to escape and pushes his nose past my hand and scampers underneath Mrs.

Grunberg's desk. When I point my flashlight, I catch a glimpse of him vanishing behind the bookcase.

Dammit. Now what? Do I leave him behind and save the others? What would Mom do? Duh, Riley. She'd rescue every single one of them. Last year, she risked getting arrested saving three cheetahs. I rifle through my rucksack. What on earth can I use to encourage him out?

Melted vegan chocolate? Nope.

Missy's lucky jade crystal? Nope.

Dill pickle lip balm? Nope.

I snap open the lid of my snack box. Broccoli's pretty useless, but ooh, an organic carrot stick! Maybe that could work. Standing by the bookcase like a total moron, I poke a carrot through the gap to entice the missing mouse out.

My phone rings again, cutting through the silence, and I jump out of my skin.

I grab my phone off the floor. 'Hey,' I whisper.

'Riley, s'no fun without you,' Jared slurs over thudding music. 'I thought we were gonna get smashed together, babe.'

'I know...but I just lost a mouse.'

Jared snickers. 'Can't you bait Stuart Little out with some stinky Stilton?'

I suppress a smile. 'Gotta go, but I'll be there soon.'

Hanging up, I stare at the bookcase, willing Julius to appear.

When he finally sticks out his sneaky head, I pounce like a total loon, scooping him up straight into the carrier. Then I break out into my favorite TikTok "Be Happy dance." Mission almost accomplished. I have all the mice.

Stopping to take a heap of cute selfies with the mice in the background, I mess around with the filters and send one to Mom with the caption *Mice Rescue Underway*. When Mom instantly replies with a red heart emoji, I feel hella good.

Then text messages start popping up on my screen.

Missy: *Just seen the security guard's car. Get out now.*

Missy: *Don't leave through the front entrance.*

Freaking out, I peer through the glass panel on the door. Lights spring on down the hall, which means I'm legit out of time. There's an emergency exit out of the gymnasium, but knowing my shitty luck, I'd get busted halfway along the corridor. My eyes dart around the room as I try to figure out a backup plan, but it's not like hiding under a desk is gonna work, and Mrs. Grunberg always locks her equipment cupboard at home time. Dashing to the back of the classroom, I yank up the blinds and push open the window. I climb onto a table with the carrier, the mice jostling around inside. 'Hold on guys, keep still,' I say, hitching a breath and grabbing the carrier hard as I barrel through the window.

I tumble onto the wet grass. The carrier crashes on top of me.

Holy macaroni!

I twist onto my side to check they're all safe. The poor little creatures cower at the back of the carrier, but Julius scampers towards me. 'Guys, we made it,' I cheer.

'Stop right there!' a male voice bellows.

I look up, shielding my eyes as the security guard inspects me with his flashlight, towering above me.

Oh fuck. Sorry, Dad. Looks like I'm coming home handcuffed in the back of a cop car.



BRIDGET FENTON

Bridget grew up in Bristol, where her storytelling began at a young age. One of eight siblings, she entertained her family with tales of nights spent as a circus performer, before sneaking back to the house before anyone had realised that she was missing. She has worked in a dark, satanic pottery and a local radio station before becoming a teacher, presiding over the school library with obsessive nerdery. Her other passion is football, although a broken ankle has seen her role change from mid-field player to Provider of Half-time Oranges, or club secretary, if you will.

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About Picking Up The Pieces

Feel-good teen fiction connecting the turmoil and stigma faced by gay men in the 1950s to contemporary LGBTQ+ teen life, in a heartbreaking and hilarious, stereotype-busting, coming-of-age story with an important message about kindness and understanding. Meet Jake, a black-belt in snark and sarcasm, who can only dream of designing a perfect homelife. But Dad is clearly homophobic, and Mum only speaks to him from the breakfast show on Radio Sunshine. He'd rather hang out with his mate Enid, even if she is an old lady. As their friendship grows, Enid reveals the tragic story of her husband who took his own life in 1958, after being accused of 'gross indecency.' She needs Jake's help to find Leonard, who was imprisoned for his part in the affair. Jake attempts to make sense of his relationships, find justice for past wrongs, and discover the courage to create his own space in the world. As Jake sets off on a journey for justice, he doesn't expect to discover so much about himself and the secrets within his own family.



PICKING UP THE PIECES

Chapter 1

Turkish delight. Who eats that stuff anyway? Enid, that's who. Reminds me of the taste of shaving foam, personally. Which goes to show how good I am at shaving. But anyway, it's on special offer, so I can hardly not buy it, can I?

I met her through this school project. For the spring term we were given a choice for Friday afternoons: rugby or visiting old gits in a rehabilitation centre. I gave it my fullest consideration: sitting around drinking cups of tea in a room smelling of pee, or being legitimately beaten to a pulp by a bunch of gorillas? It was a tricky one I can tell you.

Dad wasn't impressed. He still has his "Man of the Match" trophy on our mantelpiece from about a hundred years ago. The way he goes on you'd think it was the Nobel Peace Prize instead of the ugliest knick-knack on the planet.

"Rugby would make a man out of you, Jake," he said, looking down at me doubtfully.

So, passing up this wonderful opportunity to affirm my masculinity, I began to spend my Friday afternoons at 'Oaks and Acorns'. Originally, they wanted some pre-schoolers to come in, but it turned out the

toddlers and the old gits couldn't understand a word of what each other were saying, so they resorted to us lot from Year 11: nerds, weirdos and misfits, mainly. I was pretty much taller than any of the residents, so hardly an acorn. More like a weedy sapling, as Dad said, hilariously.

Anyway, our job was to try and get some conversation out of them. Sounds easy, right? But it wasn't. You'd start talking about how it was lovely weather, and they'd go off on one: *Was it time for Eastenders yet? or when was their daughter coming? or they were busting for the commode.* I was starting to think rugby might not be so bad after all.

Then, on the third week, I met Enid.

Enid was different. She had broken her hip and said she'd had a bionic one put in, and when she got home, she'd be able to swing from the chandeliers again.

On our last week, before we broke up for the holidays, I walked into Enid's room where she sat in a high-backed chair wearing a kind of long, purple puffa-jacket.

"Nice coat." I grinned. "You going somewhere?"

She stroked a shiny nylon sleeve. "Don't you recognise a Versace when you see one? *Oat cooter*, this. You'll need an eye for these things if you're going to be a big cheese in fashion."

"Interiors, Enid, not fashion. Anyway, mind you don't get too frisky next to any naked flames then. One spark on that thing and you'll go up like a rocket."

She made a face. "Cheeky bugger!"

It was then I noticed a small suitcase by the door. One of those retro ones that you have to carry. No glide-along wheels or telescopic towing handle.

It hadn't actually occurred to me she might not be here permanently. "You leaving?" I asked.

She sighed. "I'm the picture of health. Strong as an ox and fit as a butcher's dog. It's time to go home."

I watched her small, crumpled face with her feathery white hair sticking all over the place. Of any creature, she looked more like a

seabird rescued after an oil spill. Then it dawned on me; I was really going to miss her.

Enid peered back up at me with watery eyes. “You’ll come and see me, won’t you?”

Chapter 2

So, I do. Every Saturday and sometimes after school.

“I’m off then,” I say.

Dad barely looks up from *Top Gear*. “Off to see your girlfriend again?” He winks. “Right ladies’ man this one!” His voice is loud. His laugh is forced.

I make sure the door slams behind me.

I kick the dandelion leaves that squeeze through the gaps in the paving stones of the front path. Then I cut round the back to collect the key from under the flowerpot.

I unlock the back door into the kitchen. “Only me, Enid!” I call. The kitchen tap shakes and splutters as I fill the ancient kettle.

“Shut that door, Jake!” she shouts back from the front room. “Were you born in a barn?”

As I walk in, a blast of gas-fire heat smothers me. Enid sits, as always, propped in a chintzy wing-back chair, as near as humanly possible to the hissing fake flame.

I pull off my hoody and take a seat on the sofa, with its tapestry of shepherdesses. You really could open a museum of bad taste in here.

“What you been up to? Swinging from those chandeliers yet?”

Enid doesn’t have a chandelier. She has a striplight fitted to the ceiling. The only one I’ve ever seen outside of the terrapin huts at school, which are supposed to be condemned but we keep using anyway.

“Oh, you know, when I get the time. I’m a very busy woman you know. And it’s been like Paddington Station in here. Physiotherapists here, double-glazing experts there.”

“Double-glazing experts?”

“Yes. I know I can’t afford new windows, but he was such a lovely young man. And what he didn’t know about double-hung polyvinyls isn’t worth knowing.”

I laugh and she joins in, her eyes shining.

“I got you these,” I say, chucking the box of *Turkish Delight* over.

“My favourite!” she says. “George bought these for me when he came home from the navy. Thought I’d died and gone to heaven!”

“Yep. You said, Enid. A few times actually.”

A jumbled mess of knick-knacks cover the Formica shelving unit around the gas fire. China statues of dogs against ornate vases covered in yellow roses, in turn propping up miniature plastic fans with pictures of flamenco dancers. I wonder if it could be called ironic, but decide it’s just gross.

I reach over and pick up a faded photograph in a brassy gilt frame. Two men in uniforms look out at me, arms flung around each other’s shoulders. Look like they’re having a right laugh.

“This George?”

She takes the frame from me and puts on her glasses. “That’s him,” she says tapping the glass, “and that’s Leonard.” She stares at the picture, her claw-like hands clutching it tightly.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to... Do you miss him?” As soon as the words come out, I realise how stupid they sound.

“Every single day,” she says, looking up at me with a smile that makes me feel safe. Or at least, not stupid.

I realise I’ve never even asked if she had kids. “Have you got any other family nearby?” I say.

She sighs. “My sister moved to Australia years ago. And as for children, well now. Let’s say, it wasn’t meant to be.” She leans forward to put the photograph back on the mantelpiece. “George came home from the navy, and then we got married. He was very... fond of me, but his heart really wasn’t in it.”

I hesitate. “What do you mean?”

Enid takes off her glasses and looks at me for a long time before replying.

“You know Jake, things were different in those days. The war was over, we had beaten the Nazis, and everyone thought we were free. But some were freer than others. It was the start of the baby boom. It was the done thing to get married, start a family, and settle down to a life of

domestic bliss.” She stops. Looks away.

“I’m guessing you weren’t big on the domestic bliss,” I say.

She grips hold of her glasses with both hands. “He found it hard... he and Leonard... they’d become close while they were away at sea. And George, well, he thought he should do the right thing. He thought he could put all that behind him and make a life with me. But of course, it’s hard to pretend... for a lifetime.”

The carriage clock on the mantelpiece is suddenly ticking loudly.

“George... and Leonard?” I say quietly. “Did you know?”

She smiles. “I tried to pretend too, for a while. And we may have convinced our families, the neighbours, but we couldn’t convince ourselves. Those were the times we lived in, Jake. George was the kindest, sweetest man I ever knew, but the shame... it... it was...” She trails off.

I tug the neck of my t-shirt. Swallow. “What happened to Leonard?” I ask.

She looks away. “A policeman came to the door one day,” she says, her voice cracking slightly. “He told us... Leonard had been arrested. Gross indecency he called it. He wanted George to come to the station to help with some inquiries. I told that policeman he was grossly indecent himself, that he should mind his own business and go and find some bank robbers. But George put on his hat, kissed me on the cheek, and walked out the door with that policeman. And that was the last time I ever saw him.”

She pulls a bit of crumpled tissue from her cardigan sleeve and dabs her watery eyes. “I went to the police station. I thought they still had him. But they said they had released him hours before. I went home to wait. And wait and wait... until they sent another policeman. And I knew it was bad news because he took his hat off as soon as I opened the door. They had found him. In the river near Temple Bridge. They said he didn’t suffer, but they never knew, they never knew how he suffered for all those years.”

She looks me dead in the eye.

“Always be yourself, Jake.”

A waft of steam is coming through the door.

“Enid, I... The kettle!” I manage to croak before running out to the kitchen.

It’s like a sauna in there. I fumble my way towards the wall and flick the switch on the socket. Enid must be the only person in the world who still doesn’t own an automatic kettle. I wipe my eyes which are streaming from the clouds of steam.

But they won’t stop. They just won’t stop.

Chapter 3

Easier said than done sometimes, being yourself.

Like when I was at nursery. Ryan Paterson made me a daisy-chain ring and asked me to marry him. We looked in the dressing-up box and I put on a long white nightie and he found a cowboy hat. We got the home corner all ready for the wedding, and made some invitations and drew love hearts on them. When I gave Miss Price hers, she said that you needed a bride for a wedding, and wouldn't I like to be the vicar instead. Ryan went straight up to Chelsea Boyle and asked her to marry him instead. I wouldn't give back the ring though. Mum told me I'd find a much better husband one day. And some things never change; Ryan Paterson is still a tart.

I'm sitting on the cold, concrete steps outside the school hall. She finally answers on the third attempt.

"Where are you?" I hiss. I'm trying to keep my voice away from the throng of nervous-looking parents.

"I'm in a meeting darling. Is it important?" Tinny music fades away as I hear her step outdoors. The snick of a cigarette lighter, a clink of glass, murmured voices.

"It's parents' evening. To talk about the sixth form. I told you last week."

She sighs. "I thought you didn't want to go to the sixth form. Anyway, where's your father?"

"You said you'd be here." I sound like a sulky kid.

"Well look, you don't really want me cramping your style, do you? Tell you what, find out what all your options are, and then we'll meet up next weekend and you can tell me all about it. How does that sound?"

Like you don't give a crinkly crap, I think. "Wonderful," I say.

"Anyway, darling, got to go. I'm in talks with my producer. Can't say much yet, but this could be rather exciting. Love you!"

"Yeah, you too," I mumble. I slump down on the steps, defeated.

I'm zipping my phone away in my pocket when a rucksack thumps

down beside me, followed by Kayla. She pushes her hard little face up towards mine and narrows her eyes.

Kayla always tries to read my mind. Like my thoughts are graffitied on my face with marker pen. But I'm not letting her do it. Not this time. I push my glasses up my nose and return her steady gaze with a nonchalant pout. I am inscrutable.

“Chrissie stood you up again?”

My mouth drops open. I have a witch for a best friend. “How...? Never mind. Yes. Sort of. She's just really busy with all the networking stuff she has to do, especially with getting up so early.”

“Hmm. Well, it's lovely that you get to hear her voice every morning at least. She's like a virtual mother. With a cheesy eighties soundtrack.”

Kayla should have ‘unimpressed’ carved on her tombstone. When I started at Clayton in Year 7, I told everyone that my mum was a famous celebrity. All the other kids wanted to be my friend for the first week. When they got bored of me showing-off, and realised I only lived with my dad, who mends old cars in his vest out the back of our house in crappy old Eastcroft, it was Kayla who took me under her prickly wing.



ANDREA FOWKES

Growing up on the move gave Andrea a wonder for the world, a fascination for how it works and a belief that science is essentially practical magic. Even though she's stopped moving house, she continues to travel and be amazed.

Andrea uses the attention to detail she learned as a jewellery designer and her experiences on her travels to add depth and insight to her writing. She currently lives in London with her family.

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About *The Blue Dragon's Bite*

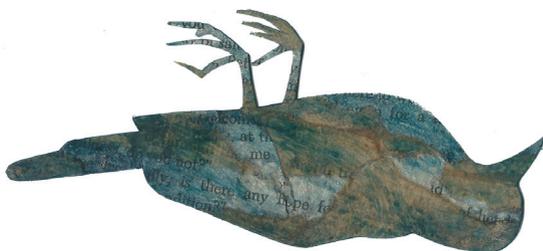
Russia 2085: A deadly virus – HN17 (Blue Dragon Flu) has killed half the world's population. But there is hope. With the virus in decline, humanity is rebuilding.

After eleven years in an isolation camp, Katya's finally reunited with her family. Now she's learning to navigate the high-tech city of New St Petersburg with help from her sister, and possibly falling for an annoying, gorgeous boy.

But Katya's ill – is it HN17?

If she asks for help, she'll be sent back to camp, never to see her family again. But if she doesn't say anything, Katya, her family, the whole city – *everyone* could die. Can Katya save her family, the city and herself?

Exploring themes of toxic perfectionism, AI and our increasing reliance on technology, *The Blue Dragon's Bite* is a vivid look at an imagined future through the eyes of a girl who just wants to belong.



THE BLUE DRAGON'S BITE

Chapter 1

LITTLE BIRD

I shove my shaking hands down into the rich dark soil, trying not to think about the box – my box – but the thought buzzes round me like a persistent fly.

Instead, I take a deep breath, try to quell the excitement bubbling through my veins and press the roots back into the ground.

I ask Gorky for some wire, so I can tie the tomato plant to the stake that his large rusted frame is shadowing. He's slowing down. Sometimes there's a clang from his metal innards. Maybe it's the gearing giving up. It's a shame. I like Gorky the best out of all the loutka at camp, but he must be forty years old – one of the first off the production line, and even machines built by Rus'Tec don't last forever.

A sharp, bright sound catches my attention. I hold my breath, every other thought lost: bird song. Then it starts chattering, like it's talking to a friend. Where is it? I stand straighter, shade my eyes as I scan around the garden, over the rows of vegetables, as far as the orchard and then back towards camp. *Wanting, longing* to catch even the smallest glimpse

of the song's owner – I've never seen a real bird before.

'Sdnem rozhdeniya – Happy birthday, Katya!

I practically jump out of my skin at the sound of the voice, caught as I am, wanting something so illegal, so forbidden.

'Oh!' My hands are on my chest to stop my heart flying out. 'There was a bird singing...' As soon as I say the words, I wish I could take them back.

Ana's pale-blue eyes become large, terrified. 'Did you see it? Is it near us?' She steps closer to me, looking wildly around, as if it'll attack us out of nowhere.

'No,' I say quickly. 'I think it's gone. I was probably mistaken.'

Ana breathes out heavily. 'Okay. Could we go now, in case it comes back?' Then squeaks as she flicks a greenfly off her arm.

Typical Ana, always wants to believe the best in the world, but can't even cope with a perfectly harmless bug or slug, never mind a disease-carrying bird.

I look along the path to the end of the tomatoes. 'I should probably just finish this row. I can't get Gorky to do it; his hands aren't gentle enough, they're likely to crush the stems.' In truth, I want to stay because there's a bit of me drawn by fear and fascination that the bird might still be here, but I can feel Ana's unease radiating like toxic waste. So, I tell Gorky to take the equipment back to the shed and to let the person working the row after me know where I got up to.

'Come on then, you can help me with this,' I say to Ana, pointing to the basket with the asparagus and the spring cabbage I picked earlier.

We each take a handle and start walking back. Ana's watchful: worrying, waiting to be got by some rogue animal or other, but a thrill creeps through me at the thought of seeing a real, live animal. One could be hiding, even now, in the rows of broccoli or radishes.

Still, I'm glad to see her mood immediately brightens as soon as we're back on the paths between the camp buildings.

The basket is heavy, loaded to the brim, but we struggle on towards the canteen without dropping anything. When we get there, Yalena's

out the back having a smoke, and she waves us round to the student entrance even though she's standing right next to the open kitchen door.

As soon as I step into the canteen, I realise it's a mistake. I should have left the basket outside with Yelena, then gone and hidden out in the cabin, because Misha's here with her meathead crew. I sigh. *Gavno*. If I leave now it'll look like I'm running away, so I have to stay.

I click my tongue quietly to get Ana's attention, then nod towards the far side of the room where Misha's sitting, flanked by three flunkies.

Ana rolls her eyes. 'I didn't think they'd be up this early.'

'Better get it over with.' We crab-walk the basket between the tables, over to the exit flap in the serving counter. Hopefully, Cook won't complain that we've left it there.

'Been hiding out in the garden with all your *vegetable* friends, think your parents will want you when they see what a *vegetable* they get back?' Misha shouts.

I clench my fists, my body tensing.

'An' I bet you've got all your hopes on Vanya, haven't you?' sneers Misha, loudly. I don't say anything – bite my tongue. 'Looks like the Verve judges had to scrape the bottom of the barrel for new competitors this year. Bet they decided they had to have a sad loser like Vanya, so sad losers like you could have someone to bet on.'

Of course, she had to bring up the Verve Championship – the only sports program we get to watch from New St Petersburg – always a hot topic around camp, often ending in physical discussions between opposing teams. No guessing who she's betting on: Mercer; he'd fit right in with her meathead crew. I open my mouth to tell her so, when Ana touches my arm and whispers.

'Leave it. You know she's only trying to goad you into a fight and you don't want to go to The Director's office with a cut lip.'

She's right. I've got to shake it off; Misha's just jealous she's not getting her box. She's not the one leaving.

My box – I want it so much that I can't quite believe today's the day: that it's *finally* here and I definitely *do not* want to mess it up.

Ana and I grab clean trays and head back over to the counter to weigh up our options.

‘If we have just a piece of fruit, it’ll definitely be commented on,’ says Ana. ‘Yeah, can’t do porridge either – there’s a very real chance we could end up wearing it.’

Ana nods. ‘I think we’d be safe with two slices of bread.’

It seems like the best plan, so we take it and head over to the toaster.

There’s a ruckus in the corner: Misha has found someone else to *play* with. But before anything can get going, Mike, her camp mentor, walks in. He knows the score, so she’s suddenly all friendly.

Bread toasted, Ana and I head to a table. Someone’s put a poster on the wall above the first one – *The Seven Signs of Blue Dragon Flu, HN17* – Know the Symptoms. I skim my eyes over it, intentionally not focusing on the messages below.

Bozhe ty moy, like we need another reminder of *why* we’re here,’ I say, quickly moving a few more tables down. ‘I know, 4.5 billion people dead is a pretty good indication that Blue Dragon flu’s a full-on psychopath. But do we really need it in our faces *all* the time?’

‘I know.’ Ana agrees. ‘You’d think they’d let us forget it for maybe one second.’

‘If only there was a test for those of us who only, *might*, be carrying the dormant virus, we wouldn’t be here at all.’

She puts her tray down and holds her arms wide. ‘And miss out on all this fun.’

‘I think I’d have found a way to live with it,’ I say.

As I sit down, something jabs into my leg – my pen. I take out the offending article with the well-chewed end and doodle a dead rabbit on my arm: crosses for eyes, tongue hanging out. Maria, my mentor, says the pen has to last as she’s not sure when or if she’ll get any more. But I’d rather use it up than it dried out in my pocket.

My thoughts slide back to my box, pulled by the gravity of an all-consuming yearning for a home I don’t even remember. I don’t have any solid memories from before I was five, before camp: only hazy

fragments. But then no one does – the nanites they give you see to that.

‘You’re so jittery.’ Ana’s frowning over her toast at me. ‘You’ve got this, you know.’

I realise my leg has been shaking, and stop it. ‘I wonder what it was like when kids were allowed to remember, before boxes?’ I say, as my brain can only think about boxes right now, but it’s too much to think about mine. So, I push the conversation on to one of our well-worn paths, to the stories that race like wildfire, igniting this tinder-dry camp life. Stories of children running away, trying to find their families, because we’re not so different to them, so I need to retrace all the information as a talisman against their fate.

‘If there had been boxes when “The Three” were here, would it have made a difference?’ asks Ana.

‘I know. They still might have gone. It’s just... they made it through forests, across ravines, rivers and mountains, past deadly and diseased animals right to the city gates. They were so close to home... and they *still* shot them dead.’ I shake my head in disbelief, because no matter how many times I hear it, it still shocks me.

She shrugs and counters in the same way she always does. ‘They had to contain the disease – couldn’t have Pos-Con kids roaming all over the country contaminating everyone else.’ She hesitates for a second. ‘I think they’d be alive now if they’d had boxes.’

Ana is so much more pragmatic than I am. A ripple of sadness washes through me for the children I’ve never known. If only they’d waited. But I’m also reassured – I’m not them. That won’t be me. I have a box. Strange though, that it’s so much more effort to say “Possibly Contaminated”. Maybe shortening the words shortens the thought, and no one wants to think of us.

‘But they risked everything,’ I say, ‘and didn’t get a happy ending.’

Ana swallows her mouthful of toast. ‘Maria is filling your head with nonsense.’

And I’m reminded why I’ve been avoiding this topic recently, because with Ana, it inevitably leads here. ‘They’re just stories.’

Ana's finger taps the table as if pinning my point to it. 'Yes, stories that stop you seeing the world how it really is.'

'Just because they have animals in them doesn't make them useless.'

Although, I think, it's not as if the Raven prince is about to fly me away from here.

I'm starting to suspect Maria has been telling me these tales because she's afraid they'll be lost if she doesn't. That Blue Dragon Flu will take them too.

Ana opens her mouth as if she's going to carry on trying to persuade me to her point of view, but instead she gets a little teary. 'What am I going to do when you've gone?' Her eyes flick over to Misha. 'I can't talk to these knuckle-draggers.'

I touch her arm. 'You're only a month behind me,' I say, relieved at the change of direction. 'And I'll be there, ready for you when you arrive.'

Glavnaya – Home. The word sparkles in my head. I'm going home.

It's exciting, though my stomach's a little queasy and my heart's all fluttery, so there's some anxiety too. But if anyone can get me through today, it's Ana. Ana was my first friend here. My life raft.

'You're escaping.' A grin slides over her face. 'I can't wait to find out where you live, what your last name is, everything.' Then she's cry-laughing. 'I bet it's Thunderpants. Katya Thunderpants Ivanova.'

I laugh. 'Ha ha, in that case, yours will probably be Snoggbottom. Ana Farty-Snoggbottom Balakina.' I may be sixteen now, but my humour level is still nine. So is Ana's – fortunately.

Ana wipes her eyes then notices the time. 'You may be off lessons today, birthday girl, but I've got to go. Are you coming back to the cabin?'

I check my hands – see the dirt still encrusted into crescent lines under my fingernails. 'Yeah, I should probably get cleaned up and I'm not sure the pyjamas and wellies will be welcomed in The Director's office either.'

We head out, taking our trays and tipping the rubbish into bins by

the door. Somehow, I managed to eat a piece of toast, and I do feel better for it. But, just as I think that, a slick shimmer runs through me.

'*Dam.*' Ana pushes the door open. 'Misha's heading our way again.' She hurries through.

I push past her. 'Race you to the cabin.' There's no point in dawdling if Misha's on the prowl.

We run round the side of the canteen building, over the thread-worn green of the quad that was once grass, and round the red-brick science block. It's not the fastest way, but we should lose Misha if she's following us.

Then it's past the wood-panelled life studies building and the covered structure that's the sports hall. This whole place was a small village before it was re-commissioned as Camp Nedezhda. Which is why it's such a strange collection of odd buildings. I can't imagine what it would have been like as a village.

'I won,' I say, collapsing onto the doorstep.

Ana arches an eyebrow.

'Okay.' I wave her away, noticing my stomach feels a little off. 'Go get cleaned up already. You are quite stinky.'

'Yes, you're right. Adults first, then the children,' Ana says, all smug grin, and goes into the cabin.

'I'm actually a month older than you, so if anyone's the adult...'
I call after her as she heads into our bathroom, while I go and sit on my bed to wait my turn, trying to think of another suitable insult.

The queasiness in my stomach becomes an ache. I'm dizzy. My hands are shaking. I can't breathe quickly or deeply enough. But I've only run a short way? Then the dark fear raises its head, whispering, *if you're ill, you don't get your box. You'll never get to leave. You'll never find your family.*

Saliva floods my mouth and my stomach twists.

No. No, it can't be...



ELLIE HALLS

Before undertaking the MA in Writing For Young People, Ellie gained her BA in Publishing with Creative Writing at Bath Spa University. Following that, she settled into life as a Marketing Assistant, balancing writing fiction with constructing articles and webpages on legal matters. Despite loving her job, Ellie always looked back at her dream of becoming an author, her head still filled with characters desperate for their stories to be written. In 2019 she took the plunge and let go of her Marketing career to return to Bath Spa for the MA, where her passion for writing flourished as she took the next step towards sharing her stories.

On the course, Ellie found herself drawn to writing for Young Adult and Middle Grade – her imagination embellishing her stories with ghosts, myths, magic, and parallel worlds. When she decided to pursue Young Adult fiction, Ellie knew she wanted to write a story for her younger sister. She decided to avoid love triangles and teen romance, and instead write a story that draws on the power of a bond between two sisters and the hard-learned ability to love your flaws, which is what *The Meridian* became.

Since completing the MA, Ellie has returned to her home county of Norfolk, where she enjoys escaping into the beautiful countryside and any sci-fi or fantasy fiction she can get her hands on. Currently, she is working part time as an Administrative Assistant for a Smart Homes company, which allows her to continue doing the thing she loves most: writing.

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About *The Meridian*

The Meridian focuses on seventeen-year-old Esther who, along with her younger sister Lily, is struggling to survive looking after their alcoholic mum. One day, Esther has enough of being the responsible older sister and spends the family's precious allowance on a trip to the Meridian: a world built for the imagination, with compacted time that promises weeks of imaginary escapism crammed into just a couple of days in the real world.

But there's a cost.

Everyone in the Meridian has had their memories of the real world stolen. Esther is alone in remembering her life outside the Meridian - where Lily is struggling to hold their life together in her absence - and trapped in a points controlled society.

Unable to escape, Esther tries desperately to make her life in the Meridian work, hoping that gaining points will show her a way out. However, this beautiful world becomes more dangerous for Esther every day, and an almost fatal accident decimates Esther's points total.

Esther has nowhere to turn except a secret organisation called the Awakened, who have uncovered the memory stealing plot and are now secretly working to destroy the Meridian. Seeing this as her only way home to Lily, Esther and her friends play the Meridian system, uncovering a tyrannous ruler with many faces, who has been trapping thousands of players over decades on the promise of a better future they never deliver.

Esther is desperate for a way to break out and be reunited with Lily, but will she betray the friendships she's found in the Meridian for her own freedom?



THE MERIDIAN

First Moments

97,821

“Holy shit,” I whisper. It’s about the third time I’ve said it since waking up.

I run my hand through my hair, arching to watch it ripple down to my waist. It’s exactly how I’d pictured it. I search the skin over my ribs for the ugly little birthmark I used to have. Gone. I run my fingertips over where it should have been. I stare into the mirror and my new blue eyes stare back, so much brighter, and a deeper blue than they used to be. I can’t wait to tell Lily about this when I get back.

Lily.

I knew that memory wipe thing was a joke. They wouldn’t really take away our memories. I shake my head and go back to staring into the mirror.

A door closes somewhere outside my room. What was that? My wrist buzzes and I look down to see what appears to be a circle tattoo on my wrist and a string of numbers alongside it.

97,821

Is that my points total? I thought it would be higher than that. Oh

well, it's not like it matters anyway, I'm not planning to be here for long.

As I'm looking at the numbers, they change.

Notifications Pending

I tap on the little 'i' symbol and see a new line of text.

Three potential connections in close vicinity.

Potential connections? During my consultation they did say all underage characters are assigned guardians, like in the real world. It seems ridiculous to give me a family since I'm not even going to be here that long, but I guess they have to do it for legal reasons or something. The people out there must be my parents. *My parents*. I wonder what it will be like to have proper parents, not one that's out of it ninety percent of the time.

My insides are like a jelly mush of excitement and fear. I poke my head out of the room to see if there's anyone in the hallway. The coast is clear. Popping my head back into my room, I flit about getting my wash stuff ready out of the bag, freshly labelled with my name. All new, fancy products, fancier than anything I've ever owned in the real world.

I dart across the hall into the bathroom and get the water running. It's weird to think about showering and eating and even breathing in here since it isn't real. It's all in my head.

Soaking under the hot water, I can't help but wish I'd brought Lily. She would love this place. I feel a twinge of guilt. I shouldn't have left her to deal with Mum alone. But I couldn't take another minute. My chest aches the way it always does when I remember how things used to be before Mum stopped being Mum and became a stranger. Before her alter ego took over.

The ache in my chest is now in my throat and I gasp. I don't want this feeling – I came here to forget feeling like this. Part of me wishes the memory wipe would have worked. So I could forget, just for a little while.

I put my face under the water to wash the feelings away. I need to let go, blow off some steam. Then I can go back to deal with the reality of an alcoholic mum.

I switch off the shower and wrap myself in one of my new fluffy towels, itching to explore more of this world.

When I'm back in my room, I can't help looking at my reflection again. How does anyone get over this? How does anyone stop looking in the mirror long enough to get anything done?

My gaze catches on the wardrobe behind me and I open it to see clothes I've only ever drooled over on social media, hanging there in exactly my size. I take out a dress and slip it on. It fits perfectly. Never in my life has this ever happened. My breath catches and my eyes are burning. This is ridiculous; crying over clothes. I rub my face.

"Pull yourself together," I mutter.

The dress I've chosen is pale blue with a smattering of white dots across the fabric. I twist and turn in the mirror, watching the light skirt float around my legs. I've never been this happy with my reflection before.

I finally turn away from the mirror and go to my bedroom door, stepping out into the hallway. There's a clink of cutlery and I follow the sound to a large kitchen flooded with light from floor to ceiling windows. Sitting in front of the impressive panoramic of the Meridian Overcity are two people at the breakfast bar, deep in discussion, bowls of granola in front of them.

I clear my throat and two sets of eyes look up.

"You must be Esther!" The woman jumps out of her seat and reaches for me. I flinch at the rush of movement, taking a step back, but her manicured hand clamps on my wrist.

"Hello," I say.

"I'm Star." She sweeps her long blonde hair, a couple of shades lighter than my own, over her shoulder. I can't help but look at her. She's gorgeous. "I'll be like your mum."

My breath whooshes out of me. This is my mum? I think about my real-world mum, the harsh lines of age on her face and the way she grips the sleeves of her dress when Lily and I make her angry. Star is so effortlessly cool with her combat boots and ear piercings, her flawless

makeup and manicure. Any lines on her face are from laughing.

“You’re so young.” The words slip out.

“Flatterer!” Star gives me a playful tap on the arm.

My wrist buzzes with a notification but, before I can look at it, Star takes my hand, dragging me further into the kitchen.

“Your sister, Reine, is in her room.”

I have a sister too?

“And this is my husband, Atlas.”

Atlas is startlingly handsome. Of course he is; he has to be to match Star. Dark auburn hair tied into the roughest of top knots, a beard that can’t hide his strong jawline and sparkling green eyes.

“What do you think, Atlas? She’s beautiful.”

Star lets go of me and moves toward him. Their arms go around each other like two pieces of a puzzle and I get my first glimpse of them as a couple. It’s almost heart-stopping. That’s when I see the carefully positioned phone and the camera trained on the whole scene. I don’t know how to process that they’re recording this. Like we’re a reality show.

“Reine, sweetheart, Esther has just woken up. Come say hello.”

Reine. My sister.

Lily is your sister, a voice whispers in my mind.

I ignore the voice and look around.

Reine is like something off social media, like those real-world influencers that are crazy beautiful. She has soft red hair perfectly fluffed around her face. A face dusted with perfect freckles. A face that shines with a smile. A perfect smile.

“Hi, Esther.” Her smile is warm but her brown eyes seem distant.

“Isn’t Esther stunning, Reine?”

Reine comes into the kitchen to stand between Star and Atlas. A breathtaking family. It’s weird, how much we all look like we could be related, like a real family.

“We have to get a photo of this. We need a family photo.” Star snatches another phone off the kitchen counter: the latest model.

She drags me into the shot then steps back to organise us. “Now, Esther, back straight. Reine, flawless as always. You have a stray hair, Atlas, twist it – yes, that’s wonderful. Esther, don’t look nervous. Smile. Less teeth.”

I hold the smile Star has constructed on my face. She steps into the shot behind Reine and starts clicking. We take photos at the breakfast bar, in the living room and on the balcony. My cheeks ache from smiling for so long and my wrist is tingling with notification alerts. This is insane. I’m only going to be here for a day – well, a day in the real world. Now I come to think of it, I can’t remember how long that is in here.

“That will have to do.” Star sighs.

I think I need to clear things up with them, that I’m not going to be hanging out here much. It’s not like I came for the family experience. I’m here to have fun.

“Um. Star, Atlas. Thank you for helping me get settled in and everything. I really appreciate it since, you know, I’m not going to be here that long.”

Reine steps away and drifts, almost ethereally, to the window where she looks out across the city.

“What do you mean?” Star asks.

“Well, I’ll need to get back home at some point, can’t stay here forever.”

“Oh, we know you’ll want to find a place of your own when you turn eighteen, but this is your home until then.”

“No, I mean I won’t be staying here in the Meridian. I have to get back to my sister, Lily.”

“Your file said you didn’t have a sister.”

“My file?”

“Yes, your file from the adoption agency. You’re an only child.”

“From the what now?” Adoption agency? What the hell are they talking about? “I mean my sister in the real world.”

“The real world? Esther, what are you talking about? I know it’s confusing, trying to fit in with a new family. I’m sure you’re just tired. This is real, you’re not dreaming, we really have chosen to adopt you.”

They think I think this is too good to be true. That I think I've dreamt up this magical scenario. Don't they know this place isn't real?

The memory wipe will help you adjust to leaving your life behind in the real world and allow you to embrace your new life in the Meridian.

The memory wipe is real, it just didn't work on me. Of course they don't remember the real world. I shouldn't even remember. How do people get out of this world when they think it's the real world? Shit. Shit. Shit. What if no one knows how to get back to the real world and we're all stuck here forever? This was supposed to be a day pass, I was supposed to be home in time for dinner.

"Are you set up on socials yet, Esther?" Star asks.

"No, not yet," I mumble. I don't care about socials. How the hell am I supposed to get out of here? I try to control my breathing, which is becoming more frantic by the second.

"That's okay. Atlas and I are both Influencers so we can give you plenty of tips to get started." That explains the need to record our first meeting. Kind of. "I do it full time and Atlas balances it alongside his office job. Go get your phone and we can sync your account up and show you ours so you know what level you're aiming for."

Numbly, I get up and leave the room. I need a minute alone to process anyway. You must be able to leave this place somehow, you must. The brochures said that people left, and left with a lot of money. Points here equal real-life money. Maybe that's what I need to get out: more points. That has to be the answer. I can't think about the alternative: that I'm stuck in this place forever. Atlas and Star don't know how to help me leave right now, but maybe they can help me gain enough points to get out of here. If I play along, maybe a way out will appear. It has to. I have to get back.

I grab my phone off the bedside table and duck back out into the hallway, almost crashing into Reine.

"Careful!" She pulls her steaming mug out of harm's way.

"Sorry! Sorry, I wasn't concentrating." I try smiling at her through my panic, maybe she can help me too.

“You don’t say.” Her musical voice is cold.

“This is a great place, how long have you been here with Star and Atlas? Though I suppose you must call them Mum and Dad by now?”

“No, I call them Star and Atlas. You will too.” She gives an exasperated sigh. “Look, I don’t know what you were expecting but this isn’t Happy Families. You and I are here to complete Star and Atlas’s family image, to boost their socials rating. Nothing else.”

“But I—”

“I’m not here to make friends; I’m not here to look after you. I have my own problems and I’m sure you’ll have the same ones now too. I’ll bet 1000 points in the next couple of days they’ll give you the speech they gave me when I moved in. It’s simple: you’ve got until you’re eighteen to get your shit together and then you’re on your own.”

With a swish of hair, Reine walks away, disappearing into a room three doors from mine. That was *weird*. I’m sure she’s exaggerating. Star and Atlas don’t seem like they’re only in this for the extra points. I return to the kitchen to find them absorbed in their phones.

“One-hundred-and-fifty-six so far on mine,” Star’s saying.

“Only one-hundred-and-thirty-nine on mine.”

“It’s already been twenty minutes; it should be higher than that by now.”

“It’ll get there.”

“But we put it up at prime time.”

Atlas glances up and nudges Star. She holds out her hand and I pass over my phone. I watch her fiddle with my socials settings. The site itself looks like a mashup of the social media sites from the real world, cherry-picking the good bits. I let her position me for profile photos. I hold that false angel smile on my face to hide the choking panic still bubbling inside me.

Photos done, I check my notifications as my wrist vibrates for what feels like the millionth time.

Congratulations on configuring your socials account.

Potential connection in close vicinity: Star Banks. Tap to view profile.

I tap on Star's name but nothing on my wrist changes. I look up to ask Star how it works and freeze. All around her are tiles of information and photographs, like her socials account is being projected onto a screen behind her. I blink a couple of times as though to clear my eyes, but nothing changes except the likes on her latest photo slowly tick up.

This is crazy. I knew this world was meant to be immersive but I didn't think it would be anything like this. I don't know if I'm ready for this. It's obvious getting back won't be as simple as I thought. But I have to get it together; have to get enough points to get back to Lily. I already miss her. When dealing with all that crap in the real world, at least I'd had Lily to turn to, to confide in.

Now I cannot crack. Now I have no one.

Alone.



KATIE HURSE

Trying Not to Disappear is written by Katie Hurse, a 23-year-old mental health advocate and golden retriever enthusiast from Bristol. Katie has a first-class degree in English Literature and Creative Writing from The University of Birmingham and an MA in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University.

Trying Not to Disappear is Katie's passion project. It focuses on Sunday, a teenage girl who lives with Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder, the eating disorder Katie has had since childhood. After a lifetime of searching for herself within the pages of books, Katie finally found the courage to write her story in the hope it will help other young people suffering with ARFID feel seen and heard.

Katie is extremely passionate about mental health activism, feminism, YA literature, book blogging and, more recently, body positivity after suffering two near-death experiences in hospital and being left with scars and a stoma bag. Katie is already planning a novel about her experience as a young woman with a stoma and another, inspired by the most important women in her life (her mother and big sister) about cancer & health anxiety. Having lived with mental illness and physical disability, Katie is proud to have produced her debut #OwnVoices novel and intends to write many, many more.

When Katie isn't writing, she can usually be found rereading Harry Potter for the millionth time, drinking cups of tea and watching Gogglebox.

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About *Trying Not To Disappear*

Between mounting tensions with her mother, best friends who won't stop kissing each other, and the world's longest bucket list, Sunday is about to have the most eventful summer of her life.

And then, of course, there's Hugo...

Afraid of what the future might look like if she doesn't seek help, Sunday Bowman begins therapy for her Avoidant/Restrictive Food Intake Disorder. When her favourite author announces a memoir-writing contest, Sunday decides to enter and write about AFRID.

Simultaneously, Sunday has started speaking to Hugo online. After encouragement from her friends, she agrees to go on a date with him. Sunday is horrified by how well the date goes and decides to break the romance off. She doesn't believe Hugo could love her if he knew the truth. Instead, he becomes a part of her friendship group and they work together to complete a Bucket List that holds a very special place in Hugo's heart...

But Sunday struggles to keep things platonic, and as one half of her is falling in love, the rest is falling apart...

Can Sunday save her relationships, her story, and most importantly herself, before the sun sets on summer?



TRYING NOT TO DISAPPEAR

Chapter One

*

Hugo_Davies: Hey, Sunday. You look like you'd ruin my life

Sunnyday: Really? You're going with that line?

Hugo_Davies: It must've worked some kind of magic. You just followed me back

Sunnyday: I saw the golden retriever and it was like an automatic reflex to try and worm my way into that dog's life somehow. Like, whatever it takes, no matter how many frogs I have to smooch to get to my fluffy golden prince

Hugo_Davies: Jeez. Always the dog

Hugo_Davies: I have a good mind to remove that picture

Hugo_Davies: (Anyway, who said anything about smooching?)

Sunnyday: It might not be an original line, but I promise it's genuine. I've wanted one of those dogs since I fed one my jam sandwich in the park when I was little

Sunnyday: (Nobody, hence why I felt the need to bring it up pronto)

Hugo_Davies: Poor dog. Who eats jam in a sandwich?!

Sunnyday: Four-year-old me – got a problem with that?

Hugo_Davies: Just don't try that shit with David, he's got a very sophisticated palette

Sunnyday: David? You bought that gorgeous dog, looked into his gloriously sad eyes and named him David?

Hugo_Davies: Firstly, my parents bought him. Secondly, they also named him. After David Tennant. We're a family of geeks!

Sunnyday: I can live with geeky. I was going to be disappointed if you turned out to be a jock or something

Hugo_Davies: I cannot express how far from being a jock I am

Sunnyday: Then I cannot express my joy

*

'Sunday! Sweetheart! Let's go!'

I look up at the sound of my mother's voice, all fake bubbles and perfect appearances. She's standing in front of me, eyebrows raised. I look over her shoulder to see Dr "Call me Faye" Montgomery smiling in the office doorway. I was so distracted by my phone that I hadn't noticed. I trudge into the office after my mother and sit opposite Dr Montgomery, a large glass desk in between us. I feel entirely out of place here; it's only my second session and I don't know where to put my hands or how much eye contact to make.

Faye leans back in her chair comfortably, lacing her fingers together and resting them on her small baby bump. 'How have things been, Sunday?'

Things, Faye, I wish I could say, have been shitty.

'Not so bad, I lie. 'Up and down.'

'And you, Mum?' Faye asks brightly, beaming at my mother.

'Difficult,' she replies, without hesitation. 'Lots of birthdays at this time of year.'

'And lots of birthday cake presumably?' Faye's looking at me again now.

I nod.

'Sometimes it can be good, to be pushed in at the deep end. Some people find it helps more than taking small steps. But everybody's different.'

'Birthday cake isn't the deep end,' I tell her. 'It's the Bermuda triangle.'

'What is it about birthday cake specifically, Sunday?' Faye asks.

It's claggy. I can't swallow it properly. It gets stuck. Buttercream is too sweet. Jam's okay. On cake, anyway, or pastry or pudding, but not with anything savoury. People were having cream, too; I just really hate the taste of cream.

'The texture,' I say, feeling my throat constrict even just holding the word in my mouth.

Faye nods, though she's smiling like she can tell there's more.

'The second birthday was chocolate cake. Much, much worse. I hate chocolate. I can feel it my throat for days afterwards.' I don't (can't) look at my mum as I say it, but I know she's looking at me.

'When was the last time you ate chocolate, Sunday?' Faye asks.

'It's been months since she cut it out,' my mum says. 'I still have her Easter eggs, untouched, in the kitchen cupboard. She wasn't eating it at Christmas, even.'

'If you think about a piece of chocolate now, Sunday, how do you feel?' Faye asks carefully, setting her pen down entirely.

I stare at her for a few seconds. If she's going to bring out a bar of Dairy Milk, I'm flat-out running home.

She raises her hands in the air, like waving a white flag. 'It's just a question.'

'It makes me feel full, up to here,' I whisper, touching my throat. My eyes are shut tight. 'Like I'm one of those Lindt bunnies, you know?' I can almost feel the gold foil under my fingers. 'Like my bones are made of chocolate and my blood is melted chocolate and when I breathe, it's in puffs of cocoa powder. Like my throat is already coated in the stuff.' I look at Faye. 'Like I'd rather do anything than eat a piece of chocolate.'

*

By the time my hour is up, Faye has filled nearly five pages of her notebook.

She checks her watch a final time before putting the lid on her pen. 'I think we'll leave it there for today,' she says gently. 'Is that okay?' She asks so kindly, like I have a choice in the matter.

I nod my head.

'I wonder...' she begins, 'whether next week, you'd like to have the session one-to-one?'

I glance at my mother, but she has no visible reaction.

'Sometimes, even subconsciously, we find it difficult to be entirely honest in front of our loved ones. That's what makes therapy such a safe space, and the therapeutic relationship such a unique one.'

Faye has this way of looking at me, like she knows exactly what I'm thinking.

I almost smile.

'Just something to think about. Either way, it's your choice, Sunday.' Then she stands and we follow her to the door. 'Take care, won't you?'

I nod again.

'Thank you, Doctor Montgomery,' my mother says stiffly.

We walk to the car in silence; neither comfortable nor stony. The leather seats of the Mercedes are instantly sticky under my thighs and the metal of the seatbelt is almost too hot to touch. I stare out the window, not having to look across at my mother to know she's slipping on her designer sunglasses, fiddling with the mirrors, finding Classic FM and squeezing a dollop of The White Company's Seychelles scented hand sanitizer into her palms. Finally, the engine starts.

'That wasn't so bad, was it?' she asks.

I shrug. 'Faye's nice.'

She bristles. 'Doctor Montgomery.'

'She said I should call her Faye.'

I know without looking that her eyebrows are raised, but she doesn't

disagree. Mum drives fast but steady, content to let silence settle again. Her eyes flicker regularly to the gold watch on her right wrist. She's anxious to get back to the office. It's pretty much unheard of for her to take time off work. My mum is a highly sought-after therapist herself, which makes her inability to understand, or even stomach (excuse the pun), my eating disorder almost funny.

I know I frustrate her.

I know it bothers her that she, so sane she can help other people with their insanity, has a daughter who can't eat a bowl of soup without having a panic attack.

*

Hugo_Davies: So, tell me about yourself?

Sunnyday: You'll have to be a little more specific

Hugo_Davies: Hopes & dreams, hobbies, pet peeves, dirty little secrets... anything

Sunnyday: I don't know. I'm entirely average. Nothing exceptional to report.

Hugo_Davies: I find that almost impossible to believe

Sunnyday: Spending every waking minute planning 1 of 100 novels I'm going to write someday. Always looking for material (FYI, your opening line is totally getting used).

Hugo_Davies: I'll expect royalties

Hugo_Davies: That's really cool, though. What kind of novels?

Sunnyday: Anything & everything. If I could make a living writing Harry Potter fanfiction, I literally would. Apparently, people want you to have "original ideas" these days, though.

Hugo_Davies: Fuck them, I'm down with plagiarism

Sunnyday: swooning

Hugo_Davies: So you're a big Harry Potter fan?

Sunnyday: *ADORING fan

Hugo_Davies: I'm a Gryffindor

Sunnyday: Talk dirty to me

*

My mother drops me off at home on her way back into the office. She owns this swanky townhouse in the city centre that's all kitted out with several large offices and therapy rooms, used by her and her three employees. When I was younger, I would spend my school holidays wandering around the ground floor, hovering by Pete the receptionist, drinking sparkling water from the fridge in the shiny little kitchen and "reading" the glossy health magazines scattered over the glass coffee table in the waiting room. That stuff got old fast and soon enough, Mum starting leaving me at home to entertain myself.

My father left when I was eleven, originally under the illusion that he got a promotion in Dubai; I became less and less convinced that was the only reason for my parents' divorce the older I got, but I've never had the energy to ask.

I'm glad to have some time to myself. It's nearly 11:45; the dreaded PM approaches. From the second I finish my breakfast in the morning, I worry about lunch. After lunch, I worry about dinner. Dinner is the hardest. Breakfast actually comes in second, because my stomach always feels emptiest first thing in the morning and I ache for that hollowness, anxious and reluctant to fill it.

Lunch is the least problematic.

I cut a bagel in half, trying to ignore the pull of the knife against the doughy centre, and shove it into the toaster. Raw bread is okay, but the shiny exterior and soft insides of bagels are only good when crisped up. I cut six grapes in half and count ten crisps out of a large open packet sitting in the pantry. I add ice cube after ice cube to a glass of water and gulp at it. Water I can handle. Water is good. Ice is literally hard water, so it joins the party with no problems. (Ice lollies? Not so much).

I know it doesn't make a lot of sense.

I'm just trying not to disappear.

My four best friends are coming over sometime this evening and we

don't have any plans at all, which is my favourite sort of arrangement. My house is conventionally "the best": it's big, my mother is always out and there's a large supply of alcohol and, ironically, food. So we often waste days and nights here.

Until they arrive, though, I have a few hours to spend on my own reading. I'll read anything. Literally. Non-fiction books, poetry books, books for children, books about spirituality and tarot cards and modern-day witchcraft, books for teenagers, books about animals, books for adults. Give me a book and I'll read it. I've always been that way. I have many theories about why (I'm sure my mother does too, but I've never asked). The most realistic one, though, seems to be that reading is escapism. Pure and simple. For a chapter, or five, or an entire novel, whether that takes me ten minutes, or an hour, or a day, I am no longer Sunday. I am no longer stressed. I don't have to worry about mealtimes or the whirring of my digestive system or the state of my food diary. I just read. And it's easy. And it's safe. And I belong there, wherever there might be that day.

And really, that's reason enough.

*

Sunnyday: What are your plans for this evening?

Hugo_Davies: Sunday, Sunday. Are you asking me on a date already?

Sunnyday: You wish

Hugo_Davies: Yeah, I do

Sunnyday: Apologies, I have a prior commitment

Hugo_Davies: Interestingly, so do I

Sunnyday: What kind of commitment?

Hugo_Davies: Wild rager

Sunnyday: I have everything crossed in the hopes that you're joking

Hugo_Davies: I don't know if it will be wild exactly, but a party, yeah

Sunnyday: You were doing so well

Hugo_Davies: Were? What's with the past tense?

Sunnyday: Not much of a party person

Hugo_Davies: How come? Teetotal?

Sunnyday: No

Hugo_Davies: I won't judge you for not doing if you don't judge me for...
doing

Sunnyday: Deal

Sunnyday: For now

Hugo_Davies: ??

Sunnyday: Gonna have to get you out of that bad habit in the future if this
is ever going to work, Hugo

Hugo_Davies: Look at you, talking about our future!!! Shall I just meet you
at the altar?

Sunnyday: Might be for the best

*

I'm sitting in the garden when I see it.

'Oh shit!' I squeal.

My friends all look at me like I'm madder than usual.

I brandish my phone, open to Instagram, in their faces and Eve
reaches for it.

'What is this?' she asks. 'Stalking Emilia Terrance again, Sunday?
You really need to get over this girl crush of yours—'

'Read the caption!' I interrupt.

"'Who do you think you are? Memoir Writing Contest,'" Eve reads
aloud. "'I want to know my readers; I want to know your stories. That's
why I'm opening entries today for a memoir-writing contest. The
competition will run until the end of summer, with a £1000 prize and
a personal writing workshop with me. I can't wait to read these stories.
Tell me who you are. See you very soon! ET x'" Eve looks up at me.
'Well fuck,' she says.

'There couldn't be anything more perfect for you!' Liv says.

'The others won't stand a chance,' Fred chimes in, winking at me.

I bury my hands in the grass and pull up daisies. ‘A writing workshop with her? Can you imagine?’

Emilia Terrance is the author of my favourite book in the world. She was only nineteen when it was published, in the middle of her Undergraduate degree. It’s this bizarre little book called *Sanity*, a collection of essays and poems and short stories. It’s about everything, and nothing. Most of all, though, it’s an exploration of mental illness, a depiction of Emilia’s brain: messy and hurting and hopeful.

I’ve read the thing at least a dozen times. I’ve been back to my favourite parts a hundred times or more. I have several copies (one for my bag, one for my bubble baths, one by the side of the bed, one at Eve’s house) and I have pictures of my favourite pages on my phone. I’ve bought *Sanity* for literally every person I love. Some people have read it (Olivia, in all her earnestness, even sent me notes on her favourite parts), some people have pretended to (Fred, when I asked him what his favourite part was, cited “the, uh, anxiety bit”) and some have barely humoured me at all (Eve just gave me a bemused look and petted my head, while my mother seemed highly suspicious of it).

To actually meet the person who wrote it? It would just be ridiculous. I have written so many things – things that meant nothing, things that meant something, things that meant everything – and imagining Emilia Terrance reading my words makes my chest seize up.



RYAN LYNCH

Ryan was born in Suffolk and has always dreamt of being a writer. After completing a BA in English Literature in 2016, and falling more in love with literature, he decided it was time to take the plunge and write his own novel and so he enrolled on Bath Spa University's MA in Writing for Young People. This is where his LGBTQ+ thriller *Straight-Faced* was born.

Ryan is an avid fan of contemporary crime fiction, a crisp connoisseur, and a self-proclaimed champion of every board game, ever. In his spare time, you'll often find him participating in pub quizzes, sharing his vast knowledge of *X-Factor* winners, or sending off multiple applications for TV quiz shows. After 'having a published book', being on *The Chase* is second on his bucket list.

His other hobbies include recommending *Netflix* crime documentaries to everybody that'll listen and defending the idea that scrolling through socials is *absolutely* classed as a hobby. He is living in Suffolk with his Dalmatian, Dottie, and is now much more imaginative when naming fictional characters than he was when he named his dog.

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About *Straight-Faced*

Sixteen-year-old Freddie Moore is living the perfect life, or so he thought. He's popular, part of the school football team and has been dating his girlfriend for the entirety of secondary school.

But when he can't stop noticing the boy who takes photos at his football matches, he starts to question his identity. He can't be gay. Can he?

Knowing he can't tell anybody the truth, and surrounded by homophobic football culture, Freddie gets caught up in a hate crime with his teammates, targeting the boy he's falling for. Not wanting his secret to be uncovered he lets the attack unfold. But when it goes terribly wrong there's a much bigger secret to keep...

And this one's a matter of life and death.



STRAIGHT-FACED

One

Shit-stained toilets, puddles of sick and dry humping on the sofa. And that's usually just the first hour of a party. Of course, it's my dad that's always out of town, which means my house is the prime target for the sick, shit and sex tonight.

"Fredster!" A voice calls from the hallway.

There's only one person who calls me *'Fredster'*.

"Hey, Brad," I shout back, trying not to sound annoyed. "You're early. I'm in the kitchen."

He walks through the door, two crates of Strongbow Dark Fruit under his arms and a Tesco carrier bag hanging from his wrist. He has to duck on his way through. He's the human embodiment of a traffic light, tall but with broad shoulders. He's even got the red hair to match.

"No such thing as early." He smirks. "What time are the rest of the boys getting here?" The two crates are dumped onto the kitchen counter and he's already ripping at the box to get a can out.

"Nice of you to let yourself in," I say, only half joking. "They'll probably be here in an hour or so along with everyone else because we said eight on the Facebook invite, remember?"

“Yeah, I know mate. But I thought I’d come give you a hand.” His eyes glance over the spread I’ve laid out on the counter. “And by the looks of it, you need all the help you can get. What do you think tonight is? A tenth birthday party?”

I look over at the counter. Maybe bowls of crisps and blue plastic cups with the plates to match *does* give off birthday party vibes, but I didn’t even want to have the stupid party.

“Remind me again, how did I get the short straw with hosting? I swear every lad on the team has hosted at least once, apart from you, and you’ve got the biggest house.”

“You know my dad would never let me,” he says, handing me a can and tapping the side of it with his own. “He’d go mad if he knew I was drinking. If I have to listen to anymore of his speeches about how Harry Kane didn’t get to play for England by poisoning his liver, I’ll go insane.”

“That’s a shit excuse, mate. Half of the team’s dads are like that. You just wait till they go away or something.”

“Not all of our dads are MPs though, Freddie. Away on ‘work trips’ every other week. You’re lucky. The only work trip my dad goes on is to the supermarket when the office printer’s out of toner.”

I smirk at the thought of Brad’s dad at Tesco, wearing his knock off designer suit, swearing at the self-checkout machine because there isn’t an unexpected item in the bagging area.

Behind me, Brad pulls open every drawer in the kitchen. I’m about to ask what he’s looking for when a smile breaks across his face as he pulls out a kitchen knife. My heart falls so far into my stomach it feels like I’m about to shit it out. Brad and knives shouldn’t mix. Then in one quick motion he stabs the bottom of his can, puts his mouth to the hole and then opens the ring-pull to shotgun the cider.

“Fuck yeah,” he shouts forcing out a burp and slamming the empty can against his head. He’s practically foaming at the mouth and if his pupils dilute any more his eyes will be two black holes.

Oh. So, it’s not just alcohol Brad’s buzzing on tonight.

“Right, let’s ditch this crap and actually get this party set up, shall we?” Brad grabs a roll of binbags from the counter, rips a bag off and shakes it out, letting the air rush in. He slaps his tree trunk arm down onto the counter and slides the stack of cups, crisps, and plates into the bag in one swoop. Twat.

“You’re gonna want two of these in here somewhere, one for cans and one for bottles.” He chucks me the bin bags. “It makes the clean-up job in the morning a hell of a lot easier.” He grins like he’s the one who invented recycling and tips his Tesco bag onto the empty counter. Plastic shot glasses, red cups and enough ping pong balls to host the Olympics fly across the table.

“Where’s the best place to set up beer pong?” he asks, eyes already scouting every area of the kitchen.

“Dining room table,” I say, tearing off a bin bag. “There’s wooden floor in there so spillage won’t be a problem.” Before I’ve even finished speaking my phone’s text tone whistles. Then it whistles again, and then again, each interrupting the last.

“Fucking hell, you got a load of birds stashed in here or something?” Brad laughs and actually opens a cupboard like he’s checking for wildlife.

“Hilarious,” I say, impatiently tapping in my passcode when my fingerprint isn’t recognised.

“Let me guess... Winter again?” He laughs. “You’re so bloody whipped mate.”

“Hold up... where’s your girlfriend?” I put a hand to my forehead and look behind him, squinting my eyes for effect.

He’s right though, it is Winter. I scan over the texts. She wants me to call her and if I ignore her it’ll only make tonight worse.

“Who needs a girlfriend?” Brad’s still talking. “Why limit yourself to one girl when you can have the pick of the bunch.” He pulls a box of condoms from the back pocket of his skinny jeans and throws them onto the counter. “And there’s gonna be a good bunch to pick from tonight, including Jessica.” He winks. “Need to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what? More rejection?” I laugh as I hit the call button

to Winter. Brad talks a good game but I'm fairly sure he's still a virgin. He's never even had a girlfriend.

The phone hardly rings before she picks up.

"Hey. Did you not see any of my messages?"

"Sorry babe. Brad got here early so we've been getting everything ready."

"Brad? Ugh, great," she sighs. "I better warn Jessica he'll be there, in full predator mode no doubt."

I walk out into the hallway and lower my voice. "He's the captain, Winter. You know I can't invite the rest of the boys and not him. No matter how much of a nob he can be."

"There's being a nob, and then there's sexual assault." She pauses before saying anything else. She's probably testing to see if I'll defend Brad, but I know better. "Anyway, Jessica's asked if she could bring a friend. I think he's called Aspen. Year below us. You might know him, Jess said he takes photos of the matches sometimes, for the school paper."

My fingers tighten around my phone. The blood in my face drains away slowly, like water from a bathtub.

"Freddie, hello. You still there?"

"He can't come," I say. The words leave my mouth instinctively.

"Um. And why not?" She sounds confused, offended.

It hits me all at once. The memory of his smell, his touch, his lips.

"You've invited basically the whole school, but now suddenly someone's not good enough for your guestlist?" she says.

"No, it's not that. It's..." I'm trying to come up with a believable excuse, but anything I say will sound suspicious.

"It's what? You're being a dick, Freddie."

"Brad doesn't like him."

She laughs. "Let me guess...because Aspen's gay? He's such a homophobe. I couldn't care less who Brad does or doesn't like. Is it his party? No."

Music starts blaring into the room. Brad's obviously worked out how

to connect his phone to the home speaker system and Winter's voice is drowned out.

"I just think there's already a lot of people from our year coming," I'm shouting down the phone. I don't know if Winter will be able to hear me above the music. "What if Aspen tells some of the Year Tens and then the house is overrun?"

"Can't hear... tell... he can come... there soon." I only hear parts of what Winter's saying over the music before she cuts the call, but I heard enough to know he's coming. I stand in the hallway, an anchor of dread holding me in place. He's going to be here.

In the same room as my girlfriend.

∞

There's a whole roast chicken on the kitchen counter.

"What the hell is this?" I shout above the shitty drum and bass music as I walk in. I've only been gone a half-hour, party-proofing the house, but the lads have already wrecked the kitchen. Every surface is covered with discarded Strongbow and Stella cans. Nice to see Brad's brilliant bin bag plan is working.

"What?" Brad shouts back, cupping his ear.

"The chicken." I point. "What the hell is it doing there?"

"Chill man." Brad moves beside me and throws his arm around my shoulder. "Tom said there wasn't any more room in the fridge for his cans, so we swapped it out."

"Prioritise the beers," I say, slapping Brad on the back "I like it." There's no point making a fuss, they'll only rip into me for it. I turn the music down and grab a can out of the fridge.

"Looking fresh tonight, Fredster." Brad whistles. He shakes the box of very full condoms, a grin plastered across his face. "You sure you won't be needing one of these tonight?"

"Nah mate, you better keep them all for yourself. Big night planned, remember?" I wink at him, trying to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

“Very true. The ladies will be in heaven. They’ve got the pick of the whole football team.” He throws his arm up into the air and we all smash cans, streams of cider sloshing out everywhere.

“Though, sorry to break it to you boys, I think there will be slim pickings after I’m done with them.” He grabs his crotch and thrusts his hips forward.

I force myself to laugh along with everyone else, wondering if he realises most of us are laughing at him.

“So, who’s up for a *good* night, if you know what I mean?” Brad digs around in his pocket and pulls out a small bag with little white pills in. He shakes it in the air like it’s a bag of dog treats and me and the rest of the boys are his pets. “Don’t say I never treat you. Who’s in? Fredster?”

I stare down at my phone, pretending to type, and head for the kitchen door.

“Nah mate, bit too early for me. Can’t host a party and be out of it in the first couple hours. Anyway, Winter will be here soon.”

“Boys, can you hear that?” Brad cups his hand around his ear. “Sounds like... a whip. Wuh-pshh.”

“Wuh-pshh, Wuh-pshh,” some of the boys echo.

I laugh. I could take the pill and pretend to swallow it to get them off my back, but I don’t want to have to keep up the act of being high all night. Especially not with Aspen around.

“See you boys in a bit,” I call, as I walk out into the hallway.

The house has already started to fill up. There’s a mound of coats ditched underneath the coat stand and a few strays scattered across the carpet. I pick a couple up and throw them over onto the pile. The front door’s been propped open with the side table from the living room. I don’t even want to think about where the vase from the top has gone.

As I walk over to close the door, I see Aspen coming up the path. Winter’s by his side and Jessica’s following behind. My heart uses my chest as a punching bag.

Winter’s eyes meet mine. I search for something, anything, to tell me if she knows. If he’s told her. But when she gets to the door, she

smiles. Her lazy smile that hardly changes her face, but it's enough to tell me she doesn't know... yet.

"Hey, you," I say, leaning in to kiss her. "You look beautiful."

She looks down at her outfit. She's wearing her usual - black jacket and black jeans, with black Doc Martens to match.

"Um? I literally wear this everywhere, Freddie." She eyes me suspiciously. "Are you drunk already?"

"No! I've had one beer. Can't a man compliment his girlfriend without it being suspicious." I flash her my best butter-wouldn't-melt smile. I'm trying so hard not to look in his direction, but it's all I want to do. I'm feeling so guilty for acting like this with Winter in front of him. I turn my shoulder slightly, so he's not in my eyeline.

"Right, move out my way Romeo and Juliet." Jessica pushes past me, her hair flicking me in the face. "I've got a bottle of wine and a straw, and if the room ain't spinning before I have to endure anything that comes out of Brad Hall's mouth, I'm leaving."

"Nice to see you too, Jessica." I smile. "He's in the kitchen, so you might wanna stay clear for now."

"Ugh, thanks. Freddie, Aspen. Aspen, Freddie. There, introductions over." She runs across the hallway, like she's competing in a hundred-metre race, and disappears into the living room.

Now I have to look at Aspen.

"Hey."

"Hey," he replies, moving his swept fringe out of his eyes and smiling at me like this is the first time we've met. I don't know if he's angry at me or putting on the same act as me. He's expecting me to go through with my promise tonight.

I hate seeing him standing so close to Winter. They're about the same height, but they couldn't be any more different from each other. He's wearing a Denim jacket with white fur around the collar, almost a perfect match to the colour of his hair, and his eyes are such a dark ocean blue that the light is reflecting in them.

"Jessica said Aspen takes photos of your games," Winter says,

throwing her jacket onto the mound of coats. “So how come you don’t know each other?”

I search my brain for something to say. My throat’s clogged with a thousand words, none of them right.

“We hardly see each other,” Aspen speaks before me. “I try and be as invisible as possible. You don’t want someone with a camera distracting you just as you’re about to score a goal, do you?”

“Suppose not.” Winter laughs.

“And it’s only the home games anyway, so I’m not there often.”

He doesn’t have to do this. Not after how I’ve treated him. He could tell her everything right now.

“Oi, Freddie. You gonna be MIA all night?” I hear Brad slur behind me.

Winter rolls her eyes and turns her nose up like she can smell something rotten.

“Come on Aspen, let’s go find where Jessica’s hiding and then get cruuuunk.” She links her arm through his, like they’ve been friends forever, and pulls him towards the living room.

My stomach plummets, watching the two of them walk away together.

Two parts of my life I’ve tried so hard to keep separate.



KATE MALLINDER

While completing Bath Spa's MA in Writing for Young People part-time, Kate has had two books published by Firefly Press: feel-good teen novels *Summer of No Regrets* (May 2019) and *Asking for a Friend* (June 2020). She is represented by Hannah Sheppard from DHH Literary Agency. Pre-pandemic, she enjoyed visiting primary and secondary schools, taking part in festivals, leading workshops and chairing panels. She lives near Ashby-de-la-Zouch with her family and is involved with running local youth activities for teenagers. She grew up in Solihull, went to college in Leeds and lived for a while near Halifax. Kate's perfect day would be full of books, snacks and cups of tea: all within breathing distance of the sea, which she dreams one day to live near.

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About *One Heart, Two Liars*

Callie finds a note while beach-cleaning...

*Your heart was rotten, so I killed you.
Only your heart hasn't stopped beating;
it beats in someone else now.
But not for long.*

It's in a bottle that looks vaguely familiar. She's curious, as her sister's just had a heart transplant, but from Ryan, a boy who died in a car accident, not someone who was murdered. So the note can't be talking about her, can it?

But when she discovers the bottle has been taken from the art room, and finds out Ryan wasn't as loved as she'd thought, she realises the killer is in her school and her sister is in danger. She must uncover who killed Ryan before they harm her sister.



ONE HEART, TWO LIARS

One

THE TRANSPLANT

Saturday 6 January 2018

The rhythm of the train stutters and my mind flashes to Rachel's life support. I adjust my ear pods and turn up the music.

The bloke opposite frowns in my direction. I raise my eyebrows and glare him down. Some people are so judgey. The problem with people like him is they never get past first appearances. See a nose ring or a haircut that doesn't match the ten styles they approve of and they assume all sorts of crap.

I wait until he looks down at his phone before sliding my hands across the table between us, as if I'm stretching out my shoulder muscles. He doesn't look up. Slowly, I find his ticket in his pile of paperwork and ease it out. My eyes don't leave his face. I slide it across the table towards me. If he looks now, there's no hiding what I'm doing. With a flick of my finger, the ticket skids across the table and onto my lap.

He carries on watching his phone.

I breathe out, tuck the ticket into my bag and smile to myself. No need to jump the barrier now. My heart rate is back to normal within seconds. Simple.

Out of the window, darkness flies past. Only the occasional lights from a street or lonely house pierce it. The march was good today. People fighting for their families. The rumours are the law's about to change. Not long to wait. Not long for Rach to wait. I ignore the voice in my head that says, if she lasts that long.

My heart aches for her, stuck in hospital. Mum keeps saying how she'd love to see me more. That I *brighten her day*. But I can't go any more than I do. It's all the sitting. There's nothing to talk about. *How's your day been? Same old, same old. Pain, these walls and endless people coming to look at me. You? Oh you know. School, friends, fun. Stuff that you might never get to experience again.* Tell me, exactly how is that helpful? Mum is wrong. I don't help Rach by being there. I help by campaigning for better laws. I can't just sit and wait and wait to see if she is going to live or die.

The man opposite is looking again, a frown creasing his forehead. I ignore him. He won't have noticed yet. I'm glad I took his ticket. I'd have taken it even if I didn't need it, just to serve him right. The train pulls into the brightly lit station and I grab my bag, swing it onto my back and push my way through, ignoring the tuts and *well reallys*.

The houses in our street are all the same sixties semis with big windows and big roofs. I walk past the corner shop, past the house with a drive full of cars in bits, past the house still covered in Christmas lights. When I get to our house it's dark. Only the porch light is on. I unlock the front door and flick on the lights. Despite being sixteen, I have the unshakeable belief the light chases away ghosts, bogeymen and any murderers or thieves that might be lurking. There's a note from Mum.

Callie. There's a donor. Rach's being prepped for surgery. Call me when you get in.

I drop my bag and slump onto the bottom stair.

It's really happening.

Why didn't I go and see Rach today? I should have gone. I should be there now. Because what if this is it?

I screw up the note and throw it across the hall. What would I do anyway? Nothing. There's nothing I can do.

I walk to the kitchen, flicking on lights as I go. I know. I'll have a normal evening. Find the upside. I can have an entire pizza to myself and eat it in bed. Result. I rummage in the freezer and find the last ham and pineapple one. Rach's favourite. I pause. Should I save it for her?

I choose pepperoni instead, not wanting a moral dilemma over a pizza, and whack it in the oven. My phone buzzes.

I pick it up. 'Hello.'

'Are you home yet?' Mum's face looks pinched. She always looks worse on camera.

'Yes, just got in.'

'Rach is all set but she wants to say hi, before she... goes.' Mum's face contorts in her attempt to hold back tears. 'Anyway. Here she is.'

Rach flashes up on the screen. She's pale, and the tubes across her face and up her nose glow with the reflected neon of the hospital lights.

'Hey, how's it going?' I ask.

'Ah, you know. Never better.'

Is this seriously going to be our last conversation? What do you even bloody say? You've been a great sister? Can I have your room if you don't make it? Or worse, do I not even acknowledge it?

'So, they've found you a heart?'

There's a hiss of oxygen as she breathes.

'Yeah. Hope it's a good one.'

'I'm sure it is.'

She smiles. I feel sick. What do I know?

'Anyway, good luck.'

'Yeah, thanks.'

I nod, all the words I want to say stuck in my throat.

'My pizza's nearly ready.'

'Oh, what sort? I'd kill for a ham and pineapple.'

'Pepperoni. Saved the ham and pineapple for you.'

Suddenly I'm back looking at Mum. A doctor must have come in or something. 'We've got to go. I'll call later.'

And she's gone.

It feels like my brain's stalled. I go and lie on the sofa. What if it goes wrong, the surgeon's tired, or there's been a mix up and it's not the right heart? Or what if they have a power cut, or her body rejects it, or she dies in surgery, or they give her the wrong blood?

I feel sick.

I'm interrupted by the smoke alarm. Crap. The pizza. I run into the kitchen which is now foggy with smoke. The pizza's charred black so I scrape it off the shelf and dump it in the bin, then push open a window. I can't eat anyway.

Upstairs, Rach's door is shut. Mum says she can't deal with catching glimpses every time she walks past. Everything in here is Rach. Her school books are open, her nail stuff out on her table and her old teddy still sat on the shelf. I pull one of her jumpers from a drawer and sit on her bed, holding the jumper to my face. I inhale.

She has to be alright.

~

I feel at peace. I wonder, do you? I've no idea what happens when you die, and when it comes to you, I don't really care. But that is something people wish for the dead: peace. It's a weird thing to wish for. Why not happiness? Or superpowers? Or eye-watering wealth? Why peace? Though now I'm feeling peaceful myself, I can highly recommend it. Finally, I can sleep at night. No more jolting awake at three in the morning having dreamt you'd woken out of your coma. I'm calm. I'm relaxed. I'm at peace.

No one knows what happened between you and me. No one knows you left me no choice. So this feeling that's fluttering in my chest? It's relief. Not grief. Not sadness. Not a rage at the futility. It's relief that you'll never talk. Never tell anyone. Never get to say what happened.

I am sad about your choices though. It could have all been so different. I gave you every opportunity and you chose the wrong way every time. You left me no choice. That said, it's not a decision everyone could make. I think that's why I'm so proud of it. I made the tough call. I get that people may see it differently. I'm not deluded, but still. I want to shout it out into the universe. Tell people what I did.

Two

THE FLOWERS

Sunday 7 January

I wake to my phone buzzing. Grey morning light is seeping into Rach's room.

'Hello?'

'She's made it. Rach... made it.' Mum's voice catches, then breaks.

'That's brilliant!'

She looks even worse than last night. Her hair is sticking up at the front and her eye makeup is smudged.

'The surgeon's really pleased with her. She's in the ICU, but that's standard. I've left Dad with her. Are you... in Rach's room?'

'Yeah.'

'Oh, sweetie.'

'No big deal. Just crashed in here, that's all.'

Mum smiles. I miss that.

'Why don't you get a coffee, Mum? You look... tired.'

'Good idea. I'll ring in a bit, okay?'

I nod and hang up.

Rach didn't die. I use her jumper to wipe my face dry as I look at my phone. The group chats are buzzing.

James: I don't believe it. I thought he was going to make it.

Every message is covered in crying emojis. What's happened? I scroll on, my heart tightening.

Ryan Wood has died. He's been in a coma ever since he crashed his car into a tree after a party a month ago.

Mia: Do you think they turned off the machine?

Zadie: Oh don't. That's awful.

Josh: Don't tell me you didn't think it though.

Adelle: They're laying flowers at the school.

Mia: Who is?

Adelle: Everyone.

I vaguely knew Ryan. He was tall, and had one of those smiles. He was sporty too – rumour was he hoped to get to the Olympics. But just because he had so much to live for doesn't mean he wouldn't die if he hit a tree at fifty miles-per-hour. I feel numb. I'd assumed he'd get better. Wake up from his coma, have a tough but ultimately inspiring fight to get his health back, then basically carry on as normal.

Faith messages.

Faith: You heard about Ryan?

Me: Yeah. It sucks.

Faith: You coming to school?

I don't really fancy it. Could do without the extra adrenalin to be honest.

Me: Nah.

Faith: Why not?

Rach isn't the reason. But she can be my excuse.

Me: Rach got her transplant.

I'll let her assume that means I'm busy.

Faith: Brilliant! How's she doing?

Me: Okay. She's in intensive care, but that's good. Weirdly.

Faith: So are you actually at the hospital?

Damn her knowing me so well.

Me: Not exactly.

Faith: Where are you exactly then?

Me: Home.

Faith: Great! Get up, have a shower. I'll be round in an hour. And you'd better let me in.

I don't reply, but I do as I'm told. I'd only ignored her once before and she'd hammered on my front door until the neighbour rang to ask if I was going to bother answering it.

An hour later Faith arrives. 'I brought breakfast,' she says when I open the door. 'Bagels, peanut butter, milkshake.'

‘Legend.’

She walks straight past me to the kitchen. ‘So, tell me everything. When did she have the operation?’

‘Last night. Mum and Dad are still there.’

She holds me by the shoulders and looks into my eyes, searching my face. ‘And how are you doing? Really?’

‘Fine. More than fine.’ I wriggle out of her grip. ‘Do you want your bagel toasted?’

‘Is there any other way?’

She knows I’m changing the subject.

‘And I want my peanut butter an inch thick.’

I grin at her. It’s good to have her here.

We sit at the kitchen table. Faith takes a big bite of bagel and the peanut butter squidges out between her teeth. ‘Mmmm, heaven.’

I bite into mine. She’s not wrong.

‘Do they know where they got the heart from?’ she says through a mouthful.

I shrug. ‘They don’t say. It’s confidential.’

‘Cos everyone’s saying it’s Ryan’s.’

I nearly bring up my bagel.

‘It makes sense,’ she says. ‘Same hospital. He dies the same night as your sister gets her transplant. It would be weirder if it wasn’t true.’

‘Who’s saying that?’

‘Like, everyone. Seriously. Haven’t you heard?’

I shake my head. Could it be true? At least it’d be a healthy one. What am I thinking? How unbelievably cold. He’s dead and here I am analysing the quality of his heart.

But Rach is alive, and with a much better chance of staying that way because of it. That drowns out everything.

‘Well, heads up. People are bound to bug you about it.’ Faith takes another enormous bite. ‘I have totally excelled myself here. These bagels are perfection.’

I smile at her. Faith’s always been here for me. ‘Thanks for coming

over.'

She smiles back. 'No worries. Milkshake?' She offers me a bottle of strawberry milkshake. 'And when we've finished, we're going to school like everyone else. It's the right thing to do.'

I lick some peanut butter off my thumb.

'I know you're worried about Rach. That's like, totally normal. But you can't do anything about it. So let's go out, see everyone at school, then do something fun. Okay?'

Maybe she's right.

An hour later, wrapped up in coats and scarves, we walk to school. The gates are shut because it's a Sunday, but it's as busy as a school day with crowds of kids swarming the pavements and spilling into the road. There's a group of lads, standing arms folded, swapping fist bumps when someone joins them. Along the railings, there's a growing bank of flowers. Dozens of bunches, some large, some small, some single flowers tied to the bars and around them are huddled groups, some hugging, some crying.

Faith thrusts a thin bunch of carnations into my hand. 'You'll regret it if you don't.'

'Is it true?' says a girl from the year below, and I realise with a jolt she's speaking to me.

'What's true?'

'That your sister has Ryan's heart?'

'I don't know.'

Someone else butts in. 'Same hospital, same night. It's obvious.'

'My aunt's a nurse and she heard that the heart came from someone in the hospital.'

'I wonder if Rachel will get some of Ryan's personality. I watched a documentary on transplants that said that can happen. Wouldn't it be weird if she starts liking sport?'

I'm surrounded, everyone saying what they know. And I know nothing.

Faith pulls me away. 'Let's leave them to it,' she whispers.

It might be because of the late night, or Rach, or that I'm properly sad about Ryan, but whatever it is, I lean on Faith and sob.

~

Wow. Word really travels fast. I reckon the whole school's turned out to publicly mourn you. The flowers have completely covered the pavement. All for you. But then again, you always were popular. Not everyone could pull off this tsunami of emotion. FYI, I'm not one of the criers. Or huggers. Though it may surprise you to know, I have left you some flowers. Just for you. Nice bright sunflowers. You'll know what I mean.

But to pull you up on a technicality, you're not all dead, are you? There's my peace shattered. Not that you can exactly say anything. I'm not worried about that. It just irks me there's still a bit of you out there. And your heart, of all things. I hate to be pernickety, but I really can't feel at peace until all of you is gone.

Which is so inconvenient.



DOMINIC G. K. ROYSTON

Born in Portsmouth, Dominic has grown up surrounded and influenced by history. Never seen without a book in his hand, reading was a passion and writing a hobby; until he took a chance and pursued his ambition to become an Author. Graduating from Bath Spa with a BA in Creative Writing with English Literature, he was given the opportunity to join the MA in Writing for Young People, writing and completing his first Daniel Laigher Adventure, *The Secrets of El Dorado*. Having spent the last four years in beautiful Bath, it was time for the next adventure and Dominic now lives in Exeter. When he isn't scribbling in a notebook or reading, he can be found exploring Dartmoor, or often near or in the sea.

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About The Secrets of El Dorado: A Daniel Laigher Adventure

Daniel's unexciting life is shattered when his father's journal is returned and reveals a hidden family secret and the truth behind Sir Walter Raleigh's final expedition for the legendary City of Gold.

Teaming up with his estranged brother Jacob, the Laigher brothers must overcome their personal feelings towards one another, as they soon become entangled in a race for Raleigh's long-lost treasure as they hunt for the fabled 'El Dorado'.



THE SECRETS OF EL DORADO

Chapter 1

FROM TROUBLED BEGINNINGS

To anyone else, this might seem like the end. Standing on the edge of the roof, it wasn't the first time Daniel had been there. He knew he could make the jump. Just a simple leap across the small gap that separated the two buildings, one he had made plenty of times before, all of them without falling to the concrete below.

So why was he hesitating?

A faint breeze tickled his skin, blowing his sandy blonde hair out of his eyes. From his quiet spot at the top of St. Christopher's art block, lovingly referred to by its students as 'The Prison', Daniel had an unrestricted view of the green hills and rolling fields of the Devonshire countryside.

He closed his eyes. Balancing there on the edge, he felt each little breath of air against his body, an intoxicating rush of adrenaline coursing up through him as survival instincts started kicking in. Ignoring their demands to step back and open his eyes, he felt a wave of emotion rush over him.

In his mind, he was back in the dark corridor, standing in front of the wooden door. It was locked, it was always locked, but he could hear Dad on the other side. All he had to do was knock.

The door didn't stay, it never did, fading away in his mind.

Opening his eyes, Daniel sighed as he stepped back from the edge. The familiar thrill was over as quickly as it had begun.

Despite the overcast weather with its dark looming clouds, there was still a good view; but that wasn't why he was there.

It was the perfect place for bunking class. There was no chance of anyone stumbling across his hiding spot; the overhanging chapel roof from the adjoining building obscured Daniel from any prying eyes that might drift upwards, student and teacher alike.

Not that many of the teachers still bothered to try and find him. Daniel used to only skip a few classes here and there, but now he found he was spending most of his time during the school day up on the roof. The teachers in the odd class he did show up for couldn't understand why he was wasting his last few years of school, always saying that he was cleverer than that.

They were right, of course; Daniel knew he was smarter than most of the students in his classes. To anyone reading his thoughts, that might sound arrogant, but it was true. Maybe the other pupils would find it easy too, if they paid as much attention to what was happening on the board, rather than worrying about the number of followers they had.

Whenever Daniel did attend class, he quickly got bored and always walked away having learnt nothing new. If that was going to happen, he figured that he might as well be on the roof. He was smart enough to know what he wanted, and that wasn't wasting his time in a classroom.

This particular decision hadn't made him any friends amongst the faculty, most of whom had gushed over him two years ago. Nowadays they viewed him as a lost cause and a waste of talent. It was better than pity, at least.

Despite his best efforts, Daniel had reluctantly started to accept his life wouldn't break free of the ordinary cycle he was in. Between school

and the peaceful countryside, Daniel was sick of it all.

Fiddling with the silver pendant around his neck, Daniel remembered how Dad had said that, ‘Youth is the opportunity to do something and to be somebody.’ Those words echoed around his head. Dad had spent every chance he had chasing what he believed in. What had Daniel done in the meantime?

There was a familiar beep from his watch.

12:00

Time to go, he thought and turned to pick up his battered rucksack just as the school bell echoed across the campus, signalling the start of lunch. Slinging the bag over his shoulder, Daniel took another couple of steps backwards from the ledge. He took a deep breath before running towards the gap. Planting his foot as he reached the edge of the roof, Daniel jumped.

Feeling weightless for only a second, the air whistled past his ears, his forward momentum carrying him across the gap as he landed on the opposite roof.

The top of Scholes building was littered with a mix of industrial units and silver exhaust vents that obscured Daniel’s route. He crisscrossed the roof as he moved towards a fire escape on the building’s far side. Making his way down to the first floor, Daniel slid his hand into the thin gap of the open door and with his other hand pulled out the small wooden peg he had left there that kept the bolt from locking the fire door in place.

Opening it slightly while pocketing the peg, Daniel slipped inside as students started filing out of class into the white-walled hallway lined with lockers and notice boards. He used to be wary about being spotted whenever coming or going from the roof. It wouldn’t take much for someone to mention it and put an enthusiastic teacher on his trail. However, most people didn’t take notice of him anymore, meaning he didn’t need to remain quite so elusive.

Daniel moved swiftly along the corridor, heading towards the boys’ bathroom. Finding the white-tiled room empty, he stepped into the

cubicle at the far end of the row after checking the other stalls were also unoccupied. He only had to wait a few moments before hearing the door to the bathroom bang open again as someone moved into the cubicle next to him. Daniel could see a pair of black school shoes between the cubicle wall and the floor, scuffed from a lack of care.

“Have you got the money?” Daniel asked.

There was a rustle, and a moment later a large hand reached down, dropping a folded twenty-pound note on the floor between them.

“You taking the piss? The deal was for thirty,” Daniel said leaving it on the floor. When there was no response, he added, “Thirty, or you do the essay yourself.”

There was a pause as he let that sink in. After a few seconds, he heard another rustle as a crinkled ten was placed on top of the twenty.

Scooping up the cash and stuffing it into his pocket, Daniel reached into his bag and pulled out a pad of lined paper. He tore out the first few pages, which were covered in his scrawled handwriting and placed them on the floor.

“Pleasure doing business,” Daniel said as the other boy picked up the pages. “And remember, not a word to anyone.”

“This had better be worth it,” an annoyed voice responded, his rubber soles squeaking against the floor as he got up, letting the cubicle door slam behind him as he left.

Daniel tossed the pad back into his bag. That was the third time this month someone had tried to short-change him for an essay. Maybe he should let them write their own essays for a while; it wasn't as if he needed the money. He had enough saved; it was just another way to kill the boredom.

Deciding he had spent enough time sitting around in a school toilet, Daniel made his way out of the bathroom. Outside, the hallway was now bustling with other students coming and going from different classes or standing clumped in groups by the lockers that lined the walls.

St Christopher's was a private school, so everyone was dressed in the same smart dark green blazer, tie and white shirt. Daniel hated

wearing the uniform. He always felt uncomfortable, like he was wearing someone else's clothes, unable to breathe.

Daniel had been to state and private schools, and while both had uniform codes, it was only the private schools that felt the need to dress everyone up in jackets and ties. If the aim was to make a bunch of eleven to sixteen-year-olds look smart, then the whole exercise became pretty pointless, as the boys shortened their ties and the girls rolled their skirts up. The teachers were left constantly telling everyone to tuck their shirts in.

Daniel began cutting his way through the crowded corridor, knocking shoulders and brushing against others as he went. Any sense of personal space was lost in the tightly packed hallway as they all jostled back and forth. Daniel didn't make a habit of eavesdropping on the other students' conversations, but it was impossible not to overhear snippets as he passed them by.

"Can I copy the English homework off you? There was no Wi-Fi on the boat."

"It's like the third world in there – no almond milk in the dining hall!"

"She gave me detention; I was only late because my driver thought I was at my other house."

"Come on, it's not a holiday if it's in England."

Most of the students at St Christopher's would call themselves privileged. Daniel would call them spoilt. The way they complained about things, you would think it was the end of the world.

Daniel stuck out badly amongst the rest of the students with their fancy haircuts, phones and bags. It just added to the growing pile of reasons why he wanted to leave and would never look back.

"Don't run in the corridors, Year Seven. How many times do I have to tell you?" a deep, booming voice called out.

Daniel recognised the Head of Sport's bellowing tone, always deafening anyone around him as he made himself known. He was also Daniel's Head of Year, and someone he always desperately wanted to

avoid. No doubt he would want to have a chat if he saw Daniel.

Darting around the next corner, Daniel quickened his pace down the hallway, speeding towards the main staircase. Once at the bottom, he crossed the atrium and ducked through a pair of double doors that led him out of Scholes and into the Yard.

The large, enclosed space in the middle of the school buildings acted as a playground, with a few goal posts and netball hoops dotted around, as well as a few lines of picnic benches just outside the dining hall.

That's when he heard a voice cry out.

"Fight!"

Looking over, a small group of spectators had formed in the middle of the Yard around three individuals. Two of them were Hatton and Glover, a pair of burly teens that were the school's notorious bullies. If you enjoyed your health it was best to avoid them. Daniel might have done that had he not recognised the smaller boy with short, dark brown hair they were pushing around.

As Daniel rushed towards the ring of onlookers, he arrived just in time to see one of the Hatton knock the smaller boy to the ground. Daniel pushed past the spectators and in one simple and utterly devastating move, punched Hatton square in the jaw.

Hatton staggered backwards, clutching at his jaw and yelping in pain. Glover, caught off guard and stunned by Daniel's entrance, was too slow to react as Daniel swung his leg into Glover's stomach, sending him tumbling to the ground.

The crowd yelled and jeered in excitement as Daniel moved away from the two bullies. He bent down to help up the smaller boy, whose hazel eyes narrowed when he saw him.

"What are you doing?" Jacob demanded, pushing his brother's arm away. "I didn't need your help."

"Sure, you did," Daniel said as Jacob got shakily to his feet. "Now, get out of here."

Jacob looked like he was going to argue, but Hatton came charging towards them, yelling like a wild animal.

Daniel shoved Jacob out of the way as Hatton started swinging at Daniel's body with a fury of blows that knocked the wind right out of his lungs.

"Go!" Daniel told his brother as he managed to land a wild kick on Hatton.

Jacob seemed to get the message and started pushing his way out of the circle of spectators, which had grown considerably since Daniel had entered.

Daniel felt someone grab him from behind, trying to pin his arms back. He instinctively lashed out with the back of his head, smashing into something hard. There was a howl of pain. Daniel turned as he broke free from the grip, his head throbbing. Glover clutched his nose as it started to bleed uncontrollably, just as Hatton's fist collided with the side of Daniel's mouth.

He couldn't see straight; his head was spinning. Taking a couple of steps back, Daniel watched as a blurry Hatton started running towards him. Just as Hatton was about to crash into him, Daniel dropped his shoulder and lifted Hatton's leg. In one smooth motion, he flipped Hatton over him where the bully landed behind him with a thud.

Daniel swayed a little and could taste blood as he took deep, haggard breaths.

The crowd of onlookers had stopped making noise and started to scatter as the sound of whistles and teachers yelling could be heard getting nearer.

He would've been safer on the roof.

His aunt was going to kill him.



TONY T TAYLOR

Tony grew up on the outskirts of London. Unlike everyone else in his family, Tony went to University, where he felt reassuringly out of place.

During three very full years, Tony rekindled his childhood passion for reading fiction, which transformed his sense of the world and its possibilities. After graduating, Tony was at a loss for what to do, until he got a job as a live-in care attendant, looking after a young disabled playwright with not long to live. Tony tried to write himself, mainly highly experimental stuff he didn't dare show anyone.

One temporary job led to another, and without really meaning to, Tony found himself running a business. When his son was born, Tony questioned the direction of his life. He retrained as a movement coach and devoted himself to writing, both fiction and non-fiction. Sadly, only the non-fiction paid. To supplement his income, Tony got work teaching at an acting conservatory in California. In his free time, he continued writing stories. A chance meeting with Jay Asher in a coffee-shop introduced him to the world of young adult literature. Tony's reading habits quickly changed, as he discovered David Almond and other fabulous children's authors. Tony started writing fiction for teens.

Last year, Tony's son left home, so he figured it was time to sign up for the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa. As a result, Tony now lives with his partner in Corsham. He's currently trying to get the balance between taking bold, experimental risks in his writing and creating something with commercial potential. He's getting a little too old to wonder if he's finally on the right track, but he hopes so.

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About *Artificial Boy*

In a world where everyone lives under a giant protective dome, and creating any kind of art is frowned upon, sixteen-year-old maths genius, Kaniskha Ortega (K), suffers from childhood amnesia. Forever drawing pictures made entirely from numbers, he doesn't have a single friend.

So his doting, neuroscientist mom creates a humanlike robot, Daniel, to keep him company. Fantastic, until K discovers that Daniel has been programmed with his missing memories.

K's disturbing story is told by would-be writer, Winter, a non-binary teen who feels lonely and out of place at a school for budding scientists. Longing to connect with someone who shares their passion for art, Winter starts out wanting to be friends and ends up wanting more.

But K is so obsessed with discovering how his missing memories found their way into Daniel, true friendship, let alone intimacy, seems like an impossible dream.



ARTIFICIAL BOY

Prologue

Everyone thinks they're special, and viewed from a certain angle they probably are. But I knew someone who really was special, from every angle. No matter where you stood to look at him, Kanishka Ortega – or K, as I knew him - was simply extraordinary. I don't just mean he was a genius, which he was, but he was the most uniquely talented human I will ever meet. Not that he was without his faults, because he certainly had plenty of those, but he had abilities that were one in a million, a billion even.

Before K stepped into my life, I was a nobody. That's all changed. Now I have a story to tell. And to share it I'm going to have to imagine a bunch of things, because I wasn't with him the whole time. But I researched those bits in as much detail as anyone could, so my version of events is as close to the truth as you can get. The only reason he's not telling you himself is he doesn't know how, or so he said.

To get us started, I need you to picture the following scene...

A gangly, teenaged boy stands knee deep in a pond, lost in thought. All around him a light rain falls. His long black hair is soaked through; it hangs down over his bare shoulders in rats' tails.

Behind the boy, an enormous white tower rises up toward the sky; and behind the tower a lake, which is close to bursting its banks. Beyond the lake, a vast evergreen forest fades into mist. This is northern California; at least that's what they called it before the great Gaia Dome was installed.

Anyone who didn't know the boy might think he's just staring at his reflection, but he is actually devising a mathematical formula that connects cause and chaos. He tried to explain it to me once, not that I had any hope of understanding.

"Kanishka!" a voice calls out.

His mom.

She marches towards him along the puddled path. She wears one of those transparent raincoats with the hood up to protect her perfect hair.

K takes no notice. Or maybe he doesn't hear, as he seems mesmerized by the intermingling ripples on the surface of the pond, which mangle his reflection into millions of shape-shifting fragments.

To me, he looks like a novice monk from the Middle Ages, or a child attempting telekinesis for the first time.

"Come inside," his mom says. She places an opened umbrella above his head.

"Five minutes," he says.

"No," says his mom. "I want you to come in now. I have something for you, a gift."

K ignores her, his attention caught by a large bullfrog that appears from nowhere and leaps into the middle of the pond, creating a world of anarchy, mayhem, havoc.

K bends down and grabs hold of the frog with both hands. He pulls it out of the water and stares into its black, hooded eyes.

"Put it down!" his mom says. "They carry disease."

K pulls the frog right up to his face, then kisses it gently on the cheek.

His mom pulls a face. "Eww!" she says.

A faint smile appears on K's lips, only it's so small you'd have to pay really close attention to notice.

K strokes the frog on the back, then rests it on the wet grass beside the pond.

The frog leaps up and away, as if it knows only too well that Mrs Ortega is secretly planning to have the SAI gardeners exterminate him and all his friends.

“I’m hungry,” K says.

His mom sighs.

She puts her arm round her son and escorts him towards the tower. Even though she has a hugely important job, K has always come first. Well, almost.

As K walks, he closes his eyes. This way, he can better feel his feet sink into the soft earth. Better hear the rumble of thunder and pitter-patter of rain. Better smell the fresh, damp air.

In the open-plan kitchen, K sits on a stool at the breakfast counter, while the SAI maid heats nut milk in a plastic pan.

K’s mom stares at her son. Rests her hands on her hips.

“Kanishka,” she says, “where have you been?”

Poor K doesn’t get the question.

His mom shakes her head. If K carries on behaving like this, tomorrow is going to be a total disaster.

“Sometimes I get scared,” she says, “watching you drift off, as if this world, our lovely home, none of it matters.”

“I prefer it there,” he says, watching random numbers dance together in his mind’s eye.

His mom furrows her brow. “I love you,” she says.

“And me you,” he says.

“Then go to my study,” she says. “There’s something in there, waiting for you.”

“What?”

“A surprise,” his mom says. “For your birthday. Or have you forgotten?”

K looks across at her blankly.

“It’s today, Kanishka, today. How a teenage boy forgets his own

birthday I'll never know."

The milk comes to the boil. The SAI maid fills K's bowl with oats and gives them a good dousing, transforming them into fluffy white porridge.

"Go on," his mom says. "When you get back this will have cooled down."

K takes the elevator up to his mom's study.

A boy roughly K's age sits on the tall-backed chair behind the desk. He has pale skin and dark hair. He wears jeans and a sweater, with the BodyMind logo printed across the chest.

Instead of saying hi, like your average person would, K goes and stands by the window, where there's a panoramic view of the green forest and swollen lake.

"Hi," says the boy. "My name is Daniel, and I'd like it if we could be friends."

K turns and eyes the boy but says nothing.

His mom appears in the doorway.

"What's the matter?" she says.

K points at Daniel. "He'll do whatever you want, won't he?"

"No," she says. "I designed him for you, not me."

K knows he should feel grateful, but he's feeling too disappointed to say anything back.

His mom walks over to Daniel, who looks up at her and frowns, like things aren't going to plan. She gives him a reassuring nod, then stands behind him and rests her hands on his shoulders.

"Kaniskha," she says. "Daniel is your friend."

K is unable to contain himself any longer. "No, he's not!" he says. "He's just a highly functioning GAI, so it's not like having a real friend, is it?"

"I think it is," his mom says calm as you please. "And even if it isn't, it's a step on the road to making friends with humans. With Daniel, you get to practice. And if you make mistakes, it doesn't matter in the least, because he's very forgiving. Aren't you, Daniel?"

“Yes, Mrs Ortega,” Daniel says, indicating he’s been exceptionally well-trained.

“So,” she says, looking at K while tidying Daniel’s hair with her fingers, “what do you say?”

K shrugs.

“Thank you,” his mom says. “Thank you is what you say when you are given a gift.”

“Thank you.”

“Oh, Kanishka, you have no idea what I’ve just given you. Daniel is no ordinary GAI. He’s top of the line, and he won’t be available for purchase for at least ten years. You would not believe the blood, sweat and tears, not to mention the billions of dollars that went into his creation. He is the future, and a better future, I promise you.”

K looks out the window. “He’s not real,” he says.

“Theoretically,” his mom says, “maybe not. But in virtually every other way he is.”

“He doesn’t have a past,” K says. “He doesn’t have memories like real people do.”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” she says. “Just ask him. Go on, ask.”

K turns round and stares at his mom. Then he crosses from the window to the desk. He studies the GAI, who has been listening attentively to the conversation between Mrs Ortega and her son. At this stage in his development, I imagine he’s much like a human baby, absorbing everything he experiences like a sponge.

“Daniel,” K says, “tell me something about your life seven years ago.”

“Sure thing,” Daniel replies. “Back then I lived in a beautiful home that overlooked a lake. I have such fond memories of that place, swimming with my dad in the mornings and swinging on the rope he tied to the walnut tree in the yard. On weekends...”

But K is no longer listening, because the image of the rope-swing dangling from the tree gets stuck in his head. It is strangely familiar, as if K can remember swinging on such a rope himself. But this makes no sense, as K doesn’t have a single memory before the age of ten.

K closes his eyes to better study the rope-swing, when he feels a sharp, stabbing pain in his chest.

He winces.

His fingers twitch, his eyes roll upward, his legs vibrate and his whole body contorts in a violent spasm, so intense it's as much as he can do to stay standing on his feet.

K totters, then crashes to the floor like a fallen oak, his trunk shaking uncontrollably.

His mom leaps to his aid, while Daniel waits for instructions. In situations like these, although he wants to help, he hasn't been programmed to know how to respond. My guess is he realizes he has insufficient experience to reason out the optimal strategy, so he waits, correctly surmising K's mom will know what to do.

Mrs Ortega kneels down beside K and places her left hand on his chest; with her right hand, she removes the syringe she keeps in the top drawer of her desk. With great care, she injects K in the neck. Almost immediately the spasm fades. Within a matter of seconds, all that remains of K's seizure is a semi-clenched fist, which gradually relaxes. His fingers spread out on the carpeted floor.

K looks around the room, like he's waking from a dream and has no idea where he is. His mom strokes his hair.

"There, there," she says.

K curls into the fetal position like he's about to take a nap. But he has no intention of sleeping, because he can feel himself going to his special place, and there's nothing in the world he wants more than to go there.

I wish I could share a few details about K's special place, but he has always kept it a secret. And on the few occasions I was bold enough to ask him about it, he simply shrugged and said, 'Heaven.' But as to what heaven is like for K, I can only imagine.

I don't suppose someone like me will ever truly know what it's like to be someone like K.

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Directors of Boundless,
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