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ROOFTOPPERS

KATHERINE
RUNDELL

Illustrated
by
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INTRODUCTION

The idea for *Rooftoppers* came, without warning, while I was on a rooftop. When I was twenty-one I became a Fellow of All Souls College in Oxford, which was founded in 1438: a building with tall towers and some very stern-looking gargoyles. I have always loved to climb – trees and rocks and occasionally drainpipes – and when I first arrived there, I found out about a secret trapdoor that could take you, with a jump and a scramble, up on to the roof. I was up there climbing among the gargoyles one night (it had to be dark, as it's technically very illegal) when I found a dusty old beer bottle in the corner by the parapet. It made me wonder: what if somebody had

been living up here, close to the sky, and we didn't know?

That's how it began: with a *what if*. So many stories have a *what if* at their core: What if you had a scar on your forehead and had to save the world from an evil wizard? What if you went through a wardrobe and on the other side there was unfathomable beauty – and snow, and a witch, and a lion? What then? What would happen next? What if there really were people living up on the rooftop of an old college? What if there were people living secret rooftop lives all over the world? *What if?*

I have always loved being up high; I love aeroplanes, and mountains, and flying on the flying trapeze. I've always been shy, and I love the idea of seeing the world when it can't see you. When I was younger, I taught myself to walk on a tightrope – I find the feeling of focus and balance and height it brings a miraculous thing. I practised for many years (breaking only a couple of toes in the process) and can now walk a wire backwards and forwards, and in high-heeled shoes. (This is not, alas, a particularly

useful skill in the real world.) So I knew I wanted *Rooftoppers* to have a tightrope-walking boy in it: somebody who made it look as if gravity didn't apply to him.

Most of all, I wanted *Rooftoppers* to be about recklessly, riotously brave people – because I think, both in real life and fiction, they do us all a service: there is so much optimism and hope in their daring that it spreads out into the world around them. I wanted to write a book about children's brilliance and boldness, about children who charge across the rooftops of Paris, leaping and somersaulting, searching, hunting. I wanted to write an adventure story that would make the children who read it want to go on an adventure: a book that would say we should never ignore a possible.

Katherine Rundell, March 2020

CHAPTER ONE

On the morning of its first birthday, a baby was found floating in a cello case in the middle of the English Channel.

It was the only living thing for miles. Just the baby, and some dining-room chairs, and the tip of a ship disappearing into the ocean. There had been music in the dining hall, and it was music so loud and so good that nobody had noticed the water flooding in over the carpet. The violins went on sawing for some time after the screaming had begun. Sometimes the shriek of a passenger would duet with a high C.

The baby was found wrapped for warmth in the

musical score of a Beethoven symphony. It had drifted almost a mile from the ship, and was the last to be rescued. The man who lifted it into the rescue boat was a fellow passenger, and a scholar. It is a scholar's job to notice things. He noticed that it was a girl, with hair the colour of lightning, and the smile of a shy person.

Think of night-time with a speaking voice. Or think how moonlight might talk, or think of ink, if ink had vocal cords. Give those things a narrow aristocratic face with hooked eyebrows, and long arms and legs, and that is what the baby saw as she was lifted out of her cello case and up into safety. His name was Charles Maxim, and he determined, as he held her in his large hands – at arm's length, as he would a leaky flowerpot – that he would keep her.

The baby was almost certainly one year old. They knew this because of the red rosette pinned to her front, which read, '1!'

'Or rather,' said Charles Maxim, 'the child is either one year old, or she has come first in a competition. I believe babies are rarely keen participants in competitive sport. Shall we therefore assume it is the former?' The girl held on to his earlobe with a grubby finger and thumb. 'Happy birthday, my child,' he said.

Charles did not only give the baby a birthday. He also gave her a name. He chose Sophie, on that first day, on the grounds that nobody could possibly object to it. 'Your day has been dramatic and extraordinary enough, child,' he said. 'It might be best to have the most ordinary name available. You can be Mary, or Betty, or Sophie. Or, at a stretch, Mildred. Your choice.' Sophie had smiled when he said 'Sophie', so Sophie it was. Then he fetched his coat, and folded her up in it, and took her home in a carriage. It rained a little, but it did not worry either of them. Charles did not generally notice the weather, and Sophie had already survived a lot of water that day.

Charles had never really known a child before. He told Sophie as much on the way home: 'I do, I'm afraid, understand books far more readily than I understand people. Books are so easy to get along with.' The carriage ride took four hours; Charles held Sophie on the very edge of his knee, and told her about himself, as though she were an acquaintance at a tea party. He was thirty-six years old, and six foot three. He spoke English to people and French to cats, and Latin to the birds. He had once nearly killed himself trying to read and ride a horse at the same time. 'But I will be more careful,' he said, 'now that there is you, little cello child.' Charles's home was beautiful, but it was not safe; it was all staircases and slippery floorboards and sharp corners. 'I'll buy some smaller chairs,' he said. 'And we'll have thick red carpets! Although – how does one go about acquiring carpets? I don't suppose you know, Sophie?'

Unsurprisingly, Sophie did not answer. She was too young to talk; and she was asleep.

She woke when they drew up in a street smelling of trees and horse dung. Sophie loved the house at first

sight. The bricks were painted the brightest white in London, and shone even in the dark. The basement was used to store the overflow of books and paintings and several brands of spiders; and the roof belonged to the birds. Charles lived in the space in between.

At home, after a hot bath in front of the stove, Sophie looked very white and fragile. Charles had not known that a baby was so terrifyingly tiny a thing. She felt too small in his arms. He was almost relieved when there was a knock at the door; he laid Sophie down carefully on a chair, with a Shakespearean play as a booster seat, and went up the stairs two at a time.

When he returned, he was accompanied by a large grey-haired woman; *Hamlet* was slightly damp, and Sophie was looking embarrassed. Charles scooped her up, and set her down – hesitating first over an umbrella stand in a corner, and then the top of the stove – inside the sink. He smiled, and his eyebrows and eyes smiled too. 'Please don't worry,' he said. 'We all have accidents, Sophie.' Then he bowed at the woman. 'Let me introduce you. Sophie, this is Miss Eliot, from the National

Childcare Agency. Miss Eliot, this is Sophie, from the ocean.'

The woman sighed – an official sort of sigh, it would have sounded, from Sophie's place in the sink – and frowned, and pulled clean clothes from a parcel. 'Give her to me.'

Charles took the clothes from her. 'I took this child from the sea, madam.' Sophie watched, with large eyes. 'She has nobody to keep her safe. Whether I like it or not, she is my responsibility.'

'Not forever.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'The child is your *ward*. She is not your daughter.' This was the sort of woman who spoke in italics. You would be willing to lay bets that her hobby was organising people. 'This is a temporary arrangement.'

'I beg to differ,' said Charles. 'But we can fight about that later. The child is cold.' He handed the vest to Sophie, who sucked on it. He took it back and put it on for her. Then he hefted her in his arms, as though about to guess her weight at a fair, and looked at her

closely. 'You see? She seems a very intelligent baby.' Sophie's fingers, he saw, were long and thin, and clever. 'And she has hair the colour of lightning. How could you possibly resist her?'

'I'll have to come round, to check on her, and I really don't have the time to spare. *A man can't do this kind of thing alone.*'

'Certainly, please do come,' said Charles – and he added, as if he couldn't stop himself, 'if you feel that you absolutely can't stay away. I will endeavour to be grateful. But this child is my responsibility. Do you understand?'

'But it's a *child*! You're a *man*!'

'Your powers of observation are formidable,' said Charles. 'You are a credit to your optician.'

'But what are you going to *do* with her?'

Charles looked bewildered. 'I am going to love her. That should be enough, if the poetry I've read is anything to go by.' Charles handed Sophie a red apple; then took it back, and rubbed it on his sleeve until he could see his face in it. He said, 'I am sure the secrets

of childcare, dark and mysterious though they no doubt are, are not impenetrable.'

Charles set the baby on his knee, handed her the apple, and began to read out loud to her from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It was not, perhaps, the perfect way to begin a new life, but it showed potential.

CHAPTER TWO

There was, in the offices of the National Childcare Agency in Westminster, a cabinet; and in the cabinet, a red file marked 'Guardians: Character Assessment'. In the red file, there was a smaller blue file marked 'Maxim, Charles'. It read, 'C.P. Maxim is bookish, as one would expect of a scholar: also apparently generous, awkward, industrious. He is unusually tall but doctor's reports suggest he is otherwise healthy. He is stubbornly certain of his ability to care for a female ward.'

Perhaps such things are contagious, because Sophie grew up tall and generous and bookish and awkward.

By the time she turned seven, she had legs as long and thin as golf umbrellas, and a collection of stubborn certainties.

For her seventh birthday, Charles baked a chocolate cake. It was not an absolute success, because it had sagged in the middle, but Sophie declared loyally that that was her favourite kind of cake. 'Because,' she said, 'the dip leaves room for more icing. I like my icing to be extragavant.'

'I am glad to hear it,' said Charles. 'Although the word is traditionally pronounced *extravagant*, I believe. Happy probably seventh birthday, dear heart. How about a little birthday Shakespeare?'

Sophie had a habit of breaking plates, and so they had been eating their cake off the front cover of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Now Charles wiped it on

his sleeve, and opened at the middle. 'Will you read me some Titania?'

Sophie made a face. 'I'd rather be Puck.' She tried a few lines, but it was slow going. She waited until Charles was looking away, then dropped the book on the floor and did a handstand on it.

Charles laughed. 'Bravo!' He applauded against the table. 'You look the stuff that elves are made of.'

Sophie fell over into the kitchen table, stood up, and tried again against the door.

'Wonderful! You're getting better; almost perfect.'

'Only almost?' Sophie wobbled, and squinted at him upside down. Her eyeballs were starting to burn, but she stayed where she was. 'Aren't my legs straight?'

'Almost. Your left knee looks a little uncertain. Anyway, no human is perfect. Nobody since Shakespeare.'

Sophie thought about that later, in bed. 'No human is perfect,' Charles had said, but he was wrong. Charles was perfect. Charles had hair the same colour as the banister, and eyes that had magic in them. He had

inherited his house and all his clothes from his father. They had once been beautiful, razzle-dazzle Savile Row one-hundred-per-cent silk, and were now fifty per cent silk, fifty per cent hole. Charles had no musical instruments, but he sang to her; and when Sophie was elsewhere, he sang to the birds, and to the woodlice that occasionally invaded the kitchen. His voice was pitch-perfect. It sounded like flying.

Sometimes the feeling of the sinking ship would come back to Sophie, in the middle of the night, and then she found that she needed desperately to climb things. Climbing was the only thing that made her feel safe. Charles allowed her to sleep on top of the wardrobe. He slept on the floor beneath her, just in case.

Sophie didn't entirely understand him. Charles ate little, and slept rarely, and he did not smile as often as other people. But he had kindness where other people had lungs, and politeness in his fingertips. If, when reading and walking at the same time, he bumped into a lamp post, he would apologise and check that the lamp post was unhurt.

One morning a week, Miss Eliot came to the house,

'to sort out any problems'. (Sophie could have said, 'what problems?' but she soon learned to stay silent.) Miss Eliot would look around the house, which was peeling at the corners, and at the spiderwebs in the empty larder, and she would shake her head.

'What do you *eat*?'

It was true that food was more interesting in their house than in the homes of Sophie's friends. Sometimes Charles forgot about meat for months at a time. Clean plates seemed to break whenever Sophie came near them, and so he served roast potato chips on atlases of the world, spread open at the map of Hungary. In fact he would have been happy to live on biscuits, and tea, and whisky at bedtime. When Sophie first learned to read, Charles had kept the whisky in a bottle labelled 'cat's urine', so that Sophie would not touch it, but she had uncorked the bottle, and sipped it, and then sniffed at the underside of the cat next door. They were not at all similar, though equally unpleasant.

'We have bread,' said Sophie. 'And fish in tins.'

'You have *what*?' said Miss Eliot.

'I like fish in tins,' said Sophie. 'And we have ham.'

'Do you? I've never seen a single slice of ham in this place.'

'Every day! Or,' she added, because Sophie was more honest than she found convenient, 'definitely sometimes. And cheese. And apples. And I drink a whole pint of milk for breakfast.'

'But how can Charles let you *live* like that? I don't think this can be good for a child. It's not *right*.'

They managed, in fact, very well, but Miss Eliot never quite understood. When Miss Eliot said 'right', Sophie thought, she meant 'neat'. Sophie and Charles did not live neatly, but neatness, Sophie thought, was not necessary for happiness.

'The thing is, Miss Eliot,' said Sophie, 'the thing is, I don't have the sort of face that ever looks neat. Charles says I have untidy eyes. Because of the fleck, you see.' Sophie's skin was too pale, and it showed blotches in the cold, and her hair had never, in her memory, been without knots. Sophie did not mind, though; because in her memory of her mother she saw the same sort of hair and skin: and her mother, she felt

sure, was beautiful. Her mother, she was sure, had smelt of cool air and soot, and had worn trousers with patches at the ankle.

The trousers, in fact, were perhaps the beginning of the troubles. When Sophie was nearing eight years old, she asked Charles for a pair of trousers.

'Trousers? Is that not rather unusual for women?'

'No,' said Sophie. 'I don't think so. My mother wears them.'

'*Wore* them, Sophie, my child.'

'*Wears* them. Black ones. But I'd like mine to be red.'

'Um. You wouldn't prefer a skirt?' He looked worried.

Sophie made a face. 'No, I really do want trousers. Please.'

There were no trousers in the shops that would fit her, only the grey shorts that boys wore – and, 'Good heavens!' said Charles. 'You look like a maths lesson' – so Charles sewed four pairs himself in brightly coloured cotton and gave them to her wrapped in newspaper. One of them had one leg longer than

the other. Sophie loved them. Miss Eliot was shocked; and '*Girls,*' she said, 'don't wear trousers.' But Sophie insisted that they did.

'My mother wore trousers. I know she did. She used to dance in them, when she played her cello.'

'She can't have,' said Miss Eliot. It was always the same. 'Women do not play the cello, Sophie. And you were *much* too young to remember. You must try to be more honest, Sophie.'

'But she did. The trousers were black, and greyish at the knee. And she wore black shoes. I remember.'

'You are imagining things, my dear.' Miss Eliot's voice was like a window slamming shut.

'But I promise, I'm *not*.'

'Sophie –'

'I'm not!' Sophie did not add, 'you potato-faced old hag!' but she did very much want to. The problem was that a person could not grow up with Charles without becoming polite to their very bones. To be impolite felt, to Sophie, like wearing dirty underwear, but it was difficult to be polite when people talked about her

mother. They were so very certain that she was making it up; and she was so very certain that they were wrong.

'Toenail eyes!' whispered Sophie. 'Buzzard! I *do* remember.' She felt a little better.

Sophie did remember her mother, in fact, clear and sharp. She did not remember a father; but she remembered a swirl of hair, and two thin cloth-covered legs kicking to the beat of wonderful music, and that wouldn't have been possible if the legs had been covered in skirt.

Sophie was also sure she remembered, very clearly, seeing her mother clinging to a floating door in the middle of the Channel.

Everybody said, 'A baby is too young to remember.' They said, 'You are remembering what you wish was true.' She grew sick of hearing it. But Sophie remembered seeing her mother wave for help. She had heard her mother whistle. Whistles are very distinctive. No matter what the police said, then, she knew her mother had not gone down inside the ship. Sophie was stubbornly certain.

Sophie whispered to herself in the dark every night: *My mother is still alive, and she is going to come for me one day.*

'She'll come for me,' said Sophie to Charles.

Charles would shake his head. 'That is almost impossible, dear heart.'

'*Almost* impossible means still possible.' Sophie tried to stand up straight and sound adult; people believed you more easily if you were taller. 'You always say, never ignore a possible.'

'But my child, it is so profoundly improbable, that it's not worth building a life on. It would be like trying to build a house on the back of a dragonfly.'

'She'll come for me,' said Sophie to Miss Eliot.

Miss Eliot was more blunt. 'Your mother is dead. No women survived,' she said. 'You mustn't allow yourself to get carried away.'

Sometimes it seemed difficult for the adults in Sophie's life to tell between 'carried away' and 'absolutely correct but unbelieved'. Sophie felt herself flushing. 'She will come,' she said. 'Or I'll go to her.'

'No, Sophie. That is not how the world works.' Miss

Eliot was sure that Sophie was mistaken, but then Miss Eliot was also sure that cross-stitch was *vital*, and Charles was *impossible*, which just showed that adults weren't always right.

One day Sophie found some red paint and wrote the name of the ship, *the Queen Mary*, and the date of the storm, on the white wall of the house; just in case her mother passed by.

Charles's face, when he found her, was too complicated for her to look at. But he helped her reach the high parts, and wash the brushes afterwards.

'A case,' he said to Miss Eliot, 'of the just in cases.'

'But she's –'

'She is only doing as I have told her.'

'You told her to vandalise your own house?'

'No. I have told her not to ignore life's possibles.'

CHAPTER THREE

Miss Eliot did not approve of Charles, nor of Sophie. She disliked Charles's carelessness with money, and his lateness at dinner.

She disliked Sophie's watching, listening face. 'It's not natural, in a little girl!' She hated their joint habit of writing each other notes on the wallpaper in the hall.

'It's not normal!' she said, scribbling on her notepad. 'It's not healthy!'

'On the contrary,' said Charles. 'The more words in a house the better, Miss Eliot.'

Miss Eliot also disliked Charles's hands, which were

inky, and his hat, which was coming adrift round the brim. She disapproved of Sophie's clothes.

Charles was not good at shopping. He spent a day standing, bewildered, in the middle of Bond Street, and came back with a parcel of boys' shirts. Miss Eliot was livid.

'You cannot let her wear that,' she said. 'People will think she is deranged.'

Sophie looked down at herself. She fingered the material. It felt quite normal to her; still a little stiff from the shop, but otherwise fine. 'How can you tell it's not a girl's shirt?' she asked.

'Boys' shirts button left over right. Blouses – please note, the word is *blouses* – button right over left. I am shocked that you don't know that.'

Charles put down the newspaper behind which he

had retreated. 'You are shocked that she doesn't know about *buttons*? Buttons are rarely key players in international affairs.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'I meant, she knows the things which are important. Not all of them, of course; she is still a child. But many.'

Miss Eliot sniffed. 'You'll forgive me; I may be old-fashioned, but I think buttons *do* matter.'

'Sophie,' said Charles, 'knows all the capitals of all the countries of the world.'

Sophie, standing in the doorway, whispered, '*Almost*.'

'She knows how to read, and how to draw. She knows the difference between a tortoise and a turtle. She knows one tree from another, and how to climb them. Only this morning she was telling me what is the collective noun for toads.'

'A knot,' said Sophie. 'It's a knot of toads.'

'And she whistles. You would have to be extraordinarily unintelligent not to see that Sophie's whistling is unusual. Extraordinarily unintelligent, or deaf.'

Charles might just as well not have spoken. Miss Eliot swept him aside with a single flick of her fingers.

'She'll need new shirts, please, Mr Maxim. *Women's* shirts. And, my lord, those trousers!'

Sophie didn't see the problem. Trousers were just skirts with extra sewing. 'I need them,' she said. 'Please let me keep them. You can't climb in a skirt. Or, you can, but then everyone would see your pants, and surely that would be worse?'

Miss Eliot frowned. She was not the sort of person who admitted to wearing pants.

'We'll let it pass for now. You're still a child. But this can't go on forever.'

'What? Why not?' Sophie touched the bookcase with her fingertips for luck. 'Yes, it can. Why wouldn't it?'

'It certainly can't. England is no place for untrained women.'

Above all, Miss Eliot disliked Charles's wish to take Sophie on sudden expeditions. London was dirty, she said, and Sophie would catch germs and bad habits.

On the day of Sophie's probably ninth birthday, Charles stood her on a chair and polished her shoes, while she ate toast with one hand and read a book with

the other. She turned the pages with her teeth. Crumbs and spit coated the corners of the paper but it was otherwise a satisfactory arrangement.

They were almost ready to leave the house for the concert hall when Miss Eliot stormed in.

'You can't take her out like that! She's filthy! And don't slouch, Sophie.'

Charles looked with interest at the top of Sophie's head. 'Is she?'

'Mr Maxim!' barked Miss Eliot. 'The girl has jam all down her top!'

'So she does.' Charles looked at Miss Eliot with courteous bewilderment. 'Does it matter?' Then, seeing Miss Eliot's hand reach towards her clipboard, he took a cloth and sponged at Sophie; as gently as if she were a painting.

Miss Eliot sniffed. 'There's some on the sleeve, too.'

'The rain will wash the rest off, surely? It's her birthday.'

'Dirt still applies on birthdays! You're not taking her to a zoo.'

'I see. Would you rather I took her to the zoo?' Charles tipped his head to one side. He looked, Sophie thought, like a particularly well-mannered panther. 'It may not be too late to change the tickets.'

'That isn't what I meant! She'll disgrace you. I would be embarrassed to be seen with her.'

Charles looked at Miss Eliot. Miss Eliot's eyes dropped first.

'She has shining shoes and shining eyes,' said Charles. 'That is smartness enough.' He handed Sophie the tickets to hold on to. 'Happy birthday, my child.' He kissed her forehead – the once-yearly birthday kiss – and helped Sophie from her chair.

There are many ways, Sophie knew, of helping people from their chairs. It is a very revealing thing to do. Miss Eliot, for instance, would prod you off with a wooden spoon. Charles did it carefully, by the fingertips, as though they were dancing – and he whistled the string section from *Così fan tutte* all the way down the street.

'Music, Sophie! Music is mad and wonderful.'

'Yes!' Charles had kept her birthday plans a secret, but his excitement was contagious. She skipped alongside him. 'What kind of music will it be?'

'Classical, Sophie.' His face was alight with happiness and his fingers were twitching at the tip. 'Clever, complicated music.'

'Oh. That's … wonderful.' Sophie was an unpractised liar. 'That will be so good.' In fact, Sophie thought, she *would* rather have gone to the zoo. Sophie had heard almost no classical music, and she would have been quite happy to keep it that way. She liked folk songs, and music you could dance to; very few just-turned-nine-year-olds, she imagined, could have said they liked classical music without lying a little.

The performance did not, as far as Sophie was concerned, start promisingly. The piano piece was long. The pianist had a moustache, and made the sorts of faces that Sophie associated with being very itchy.

'Charles?' Sophie glanced at Charles, and saw his lips were slightly open, and curved upwards in an expression of very listening happiness.

'Charles?'

'Yes, Sophie? And you must try to whisper.'

'Charles, how long does it go on for? I mean, it's not that it's not wonderful.' Sophie crossed her fingers behind her back. 'It's just that I … wondered.'

'Only an hour, my child, alas. I could live here, in this seat, couldn't you?'

'Oh. An *hour*?' Sophie tried to sit still, but it was difficult. She sucked the end of her plait. She curled and uncurled her toes. She resolved, unsuccessfully, not to bite her thumbnail. She was at last on the borderland of sleep when three violins, a cello and a viola came on stage, accompanied by their musicians.

When they began to play, the music was different. It was sweeter, and wilder. Sophie sat up properly, and shifted forwards until only half an inch of her bottom was on her seat. It was so beautiful that it was difficult to breathe. If music can shine, Sophie thought, this music shone. It was like all the voices in all the choirs in the city rolled into a single melody. Her chest felt oddly swollen.

'It's like eight thousand birds, Charles! Charles! Isn't it like eight thousand birds?'

'Yes! But shhh, Sophie.'

The melody quickened, and Sophie's pulse kept time. It sounded at once familiar and new. It plucked at her fingers and feet.

Sophie's legs wouldn't stay still. She knelt up on her seat. After a moment, she risked a whisper. 'Charles! Listen! The cello sings, Charles!'

When the music closed, she clapped until the rest of the audience had stopped and until her hands were hot and blotched with red. She clapped until everyone was staring at the girl with lightning-coloured hair and a ladder in her stocking, whose eyes and shoes lit up the whole of the second row.

There was a something in the music that felt familiar to Sophie. 'It feels,' she said to Charles, 'like home. Do you see what I mean? Like fresh air.'

'Does it? Then I think,' said Charles, 'we must get you a cello.'

The cello they bought was small, but still too large to play comfortably in her bedroom. Charles unstuck the

skylight in the attic, and on the days on which it did not rain, Sophie climbed on to the roof and played her cello, up amongst the leaf-mould and the pigeons.

When the music went right, it drained all the itch and fret from the world and left it glowing. When she did stretch and blink and lay her bow down hours later, Sophie would feel tougher, and braver. It was, she thought, like having eaten a meal of cream and moonshine. When practice went badly, it was just a chore, like brushing her teeth. Sophie had worked out that the good and bad days divided half and half. It was worth it.

Nobody bothered her up on the rooftop. It was flat grey slate, with a stone balustrade running round the edge. The balustrade came up to Sophie's chin; people below, looking up, could see only a shock of bright hair, and a bowing elbow.

'I love the sky.' Sophie said it one night without thinking, at dinner. She bit her tongue; other girls laughed if you said things like that.

But Charles only laid a slice of pork pie on the Bible

and nodded. He said, 'I'm glad.' He added a dollop of mustard, and handed Sophie the book. 'Only weak thinkers do not love the sky.'

Almost as soon as she could walk, Sophie could climb. She started with the trees, which are the quickest route to the sky. Charles came with her. He was not a 'no-don't, hold-tighter' sort of man. He stood underneath her and shouted. 'Higher, Sophie! Yes, bravo! Watch out for the birds! Birds look wonderful from underneath!'

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To my grandmother, Pauline Blanchard-Sims,
whose flair and courage are unrivalled

A NOTE ON WOLF WILDERS

Wolf wilders are almost impossible to spot.

A wolf wilder is not like a lion tamer nor a circus ringmaster: wolf wilders can go their whole lives without laying eyes on a sequin. They look, more or less, like ordinary people. There are clues: more than half are missing a piece of a finger, the lobe of an ear, a toe or two. They go through clean bandages the way other people go through socks. They smell very faintly of raw meat.

In the western wild parts of Russia there are gangs of wolf merchants who hunt newborn pups. They snatch them, still wet and blind, and carry them away in boxes, selling them to men and women who live elegant lives in thick-carpeted houses in St Petersburg. A wolf pup

can fetch a thousand roubles, a pure white one as much as twice that. A wolf in the house is said to bring good fortune: money and fame, boys with clean noses and girls without pimples. Peter the Great had seven wolves, all as white as the moon.

The captured wolves wear golden chains and are taught to sit still while people around them laugh and drink and blow cigar smoke into their eyes. They are fed caviar, which they find disgusting. Some grow so fat that the fur on their stomach sweeps the ground as they waddle up and down stairs, and collects fluff and ash.

But a wolf cannot be tamed in the way a dog can be tamed, and it cannot be kept indoors. Wolves, like children, are not born to lead calm lives. Always the wolf goes mad at the imprisonment, and eventually it bites off and eats a little piece of someone who was not expecting to be eaten. The question then arises: what to do with the wolf?

Aristocrats in Russia believe that the killing of a wolf brings a unique kind of bad luck. It is not the glamorous kind of bad luck, not runaway trains and lost fortunes, but something dark and insidious. If you kill a wolf, they say, your life begins to disappear. Your child will come of age on the morning that war is declared. Your toenails will grow inwards, and your teeth outwards, and your

gums will bleed in the night and stain your pillow red. So the wolf must not be shot, nor starved; instead it is packed up like a parcel by nervous butlers, and sent away to the wolf wilder.

The wilder will teach the wolves how to be bold again, how to hunt and fight, and how to distrust humans. They teach them how to howl, because a wolf who cannot howl is like a human who cannot laugh. And the wolves are released back on to the land where they were born, which is as tough and alive as the animals themselves.

ONE

Once upon a time, a hundred years ago, there was a dark and stormy girl.

The girl was Russian, and although her hair and eyes and fingernails were dark all of the time, she was stormy only when she thought it absolutely necessary. Which was fairly often.

Her name was Feodora.

She lived in a wooden house made of timber taken from the surrounding forest. The walls were layered with sheep's wool to keep out the Russian winter, and the inside was lit with hurricane lamps. Feo had painted the lamps every colour in her box of paints, so the house cast out light into the forest in reds and greens and yellows. Her mother had cut and sanded the door herself, and

the wood was eight inches thick. Feo had painted it snow blue. The wolves had added claw marks over the years, which helped dissuade unwelcome visitors.

It all began – all of it – with someone knocking on the snow-blue door.

Although 'knocking' was not the right word for this particular noise, Feo thought. It sounded as though someone was trying to dig a hole in the wood with his knuckles.

But any knocking at all was unusual. Nobody knocked: it was just her and her mother and the wolves. Wolves do not knock. If they want to come in, they come in through the window, whether it is open or not.

Feo put down the skis she was oiling and listened. It was early, and she was still wearing her nightdress. She had no dressing gown, but she pulled on the jumper her mother had knitted, which came down to the scar on her knee, and ran to the front door.

Her mother was wrapped in a bearskin housecoat, just looking up from the fire she had been lighting in the sitting room.

'I'll do it!' Feo tugged at the door with both hands. It was stiff; ice had sealed the hinges.

Her mother grabbed at her – 'Wait! Feo!'

But Feo had already pulled the door open, and before

she could jump back it slapped inwards, catching the side of her head.

'Ach!' Feo stumbled, and sat down on her own ankle. She said a word that made the stranger pushing his way past her raise his eyebrows and curl his lip.

The man had a face made of right angles: a jutting nose and wrinkles in angry places, deep enough to cast shadows in the dark.

'Where is Marina Petrovna?' He marched down the hall, leaving a trail of snow.

Feo got to her knees – and then lurched back, as two more men in grey coats and black boots stamped past her, missing her fingers by inches. 'Move, girl.' They carried between them, slung by its legs, the body of a young elk. It was dead, and dripping blood.

'Wait!' said Feo. Both wore the tall furry hats of the Tsar's Imperial Army, and exaggeratedly official expressions.

Feo ran after them. She readied her elbows and knees to fight.

The two soldiers dropped the elk on the rug. The sitting room was small, and the two young men were large and moustached. Their moustaches seemed to take up most of the room.

Up close, they looked barely more than sixteen; but

the man with the door-beating fists was old, and his eyes were the oldest thing about him. Feo's stomach bunched up under her throat.

The man spoke over Feo's head to her mother. 'Marina Petrovna? I am General Rakov.'

'What do you want?' Marina's back was against the wall.

'I am commander of the Tsar's Imperial Army for the thousand miles south of St Petersburg. And I am here because your wolves did this,' he said. He kicked at the elk. Blood spread across his brightly polished shoe.

'*My* wolves?' Her mother's face was steady, but her eyes were neither calm nor happy. 'I do not own any wolves.'

'You bring them here,' said Rakov. His eyes had a coldness in them you do not expect to see in a living thing. 'That makes them your responsibility.' His tongue was stained yellow by tobacco.

'No. No, neither of those things are true,' said Feo's mother. 'Other people send the wolves when they tire of them: the aristocrats, the rich. We untame them, that's all. And wolves cannot be owned.'

'Lying will not help you, Madam.'

'I am not –'

'Those three wolves I see your child with. Those are not yours?'

'No, of course not!' began Feo. 'They're –' But her

mother shook her head, hard, and gestured to Feo to stay silent. Feo bit down on her hair instead, and tucked her fists into her armpits to be ready.

Her mother said, 'They are hers only in the sense that I am hers, and she is mine. They are Feo's companions, not her pets. But that bite isn't the work of Black or White or Grey.'

'Yes. The jaw marks,' said Feo. 'They're from a much smaller wolf.'

'You are mistaken,' said Rakov, 'in imagining I wish to hear excuses.' His voice was growing less official: louder, ragged-edged.

Feo tried to steady her breathing. The two young men, she saw, were staring at her mother: one of them had let his jaw sag open. Marina's shoulders and back and hips were wide; she had muscles that were more commonly seen on men, or rather, Feo thought, on wolves. But her face, a visitor had once said, was built on the blueprint used for snow leopards, and for saints. 'The look,' he had said, 'is "goddess, modified".' Feo had pretended, at the time, not to be proud.

Rakov seemed immune to her mother's beauty. 'I have been sent to collect compensation for the Tsar, and I shall do that, immediately. Do not play games with me. You owe the Tsar a hundred roubles.'

'I don't have a hundred roubles.'

Rakov slammed his fist against the wall. He was surprisingly strong for so old and shrivelled a man, and the wooden walls shuddered. 'Woman! I have no interest in protest or excuses. I have been sent to wrest obedience and order from this godforsaken place.' He glanced down at his red-speckled shoe. 'The Tsar rewards success.' Without warning he kicked the elk so hard that its legs flailed, and Feo let out a hiss of horror.

'You!' The General crossed to her, leaning down until his face, veined and papery, was inches from hers. 'If I had a child with a stare as insolent as yours, she would be beaten. Sit there and keep out of my sight.' He pushed her backwards, and the cross hanging from his neck caught in Feo's hair. He tugged it away viciously and passed through the door back into the hall. The soldiers followed him. Marina signalled to Feo to stay – the same hand gesture they used for wolves – and ran after them.

Feo stood in the doorway, waiting for the buzzing in her ears to die away; then she heard a cry and something breaking, and ran, skidding down the hall in her socks.

Her mother was not there, but the soldiers had crowded into Feo's bedroom, filling her room with their smell. Feo flinched away from it: smoke, she thought, and a year's worth of sweat and unwashed facial hair.

One of the soldiers had an underbite he could have picked his own nose with.

'Nothing worth anything,' said one soldier. His eyes moved across her reindeer-skin bedspread, the hurricane lamp, and came to rest on her skis leaning against the fireplace. Feo ran to stand protectively in front of them.

'These are mine!' she said. 'They're nothing to do with the Tsar. I made them.' It had taken her a whole month for each ski, whittling them every evening and smoothing them with grease. Feo gripped one in both fists like a spear. She hoped the prickling in her eyes was not visible. 'Get away from me.'

Rakov smiled, not sweetly. He took hold of Feo's lamp, held it up to the morning light. Feo grabbed at it.

'Wait!' said Marina. She stood in the doorway. There was a bruise on her cheek that had not been there before. 'Can't you see this is my daughter's room?'

The young men laughed. Rakov did not join in: he only stared at them until they turned red and fell silent. He crossed to Feo's mother, studied the mark on her cheek. He leaned forward until the tip of his nose was touching her skin, and sniffed. Marina stood motionless, her lips bitten shut. Then Rakov grunted and threw the lamp at the ceiling.

'*Chyort!*' cried Feo, and ducked. Broken glass rained down on her shoulders. She lunged forward at the General, swinging blindly with her ski. 'Get out!' she said. 'Get out!'

The General laughed, caught the ski and wrenched it from her. 'Sit down and behave, before you make me angry.'

'Get *out*,' said Feo.

'Sit! Or you will end up in the same position as that elk.'

Marina seemed to jerk into life. '*What?* What insanity in your head makes you think you can threaten my child?'

'You *both* disgust me.' Rakov shook his head. 'It is an abomination to live with those animals. Wolves are vermin with teeth.'

'That is …' Feo's mother's face spoke a hundred different swear words before she said, 'inaccurate.'

'And your daughter is vermin when she is with those wolves. I've heard stories about you both – you're unfit to be a mother.'

Marina let out a sound that it hurt Feo to hear, part-way between a gasp and a hiss.

He went on, 'There are schools – in Vladivostok – where she could learn the values of a better mother – Mother Russia. Perhaps I will have her sent there.'

'Feo,' said Marina, 'go and wait in the kitchen. *Immediately*, please.' Feo darted out, rounded the door and stopped there, hesitating, peering through the crack in the hinge. Her mother's face, as she turned to Rakov, was shining with anger and with other, more complicated, things.

'Feo is *my child*. For God's sake, do you not know what that means?' Marina shook her head incredulously. 'She is worth an entire army of men like you. My love for her is a thing you should underestimate only if you have a particularly powerful death wish. The love of a parent for a child – it *burns*.'

'How inconvenient for you.' Rakov ran a hand along his chin. 'What is your point? And make it quick.' He wiped his boot on the bed. 'You're becoming tedious.'

'My point is that you will keep your hands off my daughter if you value their current position at the ends of your arms.'

Rakov snorted. 'That is somewhat unfeminine.'

'Not at all. It seems profoundly feminine to me.'

Rakov stared at Marina's fingers, the tips of two of which were missing, and then at her face. His expression was frightening: there was something uncontained about it. Marina stared back at him. Rakov blinked first.

He grunted, and strode out of the door. Feo twisted

backwards out of his way, then ran after him into the kitchen.

'You are not making this easy for yourself,' he said. His face was dispassionate as he gripped the side of the dining table and overturned it. Feo's favourite mug crashed on the floor.

'Mama!' said Feo. She took a handful of her mother's coat as Marina swept into the room and held it tight.

Rakov did not even glance in her direction. 'Take the paintings,' he said. They had three, each with boldly coloured cubes arranged in shapes that hinted at men and women. Marina loved them. Feo humoured her.

'Wait, don't!' said Feo. 'That's Mama's Malevich. It was a present! Wait! Here. There's this!' Feo fished her gold chain from around her neck and held it out to the youngest soldier. 'It's gold. It was Mama's mother's before it was mine, so it's old. Gold's worth more when it's old.' The soldier bit the chain, sniffed it, nodded and handed it to Rakov.

Feo ran to open the front door. She stood by it, the snow blowing in and coating her socks. Her whole body was shaking. 'Now you have to go.'

Marina closed her eyes for one brief moment, then opened them and smiled at Feo. The two soldiers spat

on the floor in a bored kind of way and headed out into the snow.

'This is the only warning you will be given,' said Rakov. He ignored the open door and the snow-covered wind. 'The Tsar's orders. The Tsar will not have his animals slaughtered by wolves *you* have taught to hunt. From now on, if the people of the city send you wolves, you shoot them.'

'No!' said Feo. 'We can't! Anyway, we don't have a gun! Tell him, Mama!'

Rakov ignored her. 'You will send back a message to the superstitious idiots who send their ridiculous pets to you that you have released them into the wild, and then you will shoot the animals.'

'I will not,' said Marina. Her face looked empty of blood. It made Feo's stomach ache; it made her wish that she had a gun to point at the man in the doorway.

Rakov's coat wrinkled as he shrugged. 'You know the penalty for those who act against the orders of the Tsar? You remember what happened to the rioters in St Petersburg? This is the only warning you will receive.' He crossed to the front door, and as he passed he pointed a gloved finger at Feo's heart. 'You too, girl.' He jabbed once, hard, against her collarbone. Feo jumped backwards.

'If we see that child with a wolf, we'll shoot the wolf and take the child.'

He slammed the door behind him.

Later that day, Feo and her mother sat by the fire. The shards of broken glass and china had been swept clear and the elk had been packed in ice and stored in the woodshed – Feo had wanted to bury it properly, with a cross and a funeral, but her mother had said no: they might need to eat it if the winter kept marching on. Feo rested her head on her mother's shoulder.

'What do we do now, Mama?' she asked. 'Now they've said we have to kill the wolves? We won't, will we? I won't let you.'

'No, *lapushka*!' Marina's arm, with its embroidery of scars and muscle, enwrapped Feo. 'Of course not. But we'll be a little more silent, and a little more watchful.' She rattled the chestnuts roasting in the grate, and flipped one into Feo's hands. 'It's what the wolves do. We can do it too. Can't we?'

Of course they could, Feo thought that evening as she pulled on skis. Humans, on the whole, Feo could take or leave; there was only one person she loved

properly, with the sort of fierce pride that gets people into trouble, or prison, or history books. Her mother, she thought, could do anything.

It took Feo ten minutes to ski to the ruins of the stone chapel. At the entrance hall were three dilapidated statues of saints: they had no heads, and two of them had grown a scaly skin of green lichen. Even without heads, the saints managed to look unimpressed by this state of affairs. Only two and a half of the chapel walls were still standing, and the roof had long ago crumbled on to the mosaic floor below. There were pews, half eaten away by woodworm, and a marble miniature of the Virgin, which Feo had cleaned with the chewed end of a twig. If the light was right in the chapel, and if you looked closely, you could see that the walls had once been painted with gold figures. It was, Feo thought, the most beautiful place on earth.

In the chapel lived a pack of three wolves.

One wolf was white, one black and one a greyish mix, with black ears and the face of a politician. They could not be called tame – they certainly would not come if you called – but nor were they wholly wild. And Feo, the neighbours said, was half feral herself, and they looked in horror at her wolf-smelling red cloak. It made sense,

then, that Feo and the wolves would be best friends: they met each other halfway.

As she skied in through the door, the wolves were chewing on the carcasses of two ravens, covering the statue of Mary with flecks of blood. Feo did not go close – it is wisest not to interrupt wolves when they are eating, even if they are your closest friends – but waited, her feet tucked up on one of the pews, until they had finished. They were unhurried, licking their muzzles and forepaws, and then charged at her as a gang, knocking her off the pew and covering her chin and hands with wolf spit. She and Black had a game of chase in and out of the pews, Feo swinging for balance around the headless saints. She felt some of the grey weight of the day lift off her stomach.

Feo could not remember a time when she had not known and loved the wolves. It was impossible not to love them: they were so lean and beautiful and uncompromising. She had grown up picking pine needles out of their fur and old meat from their teeth. She could howl, her mother used to say, before she could talk. Wolves made sense to her; wolves, Feo thought, were one of the few things worth dying for. It seemed unlikely, though, that anyone would ask her to: after all, wolves were, in general, on the other side of the equation.

TWO

The wolf who arrived two weeks after the General's warning was a young one, a female with a beautiful tail, but fatter than any wolf should be.

Usually, when the carriages arrived at the house in the woods, the drivers would blink, looking around for someone large and male to come and untie the wolf. Instead they would see Feo and her mother coming from the house, wrapped in cooking smells. Marina was thirty-three and tall as the lintel on the front door. She had taught Feo to do pull-ups on the cottage door frames. She had a four-clawed scar circling her left eye. Men who met her had been known to forget, just for a second, how to breathe.

This morning, though, Feo greeted the cart alone.

She took the struggling wolf in her arms, nudging away the driver's offer of help, and laid her in the snow. She stroked her head, and she quietened.

The wolf's fur was the blackest Feo had ever seen. At night she would be invisible – in fact, darker than the night itself, because Russian nights, especially when there is snow to reflect the stars, are never absolutely dark.

'Good to meet you,' said Feo to the wolf. She ignored the driver and dipped her face, touching her nose to the wolf's muzzle. The wolf licked her chin. Her breath smelt reassuringly of spit and silver coins, but the long tongue was swollen and bleeding a little.

'She's bitten herself,' said Feo. 'You should have driven her more carefully.' She looked properly at the driver. He was a big man, with long nose hair that blended seamlessly into his beard. 'Did you pass any soldiers on the way?'

'What? Why would I –'

'Nothing, in that case.' Feo shook her head, hard. 'Forget I said that.' She untied the wolf softly, keeping her hands where the wolf could see them. Her claws were too long, starting to curl inwards towards the pads of her feet. Feo took her knife, balanced one of the wolf's paws on her knee and began to cut the claws.

'Have you got any food for her?' Feo asked the driver. 'She's hungry.'

He raised his eyebrows. 'No. She's fat enough already.'

Feo braced the wolf's jaw open against her torso and ran her fingers along the teeth, pushing at the gums.

'You – little girl, stop that! Mother of God!' The man let out an impressive cascade of swear words. Feo noticed with interest that his fingernails were sweating. 'Do you want to be killed? What are you *doing*?'

'I'm checking for gum decay.' There was none. She let the wolf go and scratched her under the front legs. The wolf collapsed on her side, whimpering with pleasure.

The man still looked horrified, and almost angry. 'Shouldn't that thing have a bit of rope around its jaws?' He was staring at Feo, at her eyes and at her earlobe: it had been split in two by an accidental wolf's claw when she was six. Feo shook her hair over her face and gave him a withering look. At least, she tried to. She had only read about it in books and wasn't sure how it was done. She imagined it involved a lot of nostril work.

'Wolves don't wear rope. They're not like *dogs*.' They had more fire in them, she thought, and uneven tempers. It was difficult to explain. She bit her lip, thinking how to put it, then shook her head. Other people were so

difficult. 'You could go, if you felt like you wanted to. That's how I'd feel, if I were you.'

Marina emerged from the house, her hair half braided, just in time to see the cart disappearing.

'He didn't want a drink?' she asked.

'No,' said Feo. She grinned at her mother. 'He didn't seem that keen on staying, actually.'

'That's probably just as well. Come, quickly – let's get her under the trees and out of sight.'

'You think they're watching us?' Feo stared around at the snow.

'It's possible, *lapushka*. I don't think it was an empty threat. Empty threats, in my experience, involve fewer breakages.'

The wolf walked agonisingly slowly towards the woods, yelping as she went, as if unfamiliar with cold.

Marina dusted snow from Feo's hair. 'We need to talk about what might happen.'

'Uh-huh.' The wolf was coughing. Feo laid two fingers on her throat and kneaded gently. 'What did she do, do you think? Why did they send her away?'

'They said she got into the Countess's wardrobe and chewed up the dresses. But are you listening to me?'

'That's *all*? She didn't bite anyone? Yes, sorry, I'm listening!' Feo thought about her pack. Grey had bitten

off the thumb of a visiting tax collector. White had scraped a cut an inch deep in a duchess's thigh when she had tried to make her dance for visitors. And Black had eaten three toes which, technically, had belonged to an English lord. Her wolves, Feo thought, were a bunch of the most beautiful criminals.

'If Rakov's men are watching us, you can't be seen with the wolves in public.'

'Of course. You already said that, Mama! And I asked the driver if he saw any soldiers, and he said no.'

'You did *what*?' Marina looked startled. 'My darling, you mustn't mention soldiers to anybody. It's not wise to let strangers know you have anything to fear.'

'Oh.' Feo's insides felt suddenly a little tighter, a little hotter. 'I'm sorry. I didn't know that.'

'It's my fault. I should have warned you.' Marina rubbed both hands through her hair. 'I've been making an escape plan. Just in case.'

The wolf set the side of her muzzle against Feo's knee and coughed. 'Mama, did she swallow the dresses? If she's still got material in her teeth it could be hurting her.'

'Feo, leave the –'

'Look, Mama.' Feo pushed open the wolf's jaws. Wolf spit covered her hand as she felt carefully inside. At the

back of the wolf's mouth a wedge of cloth had stuck between the teeth. Feo tugged. It was red velvet, with one tiny seed pearl surviving from the embroidery.

'There! And also this thread they used to tie her is too thin,' said Feo. She held up the wolf's paw for her mother to see. 'Look! Blood, there, see? Her paws are so fragile.' She kissed the wolf's ear. 'We should call you Tenderfoot.'

'Here, I've got some ointment.' Marina bent and rubbed some brownish paste on to the wolf's paw. Her hands were faster than most people's, and the wolf relaxed into her grip. 'But, Feo, do you understand? You'll need to pack a bag – food, dry clothes, a knife, rope – and keep it by the back door, just in case.'

Feo dragged her attention away from Tenderfoot. 'In case what, though, Mama?'

'In case Rakov comes back for us.'

'But he wouldn't! Would he? I mean – he's old.' Feo tried to push away the memory of his eyes staring out at her from the yellowed face. 'Old people like sitting down. And growing ear hair. And … soup.' Feo had met very few old people. 'He'll be busy doing those things.'

Marina smiled, but the corners of her mouth looked heavy. 'Just keep your eyes open, *lapushka*. If you want to see the wolves, stay in the chapel or behind the

house. We'll wild this one as quickly as we can and release her at the woods to the west, by the kidney-shaped lake, so she won't stray near Rakov.'

'But those woods are bad for hunting! She'll starve!'

'Not if we teach her to catch birds. Besides, wolves find a way. Wolves are the witches of the animal world.'

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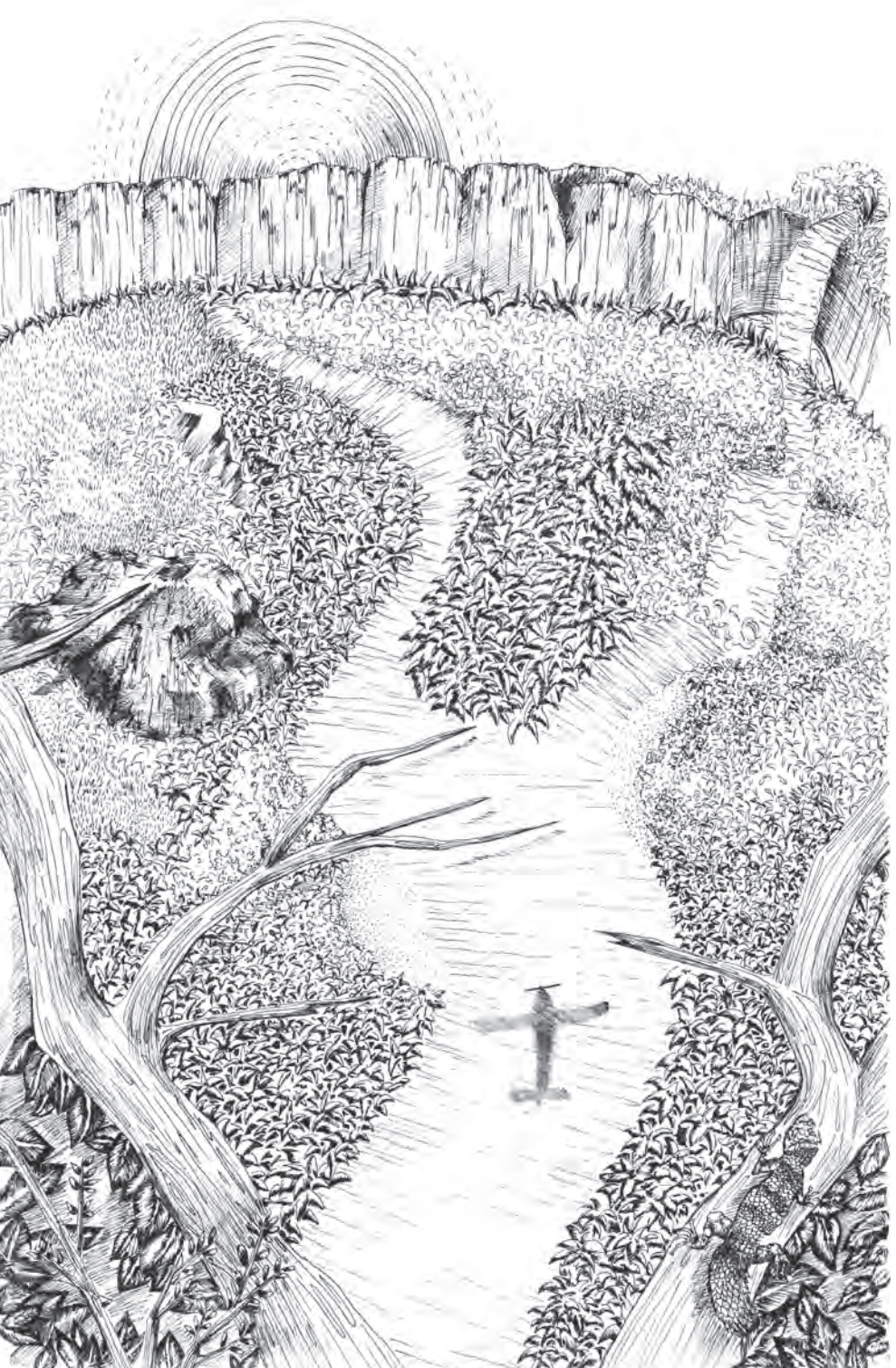


FLIGHT

Like a man-made magic wish, the aeroplane began to rise.

The boy sitting in the cockpit gripped his seat and held his breath as the plane climbed into the arms of the sky. Fred's jaw was set with concentration, and his fingers twitched, following the movements of the pilot beside him: joystick, throttle.

The aeroplane vibrated as it flew faster into the setting sun, following the swerve of the Amazon River below them. Fred could see the reflection of the six-seater plane, a spot of black on the vast sweep of blue, as it sped towards Manaus, the city on the

water. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and pressed his forehead against the window.

Behind Fred sat a girl and her little brother. They had the same slanted eyebrows and the same brown skin, the same long eyelashes. The girl had been shy, hugging her parents until the last possible moment at the airfield; now she was staring down at the water, singing under her breath, her brother trying to eat his seatbelt.

In the next row, on her own, sat a pale girl with blonde hair down to her waist. Her blouse had a neck-ruffle that came up to her chin, and she kept tugging it down and grimacing. She was determinedly not looking out of the window.

The airfield they had just left had been dusty and almost deserted, just a strip of tarmac under the ferocious Brazilian sun. Fred's cousin had insisted that he wear his school uniform and cricket jumper, and now, inside the hot, airless cabin, he felt like he was being gently cooked inside his own skin.

The engine gave a whine, and the pilot frowned and tapped the joystick. He was old and soldierly, with brisk nostril hair and a grey waxed moustache which seemed to reject the usual laws of gravity. He touched the throttle and the plane soared upwards, higher into the clouds.

It was almost dark when Fred began to worry. The pilot began to belch, first quietly, then violently and repeatedly. His hand jerked, and the plane dipped suddenly to the left. Someone screamed behind Fred. The plane lurched away from the river and over the canopy. The pilot grunted, gasped and wound back the throttle, slowing the engine. He gave a cough that sounded like a choke.

Fred stared at the man – he was turning the same shade of grey as his moustache. 'Are you all right, sir?' he asked. 'Is there something I can do?'

Fighting for breath, the pilot shook his head. He reached over to the control panel and cut the engine. The roar ceased. The nose of the plane dipped downwards. The trees rose up.

‘What’s happening?’ asked the blonde girl sharply. ‘What’s he doing? Make him stop!’

The little boy in the back began to shriek. The pilot grasped Fred’s wrist hard for a single moment, then his head slumped against the dashboard.

And the sky, which had seconds before seemed so reliable, gave way.

THE GREEN DARK

Fred wondered, as he ran, if he was dead. *But*, he thought, *death would surely be quieter*. The roar of the flames and his own blood vibrated through his hands and feet.

The night was black. He tried to heave in breath to shout for help as he ran but his throat was too dry and ashy to yell. He jabbed his finger into the back of his tongue to summon up spit. 'Is anybody there? Help! Fire!' he shouted.

The fire called back in response; a tree behind him sent up a fountain of flames. There was a rumble of thunder. Nothing else replied.

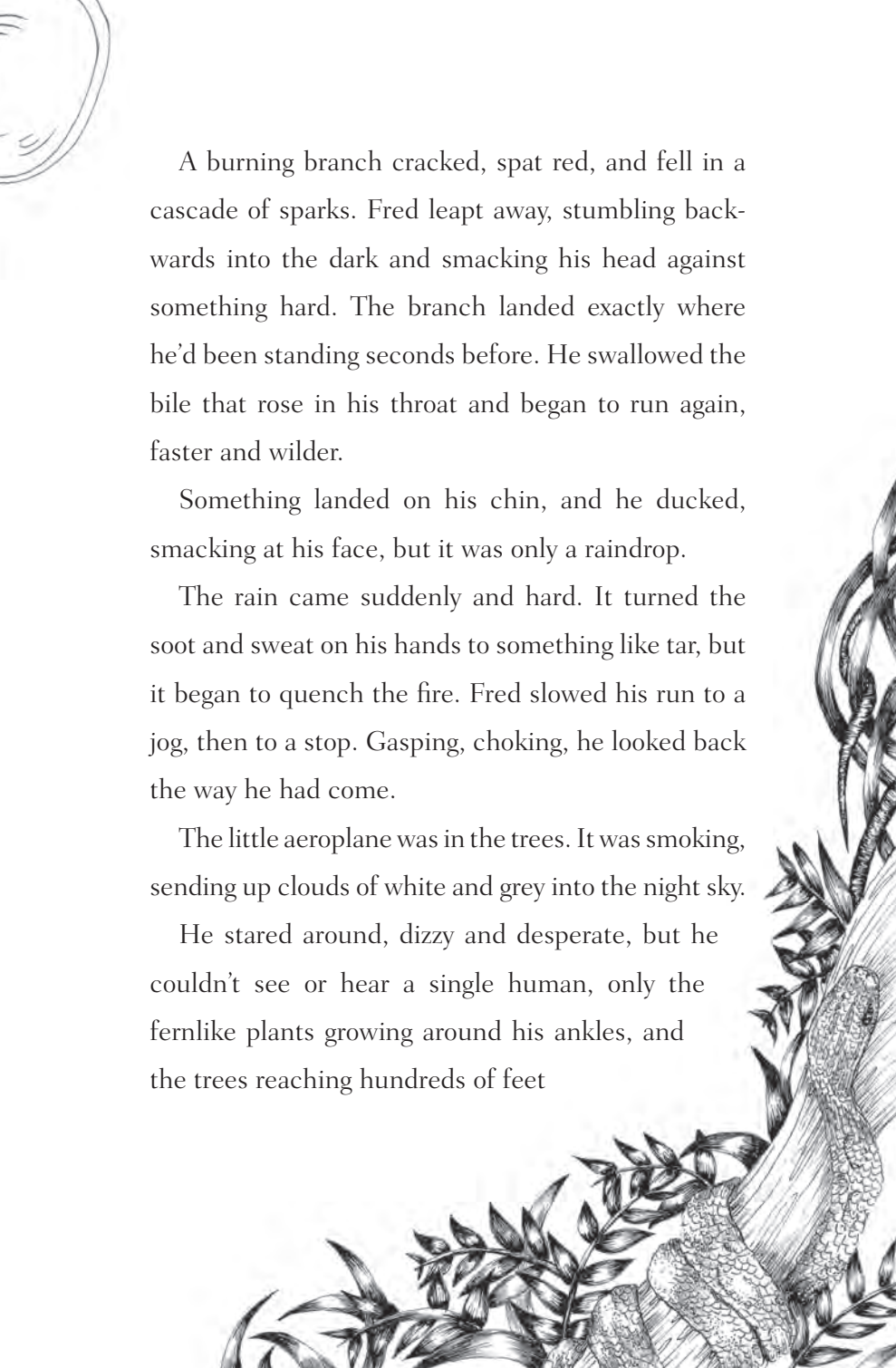
A burning branch cracked, spat red, and fell in a cascade of sparks. Fred leapt away, stumbling backwards into the dark and smacking his head against something hard. The branch landed exactly where he'd been standing seconds before. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and began to run again, faster and wilder.

Something landed on his chin, and he ducked, smacking at his face, but it was only a raindrop.

The rain came suddenly and hard. It turned the soot and sweat on his hands to something like tar, but it began to quench the fire. Fred slowed his run to a jog, then to a stop. Gasping, choking, he looked back the way he had come.

The little aeroplane was in the trees. It was smoking, sending up clouds of white and grey into the night sky.

He stared around, dizzy and desperate, but he couldn't see or hear a single human, only the fernlike plants growing around his ankles, and the trees reaching hundreds of feet



up into the sky, and the panicked dive and shriek of birds. He shook his head, hard, trying to banish the shipwreck-roar in his ears.

The hair on his arms was singed and smelt of eggs. He put his hand to his forehead; his eyebrow had charred and part of it came away on his fingers. He wiped his eyebrow on the sleeve of his shirt.

Fred looked down at himself. One leg of his trousers was ripped all the way up to the pocket, but none of his bones felt broken. There was vicious pain, though, in his back and neck, and it made his arms and legs feel far-off and foreign.

A voice came suddenly from the dark. 'Who's there? Get away from us!'

Fred spun round. His ears still buzzing, he grabbed a rock from the ground and hurled it in the direction of the voice. He ducked behind a tree and crouched on his haunches, poised to jump or run.

His heart sounded like a one-man band. He tried not to exhale.

The voice said, 'For God's sake, don't throw things!'

It was a girl's voice.

Fred looked out from behind the tree. The light of the moon filtered deep green to the forest floor, casting long-fingered shadows against the trees, and he could see only two bushes, both of them rustling.

'Who is it? Who's there?' The voice came from the second bush.

Fred squinted through the dark, feeling the remaining hair rise up on his arms.

'Please don't hurt us,' said the bush. The accent wasn't British; it was something softer, and the voice was definitely a child's, not an adult's. 'Was it you, throwing poo?'

Fred looked down at the ground. He'd snatched up a piece of years-old, fossilised animal dung.

'Oh,' he said. 'Yes.' He was becoming accustomed to the dark, and could see the shine of eyes peering out from the grey-green gloom of the undergrowth. 'Are you from the plane? Are you hurt?'

'*Yes*, we're hurt! We fell out of the sky!' said one bush, as the other said, 'No, not badly.'

'You can come out,' said Fred. 'It's only me here.'

The second bush parted. Fred's heart gave a great leap. Both the girl and her brother were covered in scratches and burns and ash – which had mixed with sweat and rain and made a kind of paste on their faces – but they were alive. He was not alone. 'You survived!' he said.

'Obviously we did,' said the first bush, 'or we'd be less talkative, wouldn't we?' The blonde girl stepped out into the lashing rain. She stared from Fred to the other two, unsmiling. 'I'm Con,' she said. 'It's short for Constantia, but if you call me that I'll kill you.'

Fred glanced at the other girl. She smiled nervously, and shrugged. 'Right,' he said. 'If you say so. I'm Fred.'

'I'm Lila,' said the second girl. She held her brother on her hip. 'And this is Max.'

'Hi.' Fred tried to smile but it made the cuts on his cheek stretch and burn so he stopped and made do with a grin that involved only the left half of his face.

Max was at the breathless stage of crying, and he clung to his sister so tightly his fingers were pressing

bruises on her skin. She was leaning over to one side to hold him up, shaking with the effort. They looked, Fred thought, like a two-headed creature, arms entwined.

'Is your brother badly hurt?' he asked.

Lila patted her brother desperately on the back. 'He won't talk – he's just crying.'

Con looked back towards the fire and shivered. The flames cast a light on her face. She was no longer blonde; her hair was grey with soot and brown with blood, and she had a scratch on her shoulder that looked deep.

'Are you all right?' he asked, wiping rain out of his eyes. 'That cut looks bad.'

'No, I'm not all right,' Con spat. 'We're lost, in the Amazon jungle, and statistically speaking it's very likely that we're going to die.'

'I know.' Fred didn't feel he needed reminding. 'I meant –'

'So, no,' Con's voice grew thin and high, 'I think it would be safe to say that none of us are all right, not at all, not even slightly!'

The bushes rustled. The rain hammered down on Fred's face.

'We need to find shelter,' he said. 'A big tree, or a cave or something that would –'

'No!' Max gave a sudden scream: a yell that was wet with spit and fear.

Fred stepped backwards, raising his hands. 'Don't cry! I just thought –' Then his eyes followed Max's pointing finger.

There, three inches from Fred's shoe, was a snake.

It was speckled brown and black, patchworked to match the jungle floor, and its head was as big as a fist. For one second nobody breathed. The jungle waited. Then Max let out a second scream that dug deep into the night and the four of them turned and fled.

The ground was sodden and they ran pell-mell, sending up mud into one another's eyes and grazing their elbows against trees. Fred ran as if his body were not his own, faster than he'd ever run, his palms stretched ahead of him. He tripped over a root and

turned a full somersault, coming up spitting earth. He ran on. The rain blinded him and shadows flashed past him in the darkness.

There was a yell behind him.

'Please, Max!' said Lila.

Fred turned back, skidding in the mud.

'He won't run!' Lila bent over her brother. 'And I can't carry him!'

The little boy lay on his back, weeping up at the sky, his whole body shaking in the driving rain.

'Come on!' Fred heaved Max over his shoulder. The boy was far heavier than he'd expected and he screamed as Fred lifted him, but Fred grabbed both of Max's knees and started running, his whole body screaming with pain. He could hear Lila, her feet thumping close behind them.

The stitch in Fred's side was almost unbearable when he tore out of the trees and into a sudden clearing. He halted, and Max bumped his head against Fred's spine and yelled. Angrily, he began trying to bite one of Fred's shoulder blades.

'Please don't,' said Fred, but he was barely paying attention to the boy on his back. He stared, stunned, ahead of him.

They were standing at the edge of a wide circle of trees, open to the sky and lit by the fat moon. There was a carpet of green moss and grass, and the stars above them were clustered so thickly that the silver outnumbered the night. Fred lowered Max to the ground and stood bent over, his hands on his thighs, panting.

'Did the snake chase us?' said Max.

'No,' gasped Con.

'How do you know?' wailed Max.

Lila dropped to her knees, clutching at her side. 'Snakes don't, Maxie. We both know that. I just …'

'Panicked,' said Con. Her voice was bitter. 'That's what happened. See! Look: no snakes. We were stupid. Now we're even more lost.'

The ground in the clearing sloped slightly towards a large puddle of water. Fred crossed over to it, his muscles aching, and sniffed; it smelt of rotting things, but he was feverishly thirsty. He took a tiny sip and

immediately spat it out. 'No good,' he said. 'It tastes like a dead person's feet.'

'But I'm thirsty!' said Max.

Fred looked around the clearing, hoping to find water before Max started crying again.

'If you wring out your hair,' he said, 'there'll be water in it.' He tugged his dark fringe down over his forehead and twisted it: a few drops fell on his tongue. 'It's better than nothing.'

Max chewed on his hair for a second, then scrunched his eyes closed. 'I'm scared,' he said. It was said without whining, as simple matter-of-fact. Somehow it was worse than the tears, Fred thought.

'I know,' Lila said softly. 'We all are, Maxie.' She crossed to her brother and pulled him close to her. His small bony fingers closed over a burn on her wrist, but she didn't brush him away. She began to whisper in his ear in Portuguese: something soft, almost a song; a lullaby. They were both shaking slightly.

Fred swallowed. 'All this will look less bad in the morning,' he said.

'Will it?' said Con. There was bite to the question. 'Will it, really?'

'It can't look much worse,' he said. 'Once it's light, we'll be able to work out a way to get home.'

Con looked hard at him: there was challenge in the look, and Fred stared, unblinking, back at her. Her face was all geometry; sharp chin, sharp cheekbones, sharp eyes.

'What now, then?' she said.

'Our mama and papa say –' began Lila. The mention of her parents made her face crease and crumple, but she swallowed and went on. 'They always say: you need to sleep before you think. They say, when you're exhausted, you do stupid things. And they're scientists. So we should sleep.'

Fred found his whole body was aching. 'Good. Fine. Let's sleep.'

He lay down on his side in the wet grass. His clothes were soaked through, but the air was warm. He closed his eyes. Perhaps he would wake up in his bed at school, he thought, next to the snoring

of his roommates, Jones and Scrase. An ant crawled over his cheek.

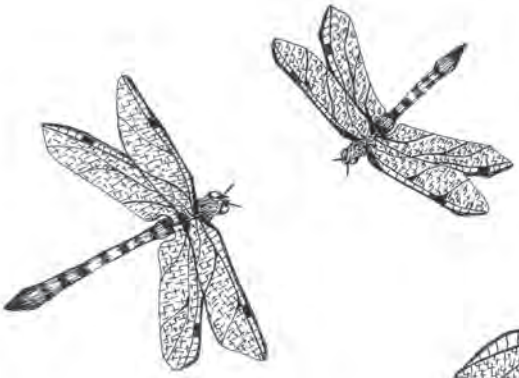
'But aren't we supposed to stay awake in case we die of concussion?' said Con.

'I think if we'd got concussion we'd be dizzy,' said Lila.

Fred, already half-asleep, tried to work out if he was dizzy. The world began to spin away from him.

'If we all die in the night, I'm blaming both of you,' said Con.

It was on that cheering thought that Fred felt himself dropping down, down, away from the jungle and the thick night air and into sleep.



THE DEN

It was ferociously hot, and he was still alive. Those were the first thoughts that came to Fred as he opened his eyes and found himself staring straight up at the Brazilian sun. Instinctively he looked down at his wristwatch, but the face was cracked and the minute hand had fallen off.

The two girls were asleep next to him. Both of them were covered in blood and scabs, but they were breathing easily. Con had her thumb in her mouth. There was a host of dragonflies in luminous blues and reds dancing around them. He thought they might be attracted to the blood.

But there was no sign of the little boy. Max was missing.

'Max!' Fred whispered, jumping to his feet. There was no answer, no movement except the burr of dragonfly wings.

Fred's heart started to pound. 'Max?' he called louder. Lila stirred in her sleep.

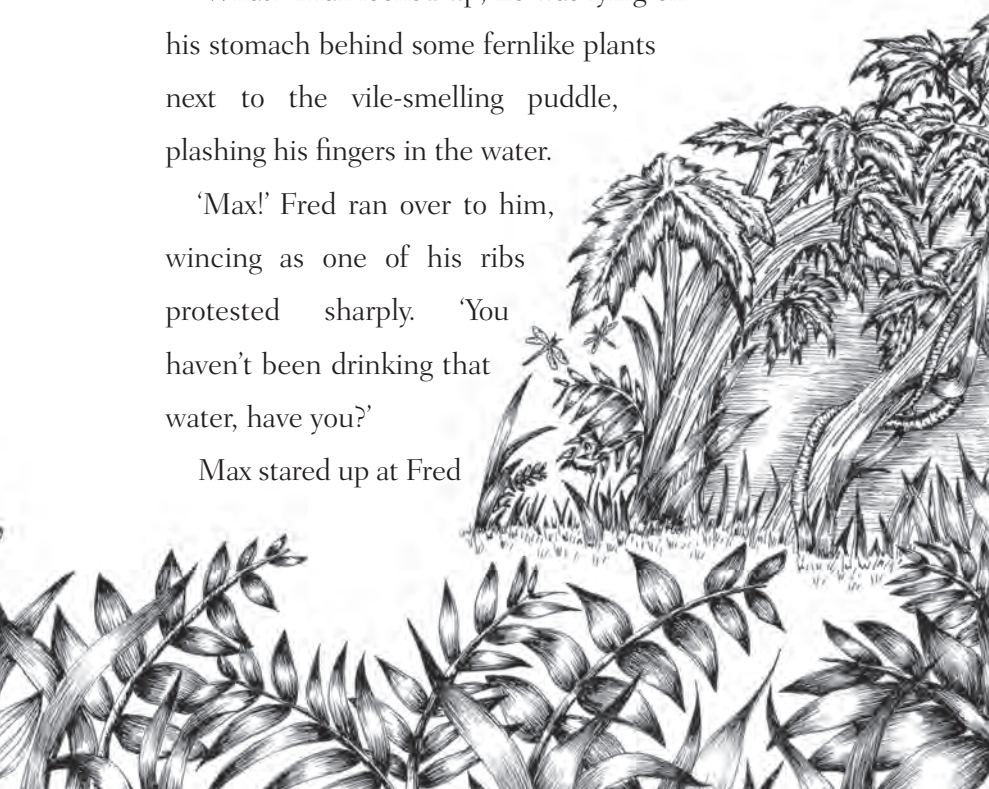
He ran to the edge of the trees. There was no trace of the boy.

'Max!' he roared, staring wildly around.

'What?' Max looked up; he was lying on his stomach behind some fernlike plants next to the vile-smelling puddle, plashing his fingers in the water.

'Max!' Fred ran over to him, wincing as one of his ribs protested sharply. 'You haven't been drinking that water, have you?'

Max stared up at Fred



as he approached, then screwed his eyes shut and let out a scream that shook the baby flesh in his cheeks. Across the clearing Lila gave a yell as she startled awake.

'That's not very flattering,' said Fred to Max, but it was possible, he reckoned, that covered in blood and soot, and with less eyebrow than usual, he didn't look very reassuring.

The boy kept screaming, barely drawing breath.

Lila jumped to her feet. 'Max!' she called. 'What's happened?'

Sugar, Fred thought. He knew that you should give people sugar for a shock. 'Do you want a sweet?' He had some mint humbugs in his pocket. 'Please stop crying!' He fished the sweets out.

His hand came out wet: there was a cut on his thigh and half-dry blood in his pocket, and the mints had spent the night marinating in it. He grimaced and put one in his mouth. The taste hadn't been improved, but the sugar gave his blood a twitch.

'Do you want one of these?' Fred spat on a corner of his shirt and polished one clean. 'It's a mint.'

'No! I hate mints!' said Max.

'It's the only food I've got.'

'Oh. Then I'll take it,' said Max. He said it like a lord accepting a peasant's bread.

'Here,' said Fred. He put it in the boy's sticky hand. 'Eat it slowly if you can.'

Max sucked loudly. His nose began to run, down past his lips and on to his chin.

'Max!' Lila called. 'Come here!'

'Come on,' said Fred. The boy's face was intent on working on the mint, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He looked very breakable. Fred felt his chest tighten, but he said only: 'You should probably blow your nose.'

'I don't blow my nose,' said Max. They walked, both limping, towards Lila. 'It's not a thing I do.'

'I think you should.'

'No!' Max licked the snot off his upper lip and added it to his mouthful of mint.

Five-year-olds were not easy to argue with, Fred thought. Max had a sweep of dirt encrusted on his

cheek, and his eyebrows turned up at the corners: it gave his face a mischievous tilt.

Fred hooked his finger into Max's shirt collar to steer him from thorns and what looked like rabbit droppings. The ground was mossy, speckled with patches of grass and creeper. One of the trees had scarlet flowers that had fallen and red-carpeted the forest floor.

Sitting among the flowers, under the bright white sun, Lila and Con were arguing.

'You! Boy, whatsyourname, Fred!' called Con. 'Come and tell this girl she's completely wrong.'

'She thinks –' began Lila, flushing.

'Obviously, I think we should go back and wait near the plane,' said Con. 'In case they see it from the air. So they can rescue us.'

'It makes more sense to stay here,' said Lila. She pulled her knees up to her chin. 'We'd just get lost, trying to find our way back. And I don't think anyone will see the plane. They don't know where we crashed; they'll have to search the entire jungle. We're on our own.' She fixed her eyes on a dandelion-like plant,

fierce and unblinking. 'We'll have to find a way to get to Manaus ourselves.'

Fred looked at the girl properly. She had a scratch across one side of her narrow face, and hair woven into two dark plaits, one of which had been charred in the crash. She wore a scarlet skirt and a blood-red top, both now stained grey-green. She looked about his age. She was scowling at Con.

Con glared back. 'That's crazy. We need to stay near the plane and wait to be rescued. My family will have sent dozens of planes to search for us by now. A hundred planes, probably.'

'But,' said Lila, 'where we crashed is burnt by the fire. Half the trees are charcoal, and so there'll be no animals –'

'We don't need animal friends!' said Con. 'This isn't a fairy tale!'

'– for us to eat,' finished Lila. 'And back there, there's –'

'What?' said Con.

'There's the pilot.'

‘He’s dead,’ said Con. She seemed genuinely puzzled. ‘He can’t hurt us.’

Lila spoke very quietly, but Fred was surprised by how authoritative she sounded. ‘We should make camp here.’

‘No!’ said Con. ‘That’s completely illogical.’

‘Fred?’ asked Lila. ‘You get the deciding vote.’

‘No he doesn’t!’ said Con. ‘That’s not fair; one person shouldn’t get to decide!’ She glared at Fred from foot to chin. ‘Not unless he agrees with me.’

Fred looked around the clearing again. The air was fresh here and the sky above them a blue that does not exist in England. He was just about to answer when he saw that at the far end, where the forest grew thick and tangled, four trees had fallen together, their tops meeting in a point. The very tips of the hairs on the back of Fred’s neck began to rise.

‘Do you think there’s anything odd about this clearing?’ he said.

‘That’s not an answer to the question!’ said Con.

'Why?' asked Lila.

'Those trees,' he said, 'over there.' He pointed.

'What about them? They fell over,' said Con. 'That's what trees do.'

'But they don't look like they fell, to me,' said Fred. He ran across the clearing. A sense was rising in him that something was strange. His curiosity pushed aside his fear.

The largest of the trees was immense: its trunk was as thick and tall as Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. Three smaller trees leant against the thicker one. Each had grown a few feet from the next in a rough square, their branches entwined and darkened by green creepers.

'Leave it alone, Fred,' called Con. 'Stay in the open!'

'There's something odd here.' He ran his hand down one of the smaller trees. At the base was a mess of fernlike plants and a few mushrooms. He pushed the ferns down, and felt his stomach swoop.

The three smaller trees didn't have roots. They were logs, fifteen feet high, each carefully tipped against the

central tree; he could see where they'd been hacked with an axe or a machete. Ferns had grown – *or been planted*, Fred thought – at their bases, disguising the places where the cuts showed.

'A den,' breathed Fred.

'What did you say?' called Con.

Fred pushed at the vines that stretched between each of the logs.

'It's like a tent,' said Fred. 'A den.' He bent down, ready to push past the foliage.

'No! Don't go in there!' said Con. It came out in a burst. 'It's not that I'm scared. But please don't. It's not a reasonable risk.'

Fred stared at her. 'A what?' He had never in his life considered whether a risk was reasonable; it sounded like something his headmaster would say.

'There could be anything in there! Jaguars, or snakes, or rats,' said Con.

'I can't *not* look!' said Fred, astonished.

'She might be right, though,' said Lila. 'About the snakes. Be careful.'

'*I'll* look!' said Max grandly, jumping to his feet.

'No you absolutely won't!' said Lila, grabbing his wrist. 'You're staying right here.'

Fred pushed aside the vines hanging down between the logs.

'Ach!' He winced: some of the tendrils had tiny but vicious thorns, and they'd caught in one of his cuts. He brushed away another handful of vines, and froze. His heart, which hadn't stopped double-beating since the crash, quickened to triple speed.

The trees met to make a tent, high enough for a man to kneel in, or for someone Max's height to stand. The air smelt deep green. There was a spiderweb in one corner, and below it was a pile of banana leaves, stacked a dozen leaves thick in the shape of a sleeping mat. They had been almost entirely devoured by ants.

Fred looked up, and felt his eyes stretch wide. 'Come and look at this!' he called. The space between the four tree trunks had once been covered in a roof of plaited palm leaves. He reached up and touched

them. The palms were riddled with holes, half-rotted, and the light shone through, but he could see how intricately they'd been woven.

He crawled further in, slowly, looking for snakes in the green light. The ground squelched under his hands. In the far corner of the den was a hollow gourd, rotten with mildew. Fred touched it, gingerly; it was mulchy. He turned it upside down, wrinkling his nose at the smell. A cascade of flints spilt out. Half had been chipped into the shape of arrowheads; others were square and squat, large as a fist.

'You two!' He crawled backwards and stuck his head through the vines. 'Come in! Quick, you have to see this! Someone was here!'

'You're crazy!' spat Con. 'If someone was here, they won't want us trespassing. I've had enough of this.' She turned and began to march back into the trees.

'Wait! Con! We shouldn't split up,' called Fred. Infuriated, he scrambled out of the den and ran after her.

'Whose house is it?' She turned to face him. Fred was startled; there were tears in her eyes. 'You don't know, do you?'

'Of course I don't,' said Fred, 'but I just think –'

'What if they come back? I've read about it in …' Con hesitated, casting around for an idea, '… *Goldilocks*. I know how it ends. I'm not getting eaten!'

'I'm pretty sure this place wasn't built by bears,' said Fred.

'It could be cannibals!'

'Cannibals are mostly a myth,' said Lila.

'Says who?'

'Everyone! Scientists. Our mama and papa.'

'How do they know?'

'Mama grew up in the jungle, near the Solimões River. And she's a scientist. A botanist.'

'Bottomist!' said Max.

Con scowled at him, the nerves in her face twitching. 'You overrate the wit of the word "bottom".'

Lila put a protective arm round Max and went on as if she hadn't been interrupted. 'And our papa's

English, and he studies the plants of the jungle. For medicine. And our grandmother was a scientist's assistant; we were supposed to be going to visit her in England. We were going to get the boat from Manaus. She wanted to meet us before she died: she wanted to see what Max was like.'

Con snorted. 'Perhaps it's just as well we crashed.'

Lila ignored that. 'Listen, whoever lives here – if they come back – might be able to take us to Manaus.'

'Or they could *eat us for dinner*,' said Con. She stared from Lila to Fred, angry and bewildered.

'Just come inside,' said Fred. 'You'll see. Nobody's been here for ages.'

Grudgingly, very slowly, Con turned round. She bent down and edged into the shelter. Lila and Max followed.

Fred pulled at the rotten leaves lining the roof. 'We could weave new leaves for the ceiling,' he said, 'and make new beds. Then it would smell less like a sock.'

He began gathering armfuls of half-decomposed foliage and pushing it outside. Underneath, the earth was soft and dusty; it smelt of a thousand warm days, layered one over the other.

Lila brought in an armful of leaves, each as big as a pillowcase. She began to lay them down for beds.

'And we could hang some extra vines over the front of the den,' said Fred, 'so nothing can see in.'

Con crouched in the shelter with her arms crossed. 'Who died and made you king?' she asked.

'Nobody!' Fred turned, startled. 'But if we're going to sleep here, we might as well make it waterproof.'

'I'm not sleeping here!' said Con. 'Someone could come back here any second.'

'But they won't,' said Fred. 'Did you see those flints?'

'Yes?'

'They're covered in moss,' he said.

'So they're dirty. Fine. How is that supposed to be reassuring?' said Con.

'He means they're old,' said Lila. 'It's deserted.'

'But why do you want to risk it?' said Con. 'What if they come back and think we're intruders?'

'Or what if they're never coming back, and they've left behind this shelter?' said Lila. Her voice wasn't loud, but there was a toughness to it. 'If someone was here that means someone else thought it was a good place to rest. It means it's safe.'

'But you can't *know* for sure.'

'But we can't know anything for sure!' said Fred. 'Lila's right. As soon as we work out how to get out of here, we'll leave. But until then, it makes sense to stay in a place where other people have been.'

'Unless they EAT US!' said Con.

'I'm staying here,' said Max. 'I want to live in the tree-tent. And if you try to make me move I'll do a wee on you.'

'No you won't!' Con backed away, smacking her head on a tree trunk.

'He does sometimes do that,' said Lila.

Which, for the moment at least, more or less settled it.

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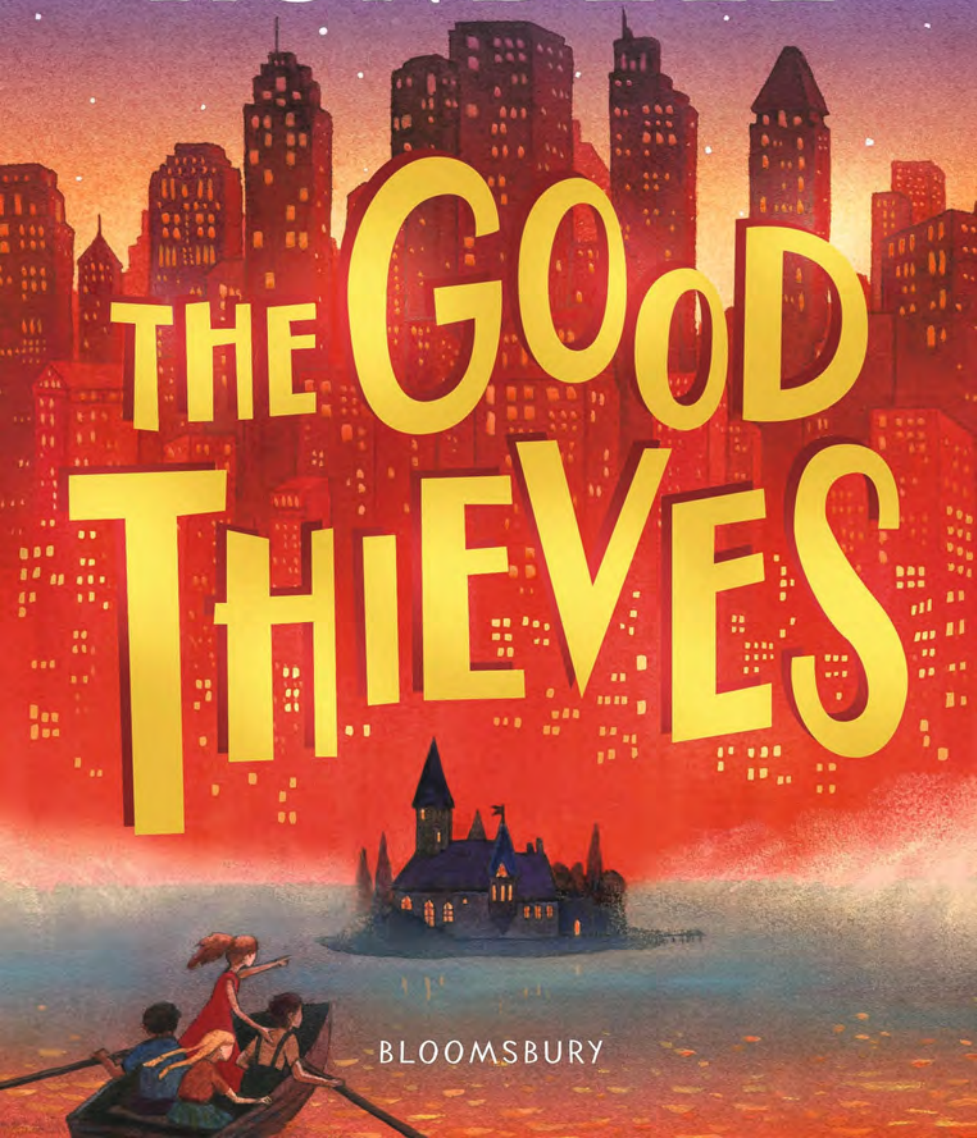
THE GOOD THIEVES



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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. Grandpa 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.

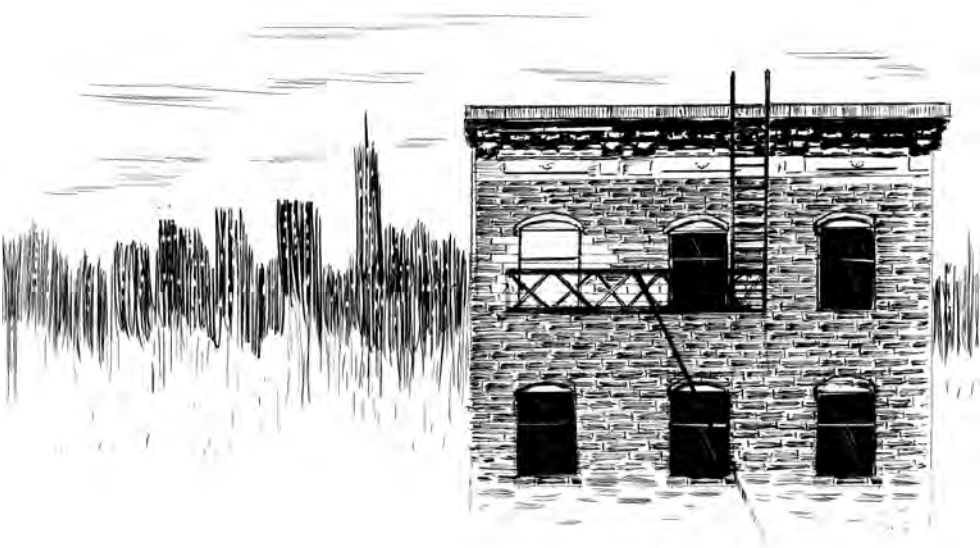
'She won't have it easy,' said Grandpa. 'And she looks so breakable. She might as well know how to throw a rock or two.'

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.

CHAPTER FOUR

Later that day, Vita crept out of the apartment, leaving Grandpa sleeping, and took a cab. She took it alone, which she had never done before, and she took it with her fists balled up inside her coat pockets and her heart beating hard.

Her first attempt to summon a cab had failed; she stood on the street outside Carnegie Hall, holding up her thumb, but when the driver who slowed saw there was no adult with her, he swerved away and drove on. On her second attempt, she wrenched open

the door and threw herself into the back seat before the driver could leave without her.

She pressed her face against the glass. It was early evening and the streets were crowded. The car hurtled across 59th Street and up Central Park West, the lights of a cinema illuminating the name of a film, *Wild Bill Hickok*.

Vita felt the bite and kick of New York spark through her. She reached into her pocket. There was a map of the city, borrowed from her grandfather, and, under it, her penknife. She closed her fingers around it, and it gave her courage.

Abruptly the cab pulled up beside the pavement. 'This is you, kid,' said the driver. 'The Dakota!'

He told her the cost for the journey, which sounded enormous. Vita knew Americans tipped everyone, but had no idea how much, so it seemed safest to give him all the money she had with her and dart away down the pavement.

She stood looking up at the building. It was vast; a castle of a place, with crenellations and turrets in the four corners, and light pouring from its windows.

As she stood there, a grey-haired man and a tall woman swept past her. The wind rose in a sudden gust and the woman laughed, lifting her hand to her hair, which was swept up with a diamond-studded swan's feather.

'Do try not to be dull, honey, or talk endlessly about politics,' said the woman. She spoke with a strong New York accent. 'Victor's parties are always so fabulously *it*.'

Vita's heart swooped with the luck of it. She didn't let herself hesitate – she followed them, keeping as close as she dared. The man and woman passed through a door, nodded at a doorman (Vita nodded too, trying to make her smile doorman-appropriate) and got into a lift. Vita stepped in with them, attempting to look haughty and unconcerned, as if she belonged in oak-panelled elevators. The woman glanced down at her, saw her left foot, and turned instantly away.

The lift opened on to a corridor. At one end were six marble steps, and an oak double door. The couple knocked, the door opened, there were shrill cries of delight, a burst of music leaked out, and they disappeared inside. From behind the door came the

tail-ends of dozens of conversations. Sorrotore was indeed having a party.

'*Run*,' said every instinct in Vita's body. *I could come back another time*, she thought. Her stomach enthusiastically backed up the idea.

But her feet disagreed. Vita's feet were braver, at that moment, than the rest of her. They carried her up the five remaining steps, and her fist, the bravest of all, gave three short raps against the door.

The door opened immediately and a heavy-browed, white-gloved footman stood there with a professional smile. His black boots were so shiny they reflected a mirror image of his nostrils up at him.

His professional smile faltered at the sight in front of him. Vita fixed her eyes on him with disconcerting ferocity. Her cheeks, she could feel, were red with cold, and her jaw quivered, so tightly were her teeth set against each other.

'Yes? What do you want?'

Vita straightened her back, to gain a few inches. 'I would like to see Mr Sorrotore.' She tried to pronounce it as her grandfather had: 'Sorrow-tore-ae'.

'He's having a soirée – as you can see.' Behind and to the left, a double door opened on to the room Vita had seen. It was even larger than she had thought, and a cacophony of voices and laughter filtered through into the hall. 'Come back tomorrow.'

'Can you ask him, though, if he'll see me?'

'You want me to risk making him angry?'

Vita wondered, suddenly, if she should have kept back some of her money. Did footmen expect to be bribed?

'He might be just as angry if he finds out you sent me away. Tell him … my grandfather is Jack Welles.'

The footman looked hard at her. He pulled off a glove, and scratched his eye, the tip of his little finger brushing the eyeball. Then he sighed. 'If he's angry, I'll make sure it's you who deals with it.' He crossed into the brightly lit room. As he pulled the glove back on, Vita saw a tattoo, between his thumb and forefinger, of a spitting cat.

Vita, left alone, stood waiting; then she pushed open the door into the drawing room, following the scent of perfume, sweat, and cigarette smoke.

It was like looking into a kaleidoscope. Couples dressed in bright colours danced in the centre of the room, or stood in groups around the edges, the women wearing diamonds large enough to kill a man, drinking hard and laughing loud. They wore splashes of rouge high on their cheekbones, and not one of them was not beautiful.

It was so hot the windows had misted over. But despite the heat, Vita wrapped her arms around herself and shivered: the laughter was too loud, as if covering over something: fear, or panic. The party seemed feverish, on edge. The women looked more like ornaments than flesh and blood. Alcohol, Vita knew, was illegal in New York under the law of Prohibition, and yet one woman sat staring at the wall, too drunk to stand.

A few noticed Vita, and she saw their eyes flick down to her ankle and their expression take on a familiar look of pity. She summoned her most unblinking glare, but she felt herself turning scarlet around the ears and neck.

She was edging back into the hall when one of the maids – a tall girl with a dirty white-blonde plait and a

sharp, sullen face, barely older than Vita – said, '*Excuse* me,' and edged past her with a tray of champagne. Vita flattened herself against a wall, out of the way.

As Vita watched, a large white-haired man reached out to take the last champagne glass. He looked oddly familiar. The maid bobbed a curtsy and was moving back into the crowd with her empty tray when she stumbled over her own boot and brushed against the man. The girl's fingers flickered against his left wrist, and suddenly there was bare skin where his wristwatch had been.

Vita caught her breath. She was about to shout, to warn the man, when the girl caught her eye. She shook her head, once, urgently, and turned away, but not before Vita saw her expression. She looked like a cornered animal: trapped.

Vita was still hesitating when a voice spoke at her right ear.

'Are you the child asking for me?'

The man who addressed her did not look like his photograph, but she had no doubt at all that it was him.

'Yes,' she said. 'And you're Victor Sorrotore.'

He was taller than she had expected, and though his suit was exquisite, his nails were bitten right down to the quick, and bloody at the edges. His hair was carefully coated in brilliantine oil, but his eyes were shadowed by dark circles, as if someone had pressed two black inky thumbs against his face. The eyes fixed themselves on Vita's, and she felt the muscles in her chest contract.

'What is it you want?' he said. She hesitated for a moment, and he went on, 'I hope you didn't come all this way to tell me my own name?' His voice was deep, American, but accented with a European edge.

'I've come to ask you for something.'

'You interrupted my party to ask a favour?' He spoke as if to a much younger child. She stared back, and tried not to blink.

'It's business,' she said.

'Business! If it was business you wanted, why didn't you come during business hours?' He snorted, and there was cruelty in it. 'I would have offered you a cigar.' He looked her over, and she could see that he

was performing some intricate, chilly calculation. 'Since you're here, let us go and find a desk and some leather furniture, so you feel sufficiently *businesslike*.'

He led the way. Out of the corner of her eye, Vita saw the maid with the waist-length plait make her way, stony-faced, among a group of laughing women. The diamond bracelet on one of their wrists disappeared.

Sorrotore stopped by the white-haired man, whose picture, she realised, she had seen in the American newspapers on the ship. A retired politician, she thought. Or, no: a retired Chief of Police. He was now a city developer and 'leading philanthropist', the papers had said, which sounded like a skin disease but presumably wasn't.

'Everything all right, Westerwicke?' said Sorrotore. 'Did it go as planned with Louie?'

Westerwicke nodded. 'I believe so. Right, Dillinger?' And he turned to a younger man standing at his elbow, with sparse sandy eyebrows and a sullen look. The man turned deep red, but nodded.

'I guess.'

'And the proof?' said Sorrotore.

Dillinger reached inside his breast pocket and pulled out a small brown envelope. He tipped a gold signet ring into his palm and held it out. 'Here.'

'Fine.' Sorrotore took it. 'I've got to deal with this –' he gestured at Vita – 'but I'll be right out.'

'Don't hurry on my account.' Westerwicke looked down at Vita and smiled: it was the smile of someone who does not like or trust children.

Sorrotore led her into a dark, wood-panelled room. The fire was smoking, and its scent was unfamiliar, as if he had doused the wood in perfume. Vita shook herself, hard, flexing her fingers inside her pockets; the party and the smoke together were making her feel dizzy, unmoored from herself.

A movement in the corner of the room made her jump.

'Don't mind the animals,' said Sorrotore.

She stared, as from behind a sofa came two tortoises, one as small as a side-plate, the other as large as a bicycle wheel. They moved cautiously, slowly, slipping a little on the polished wood. As they came closer, she saw with a jolt that they had gems

set into their shells. The larger one had a word spelled out in sparkling white stones: 'IMPERIUM'. The smaller had a word spelled out in red. She saw with a shock that it said: 'VITA'.

'Rubies,' said Sorrotore. 'And the white ones are diamonds. Not particularly high quality carat, but I think they're rather charming. *Imperium* is Latin for "power". *Vita* –' and he gave a swift, hooded look – 'means "life". Power is life, life is power.' Vita's forehead creased. 'Only those who have power really live. I don't like to forget it. They help me remember.'

'Doesn't it hurt them?' asked Vita.

'Hurt them? Don't be crazy – they're animals.'

Two armchairs stood on either side of the fire. Sorrotore placed the signet ring on the mantelpiece and sat down in one chair, gesturing Vita to the other. She sank into it with relief; her foot was beginning to shake and burn.

'Now.' The jocularity had gone out of his voice. 'Tell me why you're here.'

'I'm the granddaughter of Jack Welles,' she said.

He sighed. 'Obviously I knew that, or you'd be down in the street by now.'

'I'm here to ask –' and Vita tried to make her voice sound tough-minded and official – 'to see the paperwork relating to my grandfather's home.' The words came out too high and thin.

The smaller tortoise nipped suddenly at the back of Sorrotore's heel. He gave a hiss of shock, and kicked his foot backwards, sending the tortoise skittering over the varnished floor. It bumped against a wall and landed on its back, its feet waving in the air.

'Your tortoise!' said Vita.

'What about it?'

Vita said nothing. She got up, crossed the room, trying to hide her limp from him, and set the tortoise the right way up. Sorrotore gave a bark of unamused laughter.

'I see I've got a little Saint Francis on my hands. What do you mean, you want to look at the paperwork?'

'I want you to prove that you bought Hudson Castle legally. I want you to show me.'

'*Prove?* You expect a grown man to engage in some ridiculous game at the order of a child?'

He did not meet her eyes as he spoke, and Vita felt her temper rise to match his. He was a cheat, underneath the brilliantined hair and the gold watch; she felt sure of it. 'You took my grandfather's house, and everything in it.'

'*Took* is not the right word. He sold it to me – cheaply, admittedly, but that was his choice. It's built, as you may or may not know, on an extremely rare and beautiful ornamental lake. I would be stupid not to take the opportunity.'

'No! He said he would rent it to you—'

'Are you accusing me of lying?'

The spit of the fire and the scent of the room made Vita want to retch. Her head was lurching from thought to thought. Desperately, through the growing mist in her mind, she tried a different tack. 'At least let him go back to pack his things. There's an emerald necklace, and if you don't let him fetch it, that's illegal—'

She tried to bite back the words. But he seemed to

have barely registered them. He stood and glanced in the mirror, rearranging the way his oiled hair fell across his forehead.

'This is a joke that I have no time for. I will show you out.'

'No!' She tried to summon herself back, to remember what she knew to be true. 'You're a thief!'

Sorrotore looked at Vita, and the look pushed her backwards against the armchair. 'What did you just say?'

'I said you're a thief,' said Vita, in a voice that was just above a whisper.

'How *dare* you?' he breathed.

His face was full of something like disgust. She had prepared herself for a denial, but not for such anger, and she felt herself straining not to cry.

'Do you know what happens to people who come to my apartment and accuse me of lying to my face?'

Before Vita could answer, there was a knock, and the butler put his head around the door. 'Mr Westerwicke is being called away, sir – he'd

like to see you for a second before he leaves.'

Sorrotore swore, grunted, and strode out of the room without looking at Vita.

Vita's breath was hot in her chest, but she forced herself to stand. '*Get up,*' she whispered to herself. '*Don't be pathetic. This is what you came for. Reconnaissance. You've got to know the enemy. Look around. Something, anything, could be useful.*'

On the desk was a pile of papers, at least fifteen pages. She fumbled through them. At the top of each document were the words 'Deed of Sale'. All of the sums were $200 – astonishingly low. She noted, puzzled, that they were not addressed to Sorrotore, but to corporations with carefully boring names. She leafed through: Expedient Constructions was buying The Old Hotel on Columbus Avenue. North Manhattan Enterprises was purchasing a block of apartments of 'architectural significance' on East 23rd. The list was long.

She crossed to the mantelpiece, on which stood several invitation cards, and a photograph of a beautiful woman, signed '*Darling V! love, Lillian Gish*'.

She picked up the ring Sorrotore had set there; the gold disc, engraved with the initials *'LZ'*, glinted in the firelight. It was too large for any of her fingers, so she slipped it on to her thumb and held it out, to see it spark red and yellow.

There were footsteps in the room outside. She tugged at the ring. It stuck below the joint of her thumb. The doorknob twisted and Vita bit at the ring, trying to drag it off with her teeth. The door opened. Panicked, Vita shoved her left hand in her pocket, and darted to sit down again.

Sorrotore came back in, and this time his face was sad. 'Now, kid – listen to me. Glance around you. I imagine you noticed I'm a rich man.'

Vita did not need to glance. She knew the whole room looked like money.

'So why would I need to steal? Your grandfather said the Castle was a burden. He wanted to be free of it. I bought it. To be a canny businessman isn't a crime. It's mine, and I will not give it back, but nor –' and his eyes darkened – 'will I have it spread around town that I'm a common thief.'

'Grandfather swore he didn't! He wouldn't lie.'

'He lies because he regrets it. He lies because he's embarrassed. He lies because he feels like a foolish old man.' His voice became an intonation: a hypnotic, dark-voiced burr. 'He lies because he *is* a foolish old man.'

'He doesn't lie! I *know* him!' but an edge of doubt was creeping in; she could hear it, and flinched away from her own voice.

'You know, in your heart, that it's true. I think it would help you to say it out loud. Your grandfather lied.' And again, slower, 'Say, "My grandfather lied."'

'He *didn't*!'

'You've built a fantasy of wrong-doing and injustice around an old man's mistake. Admit it. Say, "My grandfather lied."'

Horror and embarrassment and something new, unidentifiable and unspeakable, flooded over Vita.

Renunciation, whispered the harsh, bitter little voice that lives in the dark depths of the heart. *Say he lied, and you won't need to worry any more. Poor foolish*

Grandpa. You can take him back to England. You can forget the plan. It's so simple.

Say it, and you'll be free.

The fire flickered, and Vita shrank further into her chair. She bit her lips together, holding back the words, and shook her head.

'It will help you, Vita. Say, "My grandfather lied."'

Vita's mouth opened to speak.