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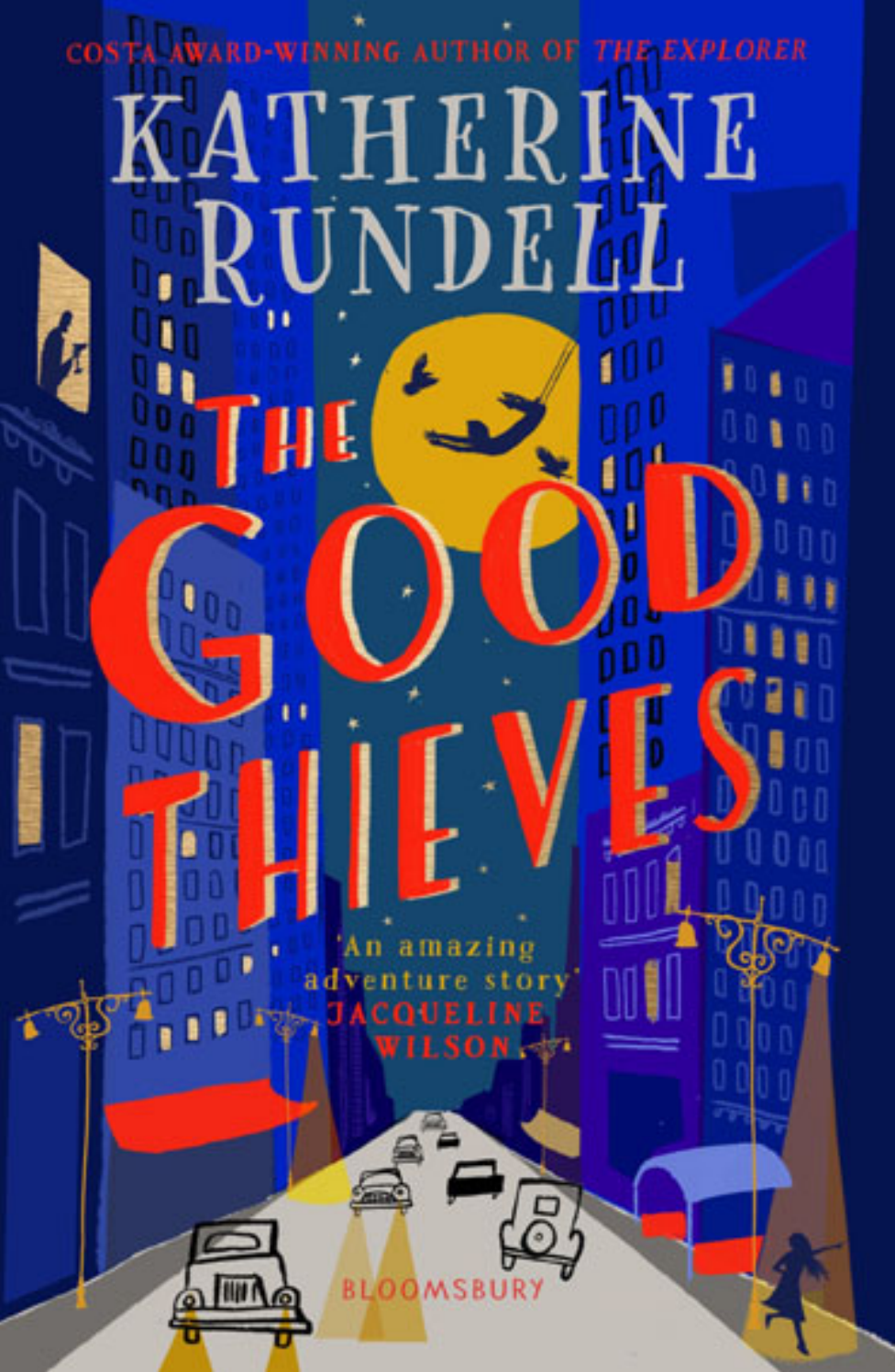
KATHERINE RUNDELL

THE GOOD THIEVES

'An amazing adventure story' JACQUELINE WILSON



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THE GOOD THIEVES

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CHAPTER ONE

Vita set her jaw and nodded at the city in greeting, as a boxer greets an opponent before a fight.

She stood alone on the deck of the ship. The sea was wild and stormy, casting salt spray thirty feet into the air, and all the other passengers on the ocean liner, including her mother, had taken sensible refuge in their cabins.

But it is not always sensible to be sensible.

Vita had slipped away and stood out in the open, gripping the rail with both hands as the boat crested

a wave the size of an opera house. So it was that she alone had the first sight of the city.

'There she is!' called a deck hand. 'In the distance, port side!'

New York climbed out of the mist, tall and grey-blue and beautiful; so beautiful that it pulled Vita forwards to the bow of the boat to stare. She was leaning over the railing, as far out as she dared, when something came flying at her head.

She gasped and ducked low. A seagull was chasing a young crow across the sky, pecking at its back, wheeling and shrieking in mid-air. Vita frowned. It wasn't, she thought, a fair fight. She felt in her pocket, and her fingers closed on an emerald-green marble. She took aim, a brief and angry calculation of distance and angle, drew back her arm, and threw.

The marble caught the seagull on the exact centre of the back of its skull. The gull gave the scandalised cry of an angry duchess, and the crow spun in the air and sped back towards the skyscrapers of New York.

*

They took a cab from the docks. Vita's mother carefully counted out a handful of coins, and gave the driver the address. 'As close as we can get for that, please,' she said, and he took in her carefully mended hems and nodded.

Manhattan sped past outside the window, bright bursts of colour amid the storm-beaten brick and stone. They passed a cinema, its walls adorned with pictures of Greta Garbo, and a man selling hot lobster claws out of a cart. A tram thundered past at a crossroads, narrowly missing a van advertising *The Colonial Pickle Works*. Vita breathed in the city. She tried to memorise the layout of the streets, to build a map behind her eyes; she whispered the names: '*Washington Street, Greenwich Avenue.*'

When the money ran out, they walked. They went as fast as Vita could go in the ferocious wind, suitcases in hand, along Seventh Avenue, dodging pinstripe men and sharp-heeled women.

'There!' said Vita's mother. 'That's Grandpa's flat.'

The apartment building on the corner of Seventh and West 57th rose up, tall and stately in brown

stone, from the busy pavement. A newspaper boy stood outside, roaring the headlines into the wind.

Across the road from the apartment block was a light-red-brick building, its facade arched and ornamented. Flagpoles protruded from its wall, and two flags flapped wildly. Above them, picked out in coloured glass, were the words 'Carnegie Hall'.

'It all looks very … smart,' said Vita. The apartment block appeared to purse its lips at the world. 'Are you *sure* this is the place?'

'I'm sure,' said her mother. 'He's on the top floor, right under the roof. It used to be the maid's apartment. It'll be a squeeze, but it's not for long.' Their return ticket was booked for three weeks' time. Enough time, said Vita's mother, to sort out Grandpa's papers, pack his few things, and persuade him to come home with them.

'Come on!' Her mother's voice sounded unnaturally bright. 'Let's go and find him.'

The lift was broken, so Vita half ran up the stairs to Grandpa's apartment, jerkily, as fast as her legs would take her. Her suitcase banged against the walls as she

raced up narrow flights of stairs, ignoring the growing pain in her left foot. She came to rest, breathless, outside the door. She knocked, but there was no response.

Vita's mother came, panting, up the final flight of stairs. She bent to pick the apartment key from under the mat. She hesitated, looking down at her daughter. 'I'm sure he won't be as bad as we feared,' she said, 'but—'

'Mama! He's waiting!'

Her mother opened the door, and Vita went tearing down the hall; and then, in the doorway, she froze.

Grandpa had always been thin; handsome and lean, with long fine hands and shrewd blue-green eyes. Now he was gaunt, and his eyes had drawn back into his skull. His fingers had drawn inwards into fists, as if every part of him was pulling back from the world. A walking stick leaned against the wall next to his chair: he hadn't needed a walking stick before.

He had not seen her and, just for that second, his face looked sculpted from solid grief.

'Grandpa!' said Vita.

But then he turned, and his face was transfigured with light, and she could breathe again.

'Rapscallion!' He stood and Vita hurled herself into his arms, and he laughed, winded by the impact.

'Julia,' he said, as Vita's mother came in, 'I only got your telegram three days ago, or I would have stopped you—'

Vita's mother shook her head. 'Just try to hold us back, Dad.'

Grandpa turned to Vita. 'Smile again for me, Rapscallion?'

So she smiled, at first naturally, and then, when he didn't look away, wider, until it felt like every single one of her teeth was showing.

'Thank you, Rapscallion,' he said. 'You have your grandmother's smile, still.' Vita's stomach clenched as she saw tears rise up in her grandfather's eyes.

'Grandpa?'

He coughed, and smiled, and cleared his throat. 'God, it's good to see you. But there was no need.'

Julia pushed Vita towards the door. 'Go and find your room, darling,' she said.

'But—'

'Please,' said her mother. Her face was white, and exhausted. 'Now.'

'It's the one at the end of the corridor,' said Grandpa. 'More of a cupboard than a room, I'm afraid,' he said, 'but the view is very fine.'

Vita went slowly down the corridor, her suitcase in hand. She noticed how the floorboards squeaked; how the paint peeled from the wall. She pushed at the door. It stuck; she held on to the wall and kicked it with her stronger foot. It flew open, scattering thin shards of plaster.

The room was so small she could practically touch all four walls at once, but it had a wooden wardrobe, and a window looking out over the street. Vita sat on the bed, pulled off her left shoe, and took her foot in both hands. She dug her fingers into the sole, pointing and flexing the toes, and tried to think.

They had arrived. She should be thrilled. They had made it across the ocean, halfway around the world,

and New York waited outside the window, stretching up to the sky like the calligraphy of a particularly flamboyant god.

But none of that mattered at all, because Grandpa wasn't as bad as she had feared. He was worse.

Vita's skirt pockets were full of gravel from the garden back home; she picked out the largest stones, and began to throw them at the wardrobe door. It helped her think.

A person watching might have noted that each hit the precise mathematical centre of the wardrobe handle – but nobody was watching, and Vita herself barely noticed. Her mind was not on the stones.

She had to do something to make it right. She did not yet know what, nor how, but love has a way of leaving people no choice.

CHAPTER TWO

Grandpa's disaster had come from a blue sky, as disaster often does. The telegram he sent Vita's mother had been short: YOUR MUM DIED LAST NIGHT.

Vita had sat on the doormat, unable to move. Her mother, white-faced, carried her into bed, where together they drank blackcurrant cordial and told each other stories of Grandma, who had travelled the world with Grandpa and had a guttural laugh like a sailor's. The stories helped them both a little, as stories often do.

But that had not been the end of it. More letters followed. The first were dark, and short. Hudson Castle, Grandpa wrote, felt full of ghosts.

Hudson Castle was very small, judging by castle standards. It had been uprooted from its hilltop in France and shipped, stone by stone, across the ocean to America by Vita's great-great-great-grandfather. The castle had been thought, in its day, both very grand and mildly insane. Now it was run-down, crumbling, beautiful, and inhabited only by Grandpa, entirely alone.

But then hope had crept in. A man, Grandpa wrote, had offered to rent Hudson Castle. He had offered to transform it into a school. Grandpa would stay on as a governor; it would give him new purpose, something to do. No paperwork had been signed, but the man was eager to begin renovations. The man's name was Sorrotore, a New York millionaire.

He enclosed a press cutting, showing a man standing outside a vast New York building, smiling at the camera with Hollywood teeth. '*Victor Sorrotore outside his home in the Dakota*,' read the caption.

'Victor Sorrotore,' whispered Vita, and she memorised his face, just in case.

Within a week, Sorrotore struck. Grandfather returned from an afternoon walk to find his way back home barred. A strange man with two guard dogs came out of the caretaker's cottage and pointed a rifle at him. 'Hudson Castle belongs to Mr Sorrotore,' the guard had said. 'Scram!'

Grandpa had never in his adult life been told to scram. He had tried to push past the guard, and one of the dogs had bitten his ankle; not a snap but a true bite, which drew blood. The gun was levelled at his chest. Bewildered, he took the train to New York, rented the tiny apartment on Seventh Avenue, and found Sorrotore's lawyer.

The lawyer expressed surprise as only lawyers can, his eyebrows riding so high up his face they nearly reached the back of his neck. Grandpa knew very well, the lawyer said, that he had sold the castle to Sorrotore. The money was there, in Grandpa's account. A very small sum – only $200 – but it was understood that Hudson Castle had become a

burden, one Grandpa was glad to be rid of. Grandpa checked his account; it was true.

Grandpa tried to hire a lawyer of his own, to demand that Sorrotore produce the title deeds, but he could find none who would take the case without more money than he had. 'Justice,' he wrote in his final letter, 'seems to be only for those who can afford it.' He would try, now, to forget the house in which he had been born. He would try, he wrote, to forget his life there with Lizzy: it was safer that way.

Upon receipt of this last letter, Vita's heart had swooped into her throat. Hudson Castle was Grandpa's home. It was where he could live alongside all his memories of Grandma Lizzy. '*No*,' she whispered.

She had seen her mother's face, and it had given her hope. Her mother was soft-bodied, sweet-voiced, and iron-willed. The two shared the same brown eyes, and the same stubborn jawline.

The next day, her mother returned from town with two tickets in hand. 'We're bringing him back here, whether he likes it or not. The ship sails from Liverpool,' she had said. 'We leave tonight.'

Vita saw that her mother's engagement and wedding rings had gone from her left hand. She didn't ask more, only went to her bedroom to pack, her boots smacking on the floor like a soldier's on the way to battle.

It was Grandpa who taught Vita to throw.

Vita's grandfather's name was Jack Welles. Or, technically – because he had come from the kind of family that believed in long names, long cars, and long dinners – his name was William Jonathan Theodore Maximilian Welles. The family fortune had long since disappeared, but the habit of extravagant naming remained. His father was American, his mother and his schooling were English. Jack was a jeweller by trade, tall enough for doorways to pose a hazard, and thin enough to fit his legs through a letterbox.

When Vita was five, two things happened: her father was killed in the Great War, and she contracted polio. Her mother fought against the disease with wild, unsleeping passion. For long dark months Vita lay in a hospital bed, lifted out for baths in almond

meal and oxidised water. She was given chloride of gold to drink, and wine of pepsin. She began to look far older than she was.

And then one day her grandparents arrived from America. Grandpa sat by her bed, gave her a ping-pong ball, and told her to call him when she could hit the head surgeon with it. Then he drew, with the steady hand of a jeweller, a very small bullseye on the far hospital wall.

She missed, and missed, until she did not.

Grandpa coached her like an athlete. He was a crack shot himself, and Vita spent hours throwing. She threw pebbles, marbles, darts, paper aeroplanes. When she came home from hospital, aged seven, she could send steak knives in elegant loops to land upright in a pat of butter across the room.

Vita grew, and her bones grew stronger, and eventually her leg brace was put away. Her left calf was thinner than her right, and her left foot curved in on itself, and her shoes were made, gratis, by a cobbler in the softest leather he could find. Her mother top-stitched them with red silk, and embroidered birds

on them. She could run, though it made the muscles pull and burn, and although Vita willingly complained of cuts, and demanded bandages where there was very little blood, she never breathed a word about that particular pain.

She grew up small, and still, and watchful. She had six kinds of smile, and five of them were real. All of them were worth seeing. Her hair was the reddish-brown of a freshly washed fox.

Vita's mother Julia only once raised the question of Vita's constant target practice.

'She won't have it easy,' said Grandpa. 'And she looks so breakable. She might as well know how to throw a rock or two.'

By the time Vita was eight, she could hit an apple in the highest branches of a tree from fifty paces. She could skim a stone and make it bounce twenty-three times. 'Back home, your Grandpa's the best shot in town,' said Grandma Lizzy. She was a tall woman, with a stern nose and richly kind eyes. 'But I think you're better.'

Grandpa watched Vita bowl overarm at the sea.

‘Now learn about velocity: learn how the air makes things twist. Look it up! Learn it! Learn as much as you can, for learning is the very opposite of death! Wonderful!’ Grandpa was the only person Vita knew who seemed to spark electricity when he talked, as if he struck against the world like flint against steel.

Eventually, Grandpa and Grandma went back to America, back to Hudson Castle. It was shortly after this that everything changed, and led Vita here, to her tiny room in the attic, looking out as the sun set over New York City.

CHAPTER THREE

The sky was moonless and starless that first night, but New York is never dark. Vita rose after midnight to find the city still awake. She crossed to the window; the apartment block was tall, taller than any around it, and she could see the streets below her stretching away towards the great darkness of Central Park. Street lamps, house lights, the basement-window blaze of illicit speakeasies, car headlamps, flashes of cigar-tips; Manhattan shivered and glowed.

Sleep, Vita felt, was impossible. There was a

restaurant in the building next door, and from it came the music of two violins, and loud, off-key male singing.

Across the street, the red brick of Carnegie Hall had turned to bronze under the street lights, its facade full of hushed solemnity. Then she blinked, and looked closer.

Right at that moment it was neither hushed nor solemn, because a boy was on the brink of jumping out of the third-floor window.

He clambered up and stood on the sill. He was thin, with dark skin and protruding ears, and he did not look down, but out, across the city.

A second, smaller boy came running round the edge of the building, laughing, dragging a thin mattress along the pavement in both hands. He dropped the mattress and called out.

'*Listo*! Ready! *Hep*!'

The boy on the window sill lifted his arms above his head and, before Vita could call out to him to stop, he threw himself upwards and outwards. Vita couldn't breathe. But he tucked his knees tight

into his chest and spun twice in the air, unfurling himself rod-straight just in time to land, feet first, on the mattress. He took a step, toppled to his knees, and sprang up again. The smaller boy gave a shout of triumph, and the taller smiled a small half-smile.

Then he looked up and saw her leaning perilously far out of her window, the ledge cutting against her belly button. For one second all three faced each other, eyes wide in the night air. Then the taller boy smiled that same secret, private smile, and the smaller boy, seeing it, laughed and saluted. Just as Vita was going to shout down to them, both boys took off around the corner, the smaller boy dragging the mattress behind them.

Vita looked down at the pavement, but there was nobody in sight to confirm that a boy had, in fact, just taken flight.

'*Remember them*,' she whispered to herself. '*Just in case. Just in case*.' As if she could have forgotten.

Vita woke on her first morning in New York to the sound of music outside her window. She spat on her

finger to wipe the sleep out of her eyes, and peered out. A man in a hat pulled low over his eyes stood leaning against the tree on the pavement, working away at his barrel organ.

The day was sunlit and bright blue, but cold enough that her breath puffed out in clouds of mist as she washed and dressed in a warm knitted jersey and a bright red skirt she could kick in. She carefully buttoned on her red silk boots, and brushed her hair with her fingers.

In the drawing room Grandpa sat in the armchair, watching the sky. He turned round when she came in, and she saw the effort it took for him to arrange his features into his old smile.

'Rapscallion! Good morning. Your mother's left already, to go and speak to my bank manager, and see what can be done. She was wearing her most crusading expression.'

Vita nodded. Her mother, when she focused on something, pursued it with the unswerving determination of a warship.

'She said she's afraid she'll be out a lot, renewing

my passport, and transferring what's left of my bank account to a British one – and so I'm responsible for you and your movements. She made me promise that we would both be sensible.' He raised one quizzical eyebrow. 'Have you any plans for what your movements may be?'

Vita said, 'I'm going to make sausages with ketchup.' Ketchup was a revelation which she had discovered on the boat and eaten every day since. 'Would you like some?'

He shook his head. 'That's very kind, but not for me.'

'Or coffee?' Coffee, Vita knew, was what you were supposed to drink in America. It tasted, to her, like angry mud, but she was aware that others felt differently. 'I don't actually know how to make it, but I could try.'

'No, thank you.'

'There's nothing I can do?'

'Just you being here is enough.'

But it wasn't enough, she knew, because as she turned to the kitchen, she saw him lean back in his chair, and the hollow look come into his eyes.

She found sausages, and put them in the oven, and was just digging a knife into the ketchup bottle when she heard Grandpa call.

'Rapscallion? Are you still there?'

Vita went to his side, as fast as she could go. 'Yes!'

'Come and sit, while your sausages cook. There's something important I need to tell you.' Grandpa's eyes were staring past her, past the rooftops outside and past the city beyond, and they were angry.

'What is it?' When he did not answer, she sat down on the floor and laid one hand on his ankle. To have your ankle held, she had found, can help, if it is the right person doing the holding.

'I need you to listen,' he said. 'You always were a remarkable listener, Rapscallion. For your own safety, I need you to know about Sorrotore. And I need you to know about what he took.'

'Your grandma made the old castle come alive,' said Grandpa. 'She could grow things where no things should be able to grow. There were wild strawberries in the mouths of the gargoyles, roses up the burglar

bars and in through the windows. There was an almost inconvenient amount of ivy growing up the toilet bowl.' He screwed his eyes shut, as if he could see it, and it hurt him.

'My great-grandfather would be ashamed of me,' said Grandpa. 'He thought, when he died, he left us in luxury – carriages, horses, jewels. The jewels! Diamonds, rubies, sapphires. It was almost all lost. My grandfather gambled away most of it. But what I've done is worse. I've lost our home. And, my God – what would Lizzy say, if she knew?'

'She would say it wasn't your fault,' said Vita sternly. 'I know it.'

'We had so much glory in us when we were young. The last jewel was a necklace – an emerald pendant, large as a lion's eye. We had it valued, when we needed money to mend the roof; it was worth thousands. Oh, Rapscallion – if you could have seen us! She'd put on her emerald, and we'd go out dancing.'

Vita tried to keep her face mute, unexcited. 'Did you say, thousands of dollars?'

'She looked so beautiful. I took a photograph of her in it – my Liz, she loved it …' He ceased speaking, and choked. 'When she died, I didn't know what to do – so I hid it. I couldn't bear to see it. It's still there, in the old hiding place. Oh, Vita.' He took a deep, shuddering breath, and tried to compose his face.

An emerald necklace. The thought ran like an electric shock through Vita's body. She could not take back a house; but an emerald was different. An emerald, as large as a lion's eye, worth thousands of dollars, could change everything.

I can get it back. I can steal it back.

And I could sell it. I could use the money for a lawyer and force them to give Grandpa back his home.

'It's impossible,' she told herself. *But*, whispered a small voice inside her, *impossible doesn't mean it's not worth trying*.

Vita placed an apple on top of the chest of drawers. She sat on her bed facing it, held her penknife in her hand, and focused on the very tip of the apple's stalk.

Colours flickered behind her eyes, and she pushed away her daily thoughts, the busy smallnesses, searching for the still steady place in her mind. Grandpa had always said, 'If you put your mind in a position where an idea can find you, an idea will always come eventually.'

'Of course,' he had added, 'the idea will not necessarily be practical, nor legal.'

The plan which began to take shape in her mind was neither.

She sat for a long time, staring straight ahead, barely breathing. She had never been so still in her life. The constant, thrumming pain in her foot no longer reached her. She thought her way around corners and back out of dead ends.

The plan took on capital letters and italics in her head. It became solid.

Vita blinked, and shook herself. She flicked open the blade of her penknife, and threw it hard across the room; the handle was weighted unevenly and it spun, yet the blade sank with a thud in the very heart of the apple. The apple toppled on to the floor.

Vita smiled one of her six smiles. Then she took from her luggage a red notebook, and, her eyes still hot with concentration, she wrote two words:

THE PLAN.

She underlined them.

Next she flipped the book upside down, to begin on a blank page from the other side, and started to write:

The day Grandpa and Grandma went back to America was the day I got my penknife.

I didn't want to watch them go, so I went to the woods to be alone. I was trying to hit a knot in a tree with a handful of stones, but I kept missing; I couldn't see.

A voice behind me said, 'Concentrate.'

And I said, 'I am!'

He said, 'You're sad, Rapscallion, and angry. I know. But if you can learn to transform anger and sadness into something – into work, into kindness – then you will be remarkable. Put your sadness and anger into your wrist, and throw it.'

'How?' *I said. 'I don't see* how.'

He said, 'It's a trick that takes a lifetime to learn. Try again. Imagine shifting your sadness out of your chest and into your hand. Throw.'

I tried. I pushed my heart down into my hand, and threw the stone, and I hit the knot, right in the middle of the tree. I turned round, and there he was, sitting on a tree stump and smiling. And he said, 'Close your eyes.'

And he put a red penknife into my hand.

He said, 'It was mine, when I was your age. It's called a Swiss Army knife. To remind you, you are an army unto yourself.'

I opened it. It was perfectly oiled. A long blade, scissors, a pair of detachable tweezers tucked into the top.

'Use it as a tool, not a weapon,' he said. 'Your weapon in life is not going to be a knife – it will be something far more powerful and original. But the tweezers will come in handy. Good tweezers are not to be underestimated.'

And he kissed the top of my head and walked away without saying anything.

That's the kind of man that Grandpa was, before Grandma died. Before Sorrotore.

Vita drew a line under her writing, and put the book away under her pillow.

She did not remember the sausages until much later, and although by then they were largely charcoal, she ate them anyway, with plenty of ketchup, followed by the apple. The plan had brought back her appetite, as plans so often do.