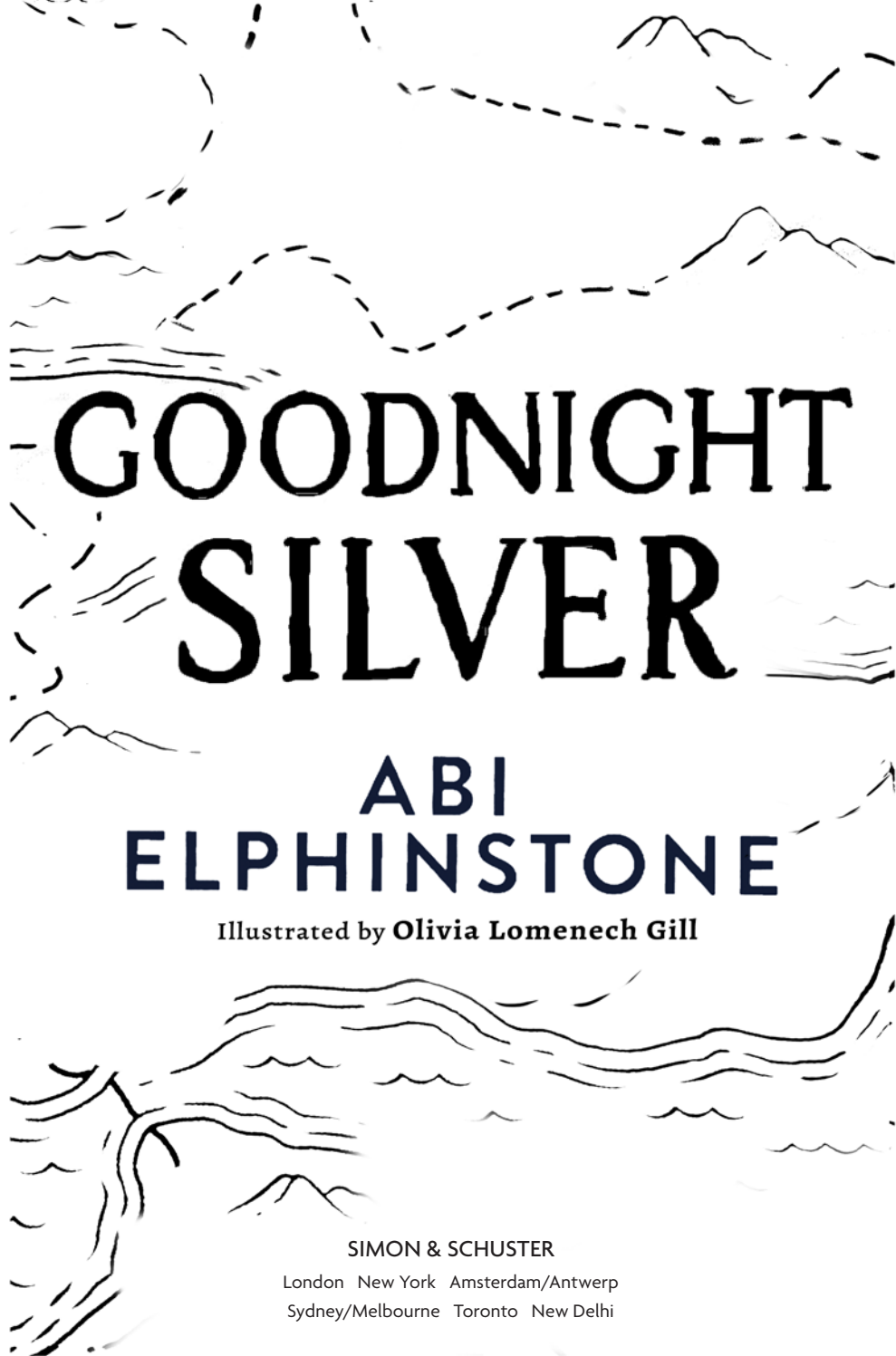


GOODNIGHT SILVER

ABI ELPHINSTONE

Illustrated by **Olivia Lomenech Gill**

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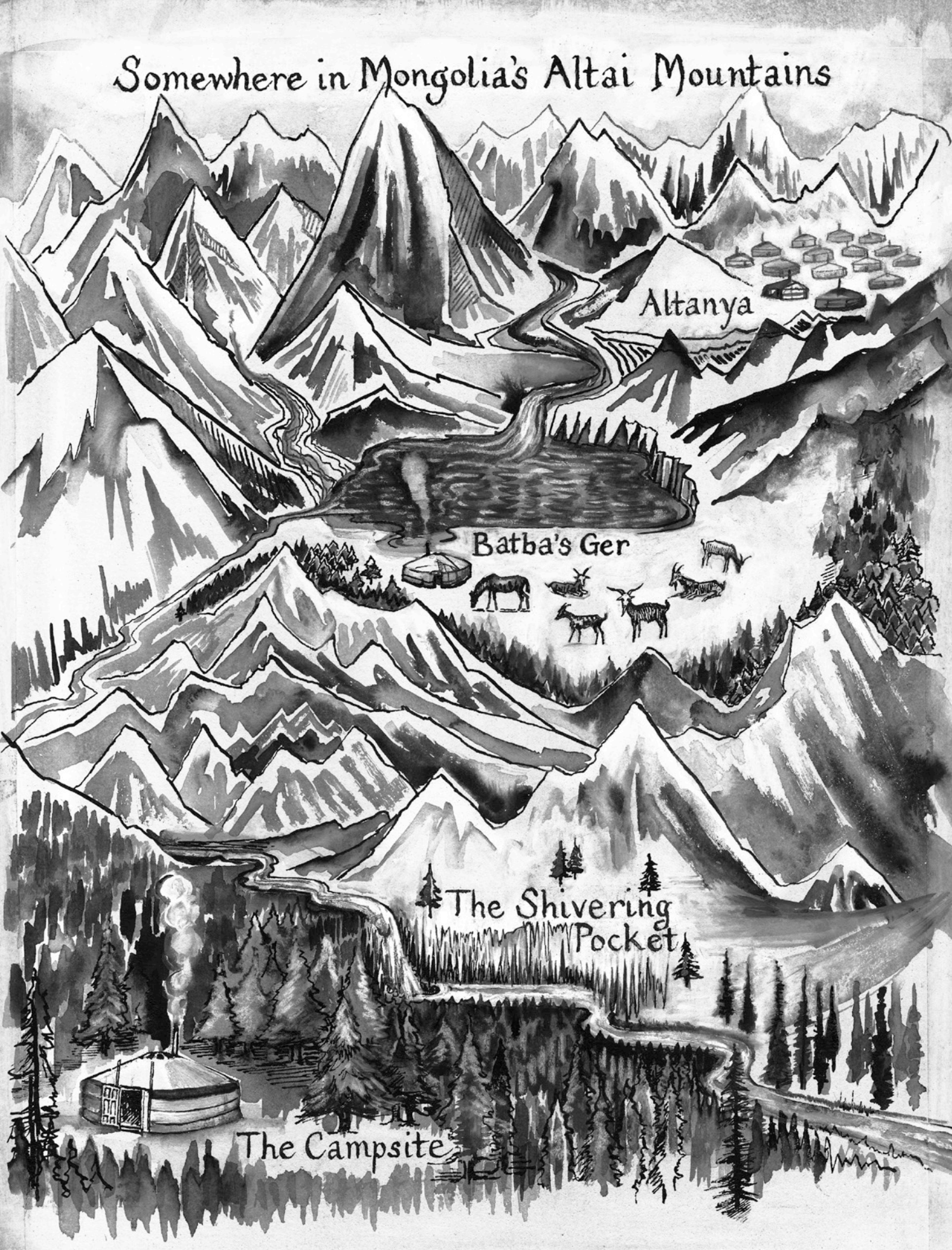
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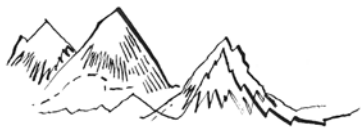
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For my own cub, Milo


Somewhere in Mongolia's Altai Mountains
Altanya
Batba's Ger
The Shivering Pocket
The Campsite



PROLOGUE

The night was still and starlit – the kind of night that looked built for stories. Snow covered everything. The forest, the frozen lake, the mountains. All of it sunk in silver. And it was quiet, too. A silence so huge you could have heard a snow leopard blink.

This was the reason the old woman had moved here. Why she had set up her large felt tent at the edge of the lake. She'd wanted to vanish into the hush of the wild and forget her troubles.

But trouble can find its way anywhere. And that night, when the old woman was sitting in her rocking chair beside the log burner in her tent, she heard a

sound that didn't belong: a shout from the direction of the forest.

She frowned. Nobody came to these parts. The old woman pulled on her sheepskin coat and made to open the tent door. But then a second noise stopped her in her tracks.

The unmistakable yelp of a wolf pup.

Curses followed – it was a man's voice – and upon realizing what was happening, the old woman flung open the door to her tent, grabbed a pitchfork and hurried into the trees.

She came upon the hunter immediately, bent over a cage, trying to drag the wolf pup out so that he could kill it and sell its fur.

But the hunter hadn't been expecting an ambush. Especially not one at the hands of an old woman wielding a pitchfork. And at the sight of her, he stumbled backwards. Which gave the pup a chance to burst free from the cage and run.

'Get out of here,' the old woman muttered at the hunter. 'And don't come back.'

The man cursed again, knowing he'd never catch

the pup. But as he turned to leave, he smirked. And the old woman knew this wouldn't be the last she saw of hunters here.

She made her way back to her tent but she didn't go to sleep. She reached for a box that had lain untouched beneath her bed for a very long time. Then she pulled a piece of gold silk from it and sat down in her rocking chair. The silk was the size of a napkin and on one half mountains, forests and lakes had been stitched in brown thread; the other half was blank.

But the emptiness was what the old woman was staring at because she knew this piece of silk was far more than a napkin.

She waited and waited. Then the flames in the log burner seemed to slow a little, as if making way for a secret. Next a breeze tiptoed into the tent, even though there was no wind, ruffling the old woman's hair before rippling over the silk.

And that's when the magic buried inside the cloth unfurled.

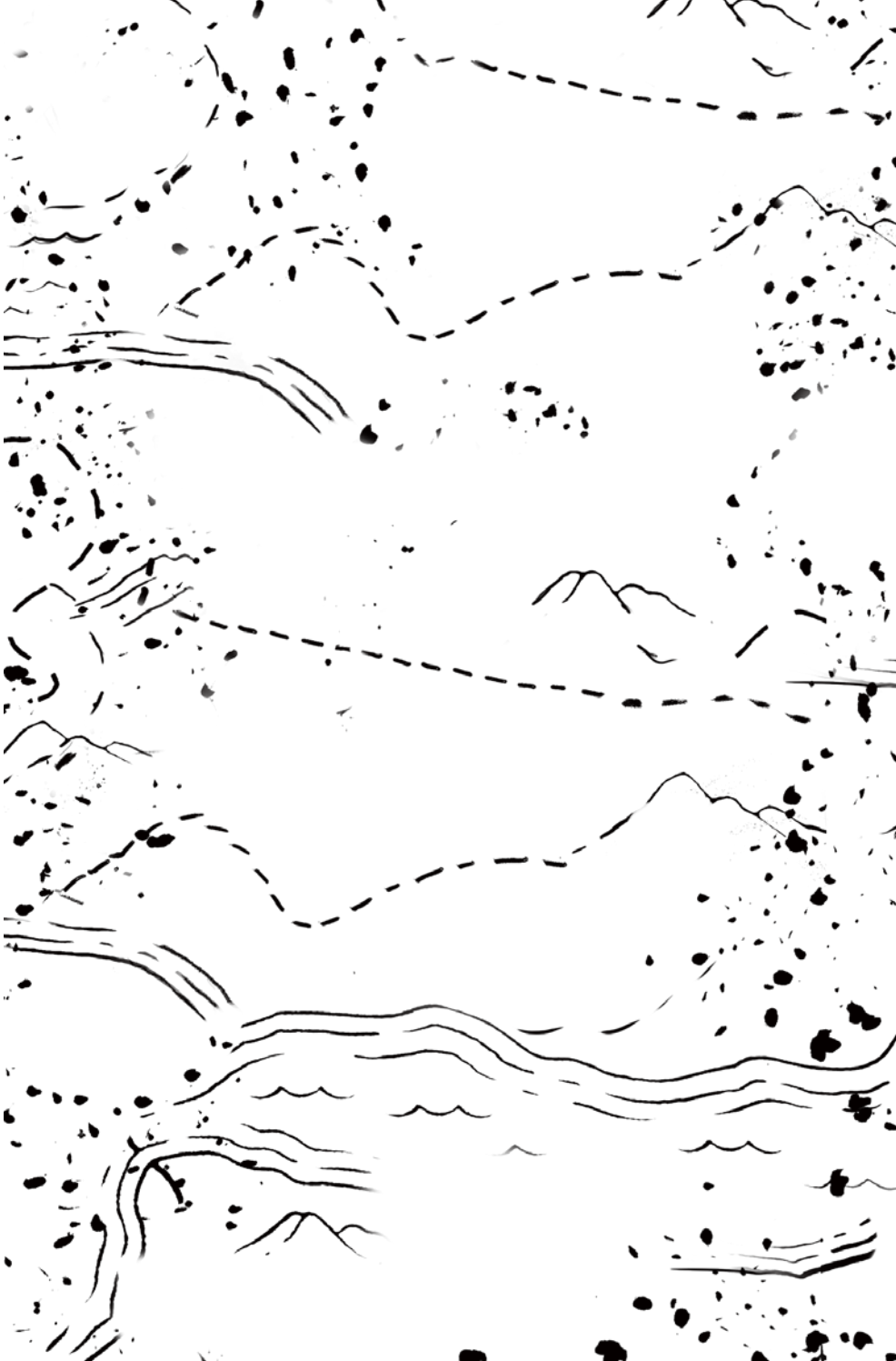
Gold stitches appeared, weaving waterfalls, rivers,

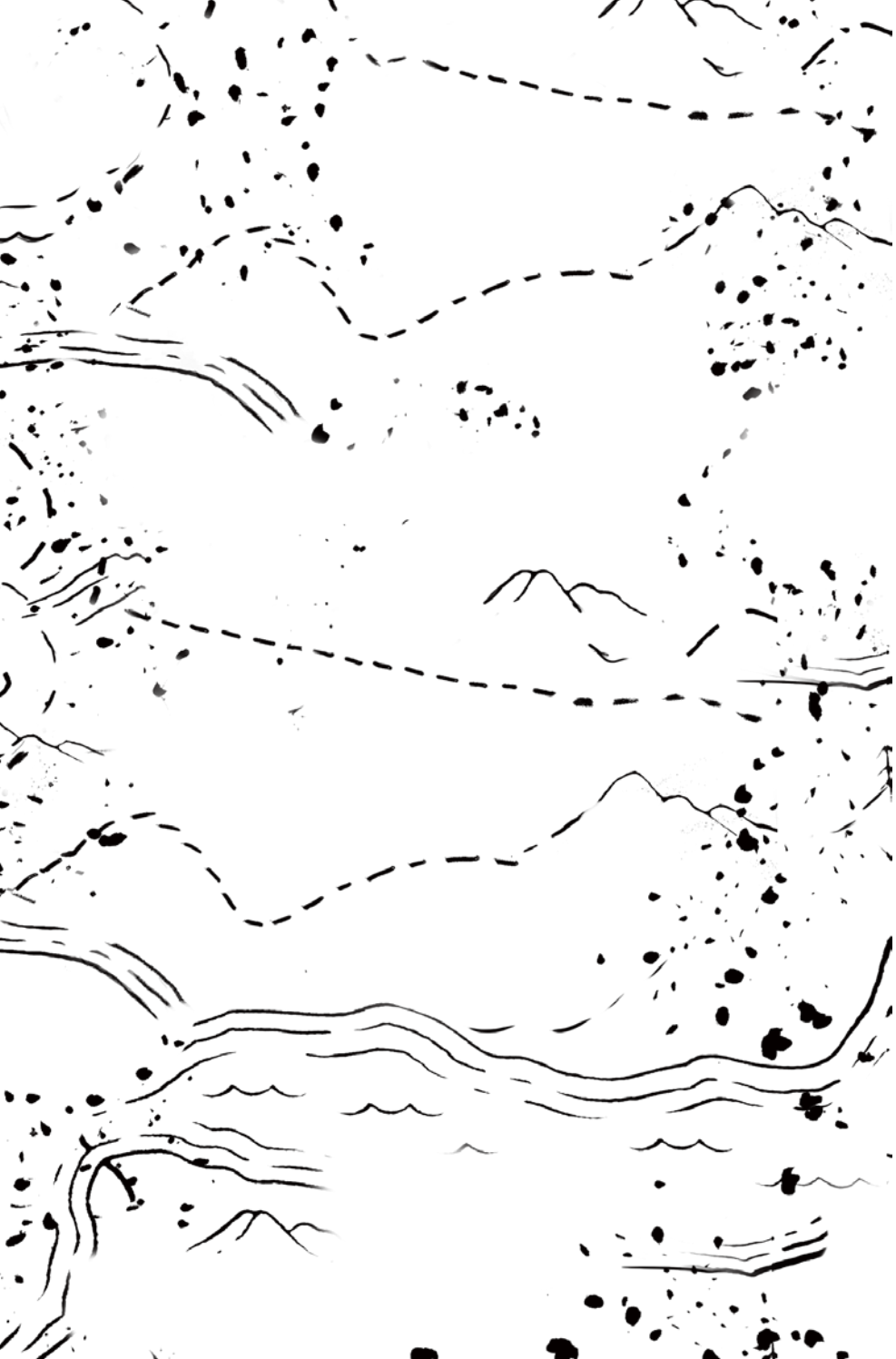
caves and mountains into the empty half of the silk. Until the old woman held, in her trembling hands, a map of a land that crackled with magic. A place where wild animals lived in peace. A pocket of the world untouched by hunters.

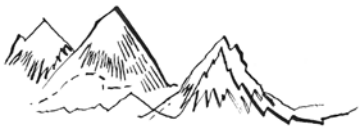
'Whisperfell,' the old woman murmured.

Then she scrunched the silk up and her eyes grew hard. She'd turned her back on magic years ago. The last thing she wanted was to drag up the past.

But magic doesn't give two hoots about what people want. As ten-year-old Emmy was about to discover. For if you happen to be in the right place at the right time or, as Emmy might have said, in the wrong place at the wrong time, magic simply goes ahead and happens. Whether you want it to or not is entirely beside the point.







ONE

Emmy was the sort of girl who trusted only in what was right in front of her nose – and that, at this precise moment in time, happened to be a chicken.

It was sitting next to her in the tiny, rickety aeroplane taking Emmy and her parents from the small city of Ölgii, in western Mongolia, to a remote camping spot in the Altai Mountains. One that couldn't be accessed by regular-sized planes because proper runways didn't exist there.

The chicken, and indeed the turboprop plane, belonged to their guide and pilot, Chono, a middle-aged man with a bushy black beard and an even bushier black moustache. He had assured Emmy

and her parents that even though the turboprop only had six seats – two up front by the cockpit for Chono and luggage, two behind for Emmy and the chicken and two at the back for Emmy's parents – it was a powerhouse of an aircraft. But to Emmy, it looked more like a yoghurt pot on wings with a propeller stuck to the front.

Still, they'd survived take-off and so long as the chicken didn't start flapping in Emmy's face, she reckoned it might turn out okay.

'The chicken is lucky,' Chono said through his headset as the plane careered out of the city. 'She was the only one in my flock who didn't blow away in the storm last week so I've kept her close ever since.'

The chicken stared straight ahead on the seat next to Emmy. It was impossible to know what the bird was thinking.

Emmy found herself picturing the rest of the flock hurtling into the clouds. Then she stopped. Because that was ridiculous and she needed to keep a lid on believing in things she couldn't see. Especially if she wanted to avoid a repeat of what had happened

four years ago when she'd thrown her hope behind a magic of sorts – something she couldn't see – and it had proved such a disaster she'd vowed never to do it again.

She gazed out of the window at what she could see instead: layer upon layer of snow-capped hills spreading out before them. And, on top of the one directly below them, a mound of stones with a wooden post in the centre, from which hundreds of blue prayer flags fluttered.

Chono's voice crackled through everyone's headsets again. 'That's a Mongolian ovoo. Built to honour the river spirits, tree spirits and mountain spirits dwelling in the wild. Pay them enough respect and they'll grant you safe passage on. Annoy them and they'll whip up whirlpools and set off deadly avalanches.' He chuckled as the plane hurtled on. 'Welcome to the Altai Mountains, where reality and myth collide – where the wild pulses with magic.'

Emmy glanced over her shoulder to see her parents listening in eagerly. And, years ago, she too would've been enthralled by Chono's words.

She had always been a dreamer, the kind of child who looked for magic everywhere. Like the face she'd felt sure she'd seen moving inside the bark of the gnarled tree in the playground at school. Or the shooting star she'd glimpsed and wished upon, fully believing that one day her wish would come true. But at the mention of magic now, Emmy bristled. And she was equally unimpressed by talk of lucky chickens.

'I don't believe in luck,' she said to Chono.

'And why's that?' the guide asked, as he steered the plane over a river.

Emmy raised her chin. 'Because I'm a pessimist and that means I believe the worst will, probably, go ahead and happen anyway so no lucky chicken's going to stop it.'

Emmy's parents whispered something to each other. The chicken carried on staring straight ahead. Emmy tried her best to ignore everyone.

But Chono only smiled. 'Pessimists should be careful with words like *probably*. They leave a bit too much room for hope.'

Emmy shifted. Being a pessimist could be hard work and it was incredibly annoying when people didn't take you seriously. She changed the subject. 'Is your moustache attached to your beard, Chono? Or are they two separate things?'

'Emmy!' Her mum groaned.

'They are attached,' Chono laughed. 'One big ball of fuzz. Like inviting a badger to live on your face. You should try it, Emmy – I think you'd look excellent with a beard.'

Emmy stifled a giggle then shoved her hat on over her headset. Her hair was a problem. The caramel-coloured curls burst out at all angles, jiggled when she talked and bounced when she walked. It was happy hair, and as far as Emmy was concerned, it was not in keeping with the vibe she was going for.

'What's happening down there?' her mum asked, pointing at a van pulled up in front of a cave in the hillside.

Emmy watched as two figures, dressed in long sheepskin coats, emerged from the cave. Each one carrying a bulging sack. And Emmy could tell, from

the fact that Chono had gone completely quiet, that this wasn't something he'd factored into their tour.

'Hunters,' he said, after a while, and Emmy noticed his voice was laced with fear. 'They raid the wild for animals like lynx, wolves and bears, then they sell their furs on the black market. But it's nothing for you to worry about,' he added hastily. 'I'll alert the authorities when we land and you can forget you ever saw them.'

He swung the plane away, on towards the mountains. But Emmy couldn't stop thinking about the poor creatures the hunters had stolen. She loved animals and hoped that one day her parents might let her get a puppy. The idea of someone killing something as precious as a lynx or a wolf or a mighty bear was unthinkable.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Chono, who was clearly keen to move the conversation on. 'Might I know why you are, probably, a pessimist, Emmy?'

She shook her head. Because how did you go about explaining everything that had happened four years

ago? She glanced at the chicken, who had stopped staring ahead and was now staring at her. Which didn't make Emmy feel any better.

Her mum started to say something then seemed to decide against it and got out her notebook instead. She was an aspiring author and it had been a story of hers, which she'd entered into a competition in a travel magazine, that had won them this trip to Mongolia. Two weeks of Emmy's Christmas holidays living in a ger, a traditional Mongolian felt tent that Chono had assembled ahead of their arrival up in the Altai Mountains.

It would be a world away from the high-rise flat Emmy lived in back in Glasgow. And a few years before, Emmy would've been over the moon about exploring one of the world's most spectacular mountain ranges. She had loved hiking and biking with her parents and friends in the hills around Glasgow. But since becoming a pessimist, Emmy spent more and more of her time shut away in her bedroom. Reading, sketching, thinking. Doing things that were less likely to wind up in tragedy.

This trip, though, had tragedy written all over it. Indeed, Emmy felt there were so many ways it could go wrong, she'd started making a list. She pulled it out of her rucksack now, careful to shield it from the chicken who had just eaten her body weight in seat fluff and was eyeing up Chono's map.

ALL THE THINGS THAT COULD GO WRONG:

1. Dad wakes a hibernating bear by mistake and it eats him.
2. Mum tries to cook on the campfire and poisons us all.
3. The chicken pecks all the passports to bits so nobody can ever go home.

She added two more points:

4. We meet a bunch of hunters in a bad mood and they end up bundling the lot of us into sacks.

5. Chono is so busy telling silly stories about magical spirits, he accidentally crashes the plane into a tree.

Chono steered the turboprop further and further away from civilization. There were no villages now. Just the odd collection of gers huddled in the snow.

'Out here, the winters are fierce,' Chono explained. 'Blizzards pounce without warning, the worst of which are said to be conjured by angry sky spirits. Winds can rage for months on end. And sometimes the cold is so sharp it stings your throat.'

Emmy reached for her pen. 'I should add *freezing to death* to my list.'

'Come on, sweetheart,' her mum teased. 'It's going to be fun. You'll see.'

Her dad reached inside his rucksack. 'Here, have a chocolate bar; it's been ages since lunch and chocolate is good for the nerves.'

It had, in reality, only been forty-five minutes since they'd eaten their sandwiches but Emmy's dad prescribed chocolate the same way doctors prescribe

medicine. Emmy wasn't so sure about the science of this but she had to admit: chocolate never made things worse.

The plane whizzed on through a valley, beside a river that looked green one minute and blue the next. As if it was flowing with the same sort of ink that runs through kingfisher feathers. Snow glinted on the banks and the surrounding trees were cast in frost. But even more magnificent than all this was what lay beyond the forest: a sprawl of glittering peaks cloaked in white that went on and on as far as the eye could see.

'Wow,' Emmy's dad breathed. 'That's quite a view . . .'

And Emmy might have agreed had she not remembered, just in time, that she was a pessimist and feeling anything more than mild dread was bound to end in disappointment.

'We're now flying above the last of the low-lying valleys before the mountains take over,' Chono explained. 'You can't see it because we're on our descent and the forest is in the way, but a little further on the land dips down into a bowl several

miles wide that's empty but for a few trees and the river. We call it The Shivering Pocket because, even in the summer, there are icicles lining the river that crosses it.' He turned to wink at Emmy. 'Some say the icicles are the frozen tears of a river spirit. In fact, there's an old song that recalls that legend. I believe it takes a week to sing but if I started now, I suppose—'

'We're okay,' Emmy said quickly. 'Maybe just focus on landing instead.'

Her mum reached a hand over the seat so that it came to rest on Emmy's shoulder. And Emmy didn't move it because the plane was now hurtling down towards the trees. She winced as the turboprop juddered onto the makeshift runway, launching the chicken into her face. She spat out the feathers and carried on staring ahead, rigid with fear, her mum's hand still resting on her shoulder.

The plane screeched to a halt on the outskirts of the forest. Then Chono jumped out into the snow and yanked the passenger door open.

'Here we are,' he said, as much to the chicken as

anybody else. 'We're the only people for miles around so we've got the forest to ourselves.'

'No hunters?' Emmy asked nervously.

Chono shook his head. 'They keep their distance from other people. And once I've called the authorities, the ones you saw will be dealt with.'

He smiled but Emmy wondered whether it was as simple as that; there was something in Chono's voice that made her feel like he was more worried than he was letting on.

'You might glimpse a squirrel or a fox here,' Chono said, gesturing to the forest behind him, 'but in my experience you often see nothing at all. When we're hiking in the mountains beyond The Shivering Pocket tomorrow, though, I'm hoping we'll catch sight of some of the wildest creatures on our planet: lynx, wolves, ibex and golden eagles.'

Emmy made a mental note to add *savaged by a lynx* to her list.

But her dad was grinning. 'Any chance we might see a snow leopard, Chono?'

'The ghost of the mountain?' The guide raised an

eyebrow. 'Now, that really *would* be lucky.'

'Dad,' Emmy said bluntly, 'you are more likely to find the city of Atlantis than stumble across a snow leopard.'

She passed the chicken to Chono and climbed out of the plane, wondering, as she often did, why her parents were so full of hope still. Surely they, of all people, knew the dangers of hoping for things?

She glanced through the trees and spotted the ger Chono had assembled. Then she noticed the colourful ribbons hanging from the branches all around it.

Chono followed her gaze. 'We hang ribbons to ask the tree spirits for protection against bad weather.' He looked up at the cloudless sky. 'And it looks like they're working.'

Emmy rolled her eyes. 'Let's just get the luggage into the ger.'

'Leave that to me and your dad,' her mum said, clambering out of the plane.

Chono nodded. 'You can either look after the chicken, Emmy, or go and fetch firewood so we can light the log burner.'

'Firewood,' Emmy said quickly. 'I've done my time with the chicken.'

Chono gave her a thumbs-up. 'There are no storms forecasted but the weather can change fast in the mountains so the minute you see a single cloud overhead, you're to call it quits on the adventure and come back.'

'Oh, I'm not going far,' Emmy replied. 'Just into those trees there to get some sticks.' She tugged her hat down further over her hair to stop it jiggling. 'In case you didn't know, pessimists are allergic to adventures.'

Emmy's dad slotted her rucksack onto her back. 'To carry the sticks,' he said. 'And don't hesitate to eat your remaining chocolate bars if you head on a little further than you'd expected and end up in some kind of an emergency. Eat all three at once if it comes to it, darling.'

Emmy couldn't resist giving her dad a quick cuddle. His commitment to chocolate made him both ridiculous and adorable and easily the best dad in the world.

'See you when the hard work's done!' her mum called. 'Try not to miss the chicken too much!'

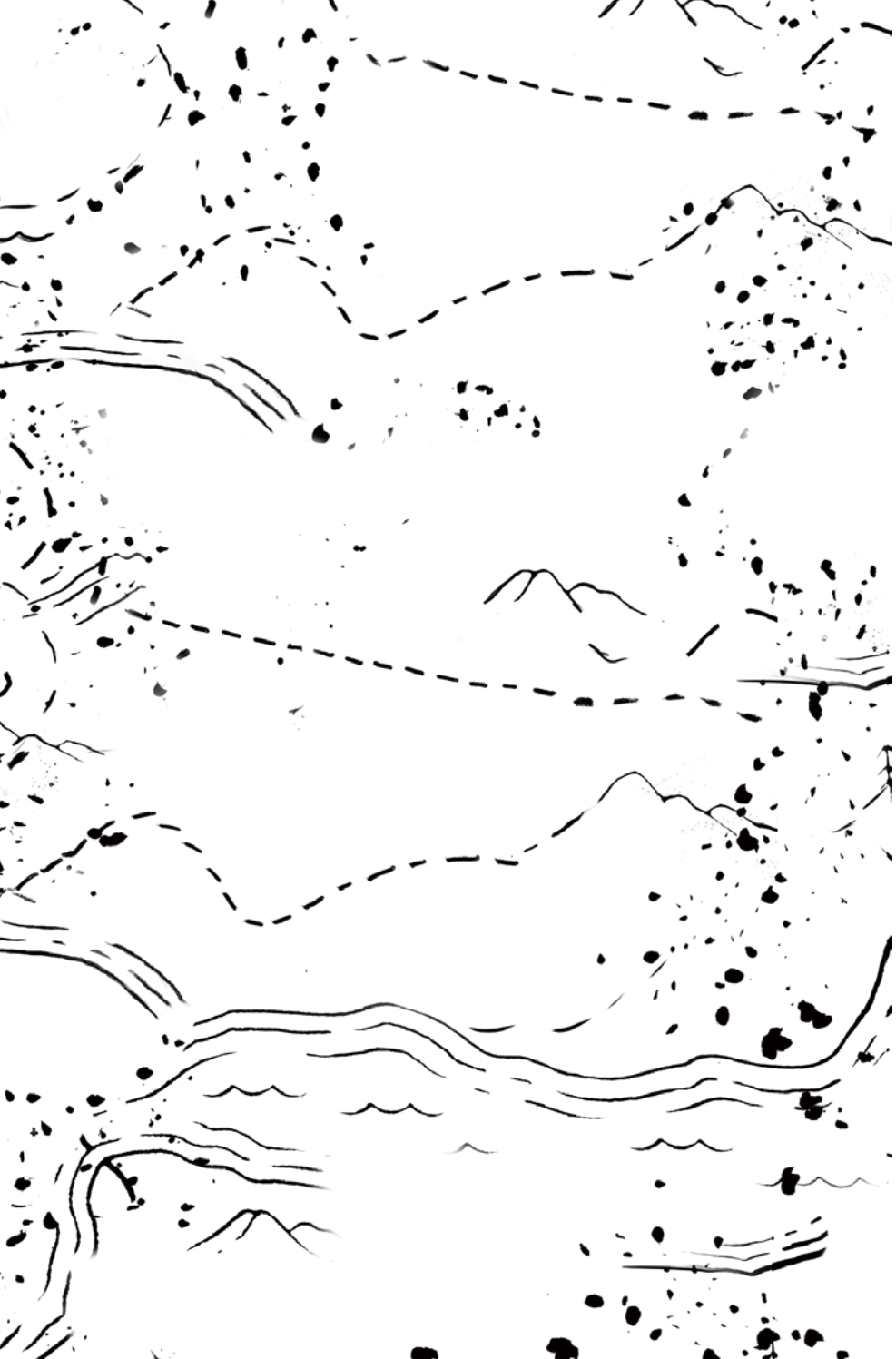
'And make sure you bow if you see a deer!' Chono called. 'They're sacred to our people as we believe we were descended from one years ago!'

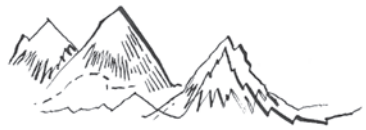
Emmy groaned. 'That's not even possible.'

Chono shrugged. 'You're in the Altai Mountains, little pessimist. The gateway to magic. And up here, *anything's* possible.'

Emmy sighed as she set off between the trees. She wasn't planning to go far at all. What she hadn't factored into her plan, though, was that this was the wild on a scale she'd never known before. And when you have grown up in a city, stepping into a place like this can feel like falling under a spell.

Particularly if there is magic at work . . .





TWO

The snow lay all around Emmy, a carpet of diamonds glinting in the sun. And that was the first thing that made her lose track of time. For it is impossible to turn your back on unbroken snow. It would be like stumbling across your birthday cake, then walking in the other direction.

And so, Emmy kept going, footprint after footprint. She caught sight of a squirrel at one point, scurrying up a tree. Other than that, the place was still. The only sound to break the silence was the rippling of a river winding through the trees in the distance, which Emmy felt a curious desire to find.

She walked on and on, breathing in the clean,

fresh smell of pines. Then she paused for a moment and frowned. She knew she'd left the campsite for a reason but her thoughts felt almost cloudy now and she found she could no longer remember what that reason was.

Emmy kept walking, lured on by the sound of the river which was burbling with such a clear lilt, it was almost like following a song.

'I'll turn back when I get to the river,' Emmy murmured.

But when she reached it, she couldn't seem to tear herself away. She was used to the River Clyde back home which was brown and sluggish, but this stretch of water was a turquoise burst of speed, glittering under the sun. And it was loud now, too, so loud it filled Emmy's ears, drowning out all her thoughts until the only thing left in her mind was Chono's voice, banging on about a river spirit who once conjured a wave so huge it swallowed a herd of yaks.

Emmy pushed the guide's words away. Just because the wild felt more alive out here than it had done back home didn't mean there was magic afoot.

And besides, she was done with that kind of stuff. But Emmy didn't turn back towards the campsite quite yet. She went on instead, drawn by an even louder roar of water just out of sight.

She was dimly aware that the surrounding trees were thinning. Then they parted completely and Emmy stopped. An enormous waterfall plunged down in front of her, spilling into a river fringed with icicles. It wound through a bowl of snow several miles wide and long, before carrying on downstream and vanishing back into the forest.

'The Shivering Pocket,' Emmy whispered to herself.

As Chono had said, there really wasn't much in it save for a few clumps of trees, frozen stiff, and the river. Beyond that, though, the mountains were a maze of detail. Crags and boulders shimmering white. Waterfalls frozen in time. Crevices scored with icicles.

Emmy shivered, as if waking from a dream. She hadn't meant to come this far . . . What on earth was she doing, teetering on the edge of a waterfall?! One false step and she could slip, bang her head on a

rock then tumble into the water and drown. Tragedy central.

Emmy shivered again. It was colder here so she swung her rucksack round to pull out her scarf before heading back to the campsite. But as she did, a wind stirred out of nowhere and plucked something from her bag. Something that bounced over the edge of the waterfall and tumbled down its banks into The Shivering Pocket.

'Noooooo,' Emmy breathed.

For the item that had fallen was something Emmy would have gone to the ends of the earth to retrieve. A tabby cat teddy she'd named Half-Price, after buying it on discount in a supermarket back home a few days before she became a pessimist.

Emmy glanced over her shoulder through the trees, in the direction of the campsite, then down over the lip at the teddy, which had rolled out into the bowl.

'Why didn't I just stay put and looked after the chicken?' she groaned.

For a moment, Emmy wondered whether it might be better to hurry back through the trees and ask the

others to fetch the teddy. But this was Half-Price she was talking about. And she couldn't bear to leave him alone in The Shivering Pocket, even for a moment. So, taking a deep breath, Emmy found herself clambering down the boulders to the side of the waterfall.

The rocks were icy and she nearly slipped, twice, but eventually she was down in The Shivering Pocket. She scampered through the snow towards Half-Price then stopped and frowned.

The wind had picked up now, a wind she could've sworn hadn't existed before she reached The Shivering Pocket, and it was nudging the teddy further and further into the bowl. To make matters worse, the river beside her was tinkling again, which sounded just like the voice of someone singing. And before Emmy could stop herself, she was thinking about another river spirit Chono had mentioned. The one whose tears had frozen to form the icicles clinging to the bank here.

Emmy stamped her thoughts out, but ran a little faster all the same, until finally she reached Half-Price. She scooped him up in her arms and it was only

when she glanced back towards the waterfall that she noticed the sky.

It wasn't completely blue any more. Clouds had rolled into the bowl without her noticing, and they were swelling and spreading like an enormous bruise. But the strange thing about these clouds was that they weren't creeping over the whole sky. They were staying low, tucked into The Shivering Pocket alone, below the forest. Emmy was sure that those back at the campsite hadn't seen or suspected a thing.

Her shoulders crept up. The whole place felt suddenly darker now, as if the sky might indeed be full of angry spirits.

'I need to get back,' she murmured, trying her best to forget about magic and focus on survival. 'Before tragedy strikes . . .'

But no sooner had Emmy started retracing her steps than the snow began. Thin scraps at first. Then the wind picked up a little, swirling the snow into thicker flakes.

Emmy kept her eyes trained on the waterfall as she ran, blinking back the snow. But the snow fell faster,

hardening into hail that stung her cheeks and clawed at her coat. Then the wind blew harder still, until the snow and hail were spinning in every direction and the way ahead dissolved into white.

Emmy clutched Half-Price to her chest. She was caught in a blizzard. A situation nobody, let alone a pessimist, ever wants to find themselves in. But rather than sit down and wait for the worst to happen, Emmy found herself trying, at all costs, to get back to the campsite because there was way more to lose than she'd admitted. Her mum. Her dad. A guide who told ridiculous stories. A chicken! All her friends back home. Anchors weighting her to a world she'd been trying her best to turn her back on.

Emmy put her arms out in front of her, feeling blindly for the waterfall. There was a dark shape ahead, so surely that was it? Seconds later, though, Emmy met with a cluster of trees which she hadn't even passed on her way out to rescue Half-Price.

'Mum! Dad! Chono!' Emmy screamed. 'I'm lost!'

But there was no answer and Emmy broke into a panicked run before stopping and hurrying back the

way she'd come. She set off again in another direction, sure that the waterfall would come into sight, but it didn't. And she stumbled on in this way, calling out for her parents, until the blizzard howled so loudly it swallowed her voice and the wind knocked her to the ground.

Emmy was shaking with fear now. It was impossible to know which way to go. Then, suddenly, she didn't have a choice. The wind was shunting into her from one direction only. And it was moving with such force, it pushed Emmy forwards on her hands and knees.

For a wild second, it felt to Emmy as if the blizzard was intentionally shoving her on in a specific direction. But Emmy had enough on her plate to start worrying about furious sky spirits bent on doing her in.

She crawled on, her voice a mere whimper as she called out for her parents and Chono. She needed to find shelter. Somewhere to hide from the blizzard until it was safe to make for the campsite again. Or somewhere simply to perish, if the worst was, probably, going to go ahead and happen anyway.

Either were better than being out in The Shivering Pocket in weather like this.

Emmy felt her way over snow and rocks in her path, pushed on and on by the blizzard as the land tilted up then down, up then down.

And that's how she found the cave.

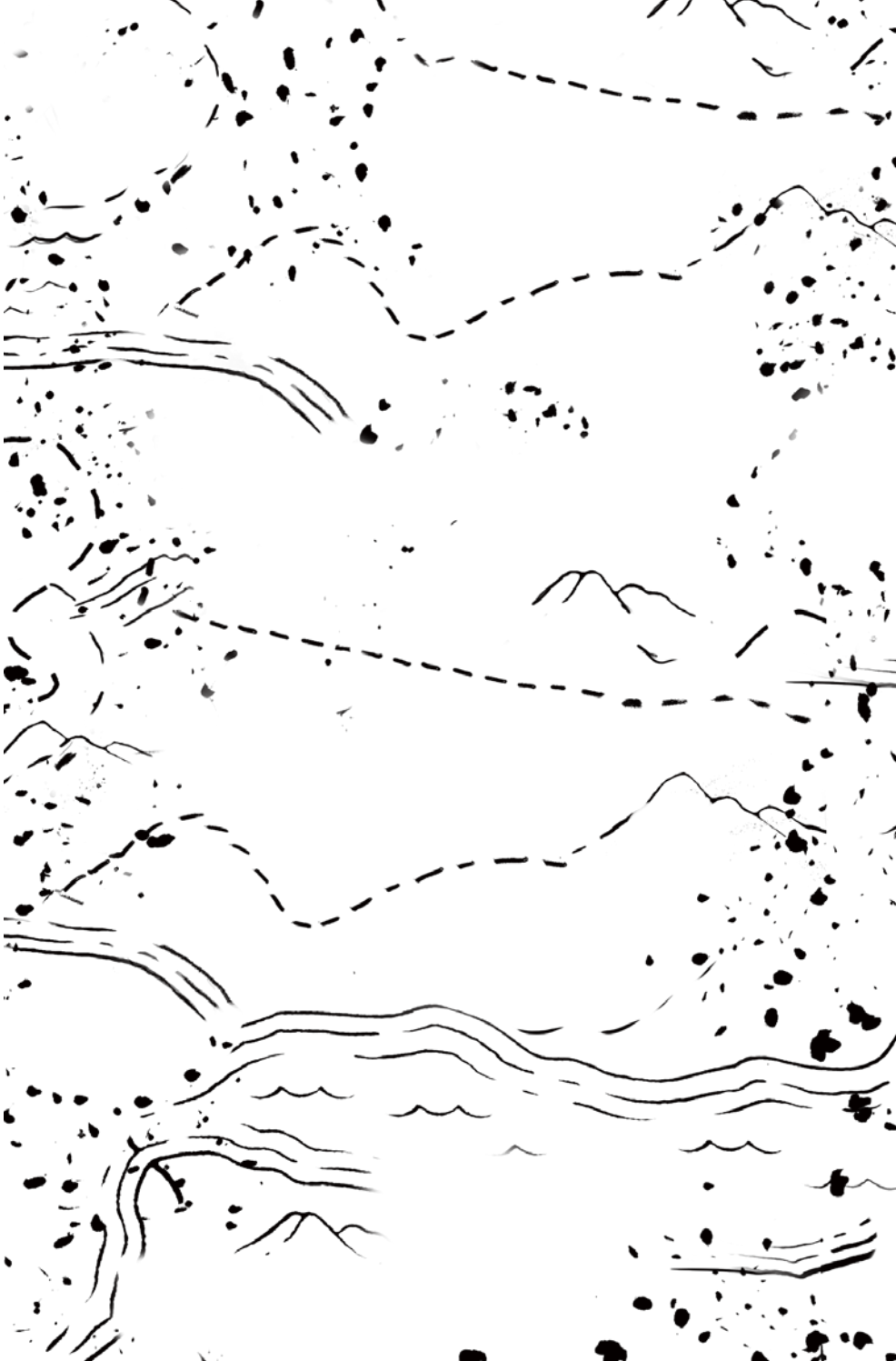
An opening all of a sudden. A little patch of black a metre high and wide that the blizzard couldn't reach. Emmy threw herself inside. Everything from her coat to her hair and eyelashes were frozen stiff. But she was out of the wind now which meant that it was a bit warmer, and she could hear herself think.

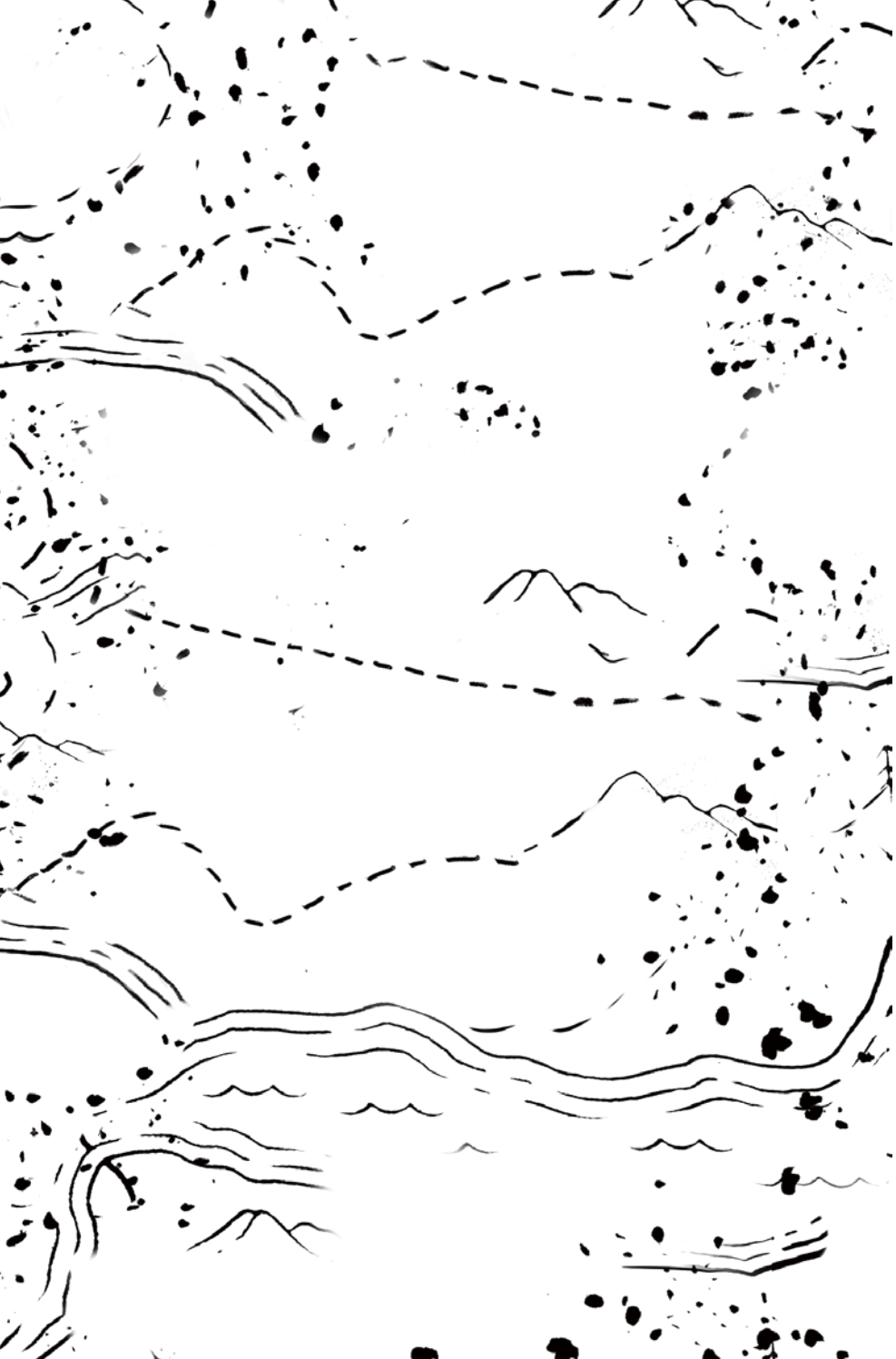
Emmy crawled into the dark, relieved to find that the cave wound round a corner, out of the blizzard completely, where it was slightly less cold. She was too tired to work out exactly how big the cave was. Or how far she might have come from The Shivering Pocket. That could wait. For now, she slumped to the ground, using what little energy she had left to crack her hand warmers into life, then hold Half-Price close to her chest.

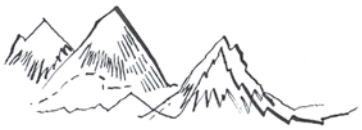
Emmy had never felt so alone in all her life.

Tragedy felt worryingly close. But she didn't cry. She hadn't cried in four whole years, in fact. Not since what happened in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Glasgow.

She just lay in the cave, curled into a ball around her teddy. A little pessimist, alone in the dark. At least that's what it felt like. Right up until the moment Emmy realized she wasn't the only one hiding in the cave.







THREE

It was the noises that came first. A scraping sound, like claws scrabbling over stone, followed by a growl. And they were coming from deeper inside the cave, where the darkness was at its thickest.

Emmy's eyes widened in horror. Was there a beast in here with her? A bear? A wolf? Some kind of yeti Chono hadn't yet told her about? Suddenly Emmy couldn't believe she'd wasted a single second worrying about magical spirits when the real threat was a mountain range full of the wildest animals on the planet!

She sat bolt upright, gripping Half-Price until her knuckles were white inside her mittens. She was

going to be eaten by whatever beast lived in here and she'd never see her beloved parents again! Because that's how it was with tragedy: it always got you in the end and she'd been a fool to believe she'd even stood a chance.

There was another growl and the dread inside Emmy deepened.

She thought about running out into the blizzard again but that had very nearly killed her. So, she edged backwards instead until she was pressed up against the cave wall. Then she made herself as small as possible and closed her eyes.

Another growl. Only this one sounded less convincing. More like a hiccup, actually.

Emmy opened one eye then another. She peered into the darkness. Were the shadows shifting? Was something moving closer?

There came a mew – a sound so full of hope it felt almost strange in Emmy's ears. She leant forward a fraction, towards the darkness. The shadows stopped moving immediately and a noise sounded which Emmy supposed was meant to be a growl but was,

again, definitely more of a hiccup. She scoured the dark. Whatever the animal was, it sounded young. And, possibly, afraid.

Slowly, quietly, Emmy took off her rucksack. Before she'd left for Mongolia, she'd collected a bunch of items from her bedroom and shoved them into her rucksack. A survival kit of sorts for when tragedy did, eventually, come. She pulled the torch out now and flicked it on.

Emmy frowned. The cave was bigger than she'd first thought. An alcove the size of a classroom, several metres high and strewn with crumbled rocks. But there was nothing in here with her. No bear. No wolf. Mercifully, no yeti.

'I'm going mad,' Emmy whispered, shining the torch over the rocks.

But then she saw it.

At the furthest point of the cave: a long, fluffy white tail with grey markings poking out from behind a rock.

Emmy blinked. And then she blinked again. For she recognized that tail from a photo in the travel magazine her mum's story had been published in.

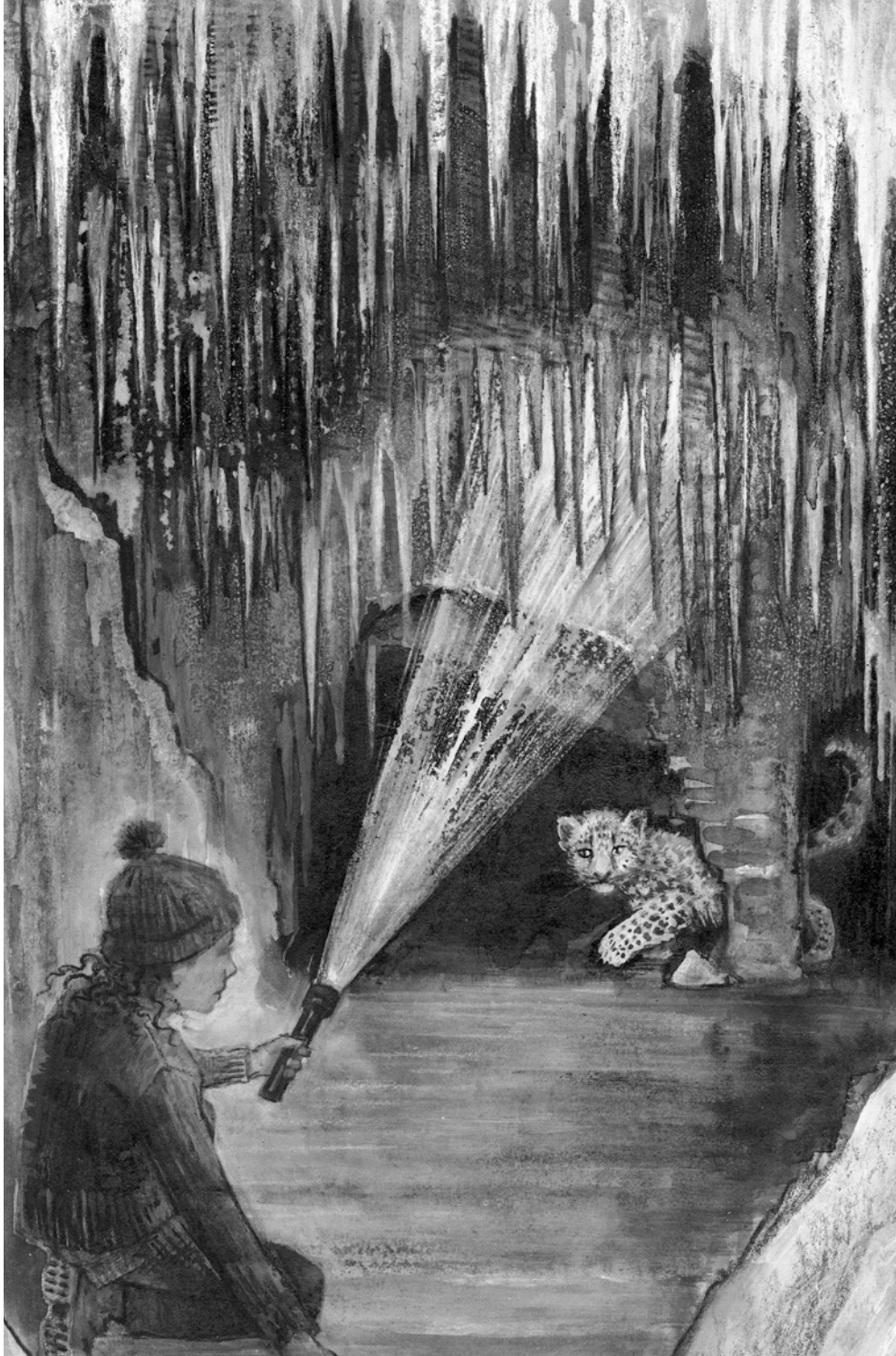
Could it be? Emmy wondered. *The ghost of the mountain? One of the rarest animals in the world here in this very cave?*

Emmy carried on staring at the tail. She hardly dared breathe. But it didn't move. Emmy wedged her torch into a crack so that it shone upwards instead of directly at the rock in question.

And that's when the snow leopard cub crept out into the open.

Emmy's jaw dropped. The cub was so small she could've scooped it up in her arms and it was more beautiful than anything she had ever seen in her life. Its fur was grey along its back, turning white beneath its tail and tummy, with black and brown markings, each one a different shape. Like a jigsaw you knew you'd never manage to complete. And then there were its eyes: ice blue and alert, above whiskers as fine as gossamer.

The cub was mesmerizing, in the same way that shooting stars are, because you hardly ever get to see them. Emmy's heart thumped. But it wasn't fear rushing through her veins now. It was wonder so immense she could almost taste it on her tongue.



'H-hello,' Emmy whispered.

The cub's hackles rose and it attempted another growl. Emmy wondered how she'd ever thought the noise threatening before.

She studied the cub a little more. It was male and thin. Not like the photos of the sturdy snow leopard cubs she'd seen frolicking about in the snow in the magazine. Which made Emmy wonder: had the cub been in here for a while? A few days, perhaps? Hemmed in by a series of storms, not just the latest blizzard that had sneaked into The Shivering Pocket?

Emmy tried to remember what she'd read about snow leopard cubs in that article. They were born in May or June and it was December now so was this little thing only six months old? But cubs stayed with their mother until they were almost two years of age, while they learnt to hunt, so what was this one doing in the cave all alone? Had he been separated from his mother in one of the snowstorms and taken refuge here?

Emmy carried on looking at the cub. Or had this cave always been the cub's home and his mother was planning to find her way back to here when the

blizzard came to an end? When Emmy also planned to leave to find her own family . . . But then a darker thought surfaced in Emmy's mind, which would explain why the cub was so thin. What if his mother had been killed by hunters?

Emmy flinched; she didn't want to face that possibility. And she also didn't want to face the fact that perhaps it was a little strange that out of all the caves that must exist in these mountains, she had ended up in this particular one with the snow leopard cub. Emmy shook her thoughts loose but her movement must've been too quick for the cub, who hurried behind the rock again, out of sight but for his long, fluffy tail.

Emmy smiled, despite everything. 'You need to get better at hiding,' she whispered.

The cub stayed exactly where he was.

'Just because you can't see me,' Emmy said softly, 'doesn't mean I can't see you.'

The cub let out another hiccupping sound that was clearly meant to be a growl.

'I'm not going to hurt you,' Emmy said. 'I've got

food and water – and you look like you need both.'

She laid Half-Price down on the ground then tipped some water from her flask into the cup that acted as a lid. She felt a pang as she thought of how excited her dad had been about the idea of filling the flask with hot chocolate and sharing it with her on top of a mountain. Would she see him again when the blizzard stopped? If the cave wasn't too far from the campsite? Emmy shut her hope down because it was making her heart hurt.

She tiptoed across the cave, towards the rock the cub hid behind. But she stopped short of him, leaving the cup of water as an offering nearby. Then she hurried back to the other side of the cave, and waited. The cub's tail was so still it could've been carved out of stone. And when it did, eventually, move and two pink, cupped ears poked round the side of the rock, followed by a flurry of twitching whiskers, Emmy almost jumped.

The cub stepped into sight, his eyes trained on Emmy as he slunk over the ground towards the water. He sniffed the rim of the cup, eyes still locked

on Emmy, then he lapped up every last drop of water with his little pink tongue.

'Good boy,' Emmy whispered. 'Looks like you needed that.'

The cub burped by way of reply.

Emmy smiled. 'Would you like some more?'

The cub did another burp for which he didn't look even remotely apologetic. Emmy moved forward very slowly to refill the cup. The snow leopard backed away but he didn't hide behind the rock again. He just watched Emmy, his blue eyes burning in the gloom, until she had moved back to the other side of the cave. Then he drank again.

'You need food too,' Emmy murmured, feeling about in her rucksack. 'Chocolate's no good, despite what Dad might say, as it's toxic to cats – according to my friend whose seriously grumpy cat, Stalemate, once ate a square and was sick for a week.'

Emmy stopped. Why was she banging on about Stalemate to a snow leopard? Only it felt good to talk after thinking she might never see another living soul again.

She pulled out a banana and an apple. 'Not quite the meat feast you're probably used to but it's going to have to do. Even Stalemate nibbles on an apple from time to time.'

Emmy peeled the banana, then nudged both pieces of fruit over the rocks towards the snow leopard. His nose twitched at the unfamiliar smell, then, when Emmy had retreated, he pounced on the fruit. When he realized neither the banana nor the apple were going to put up a fight, he gobbled them up, did another burp then sat back on his hind legs and looked at Emmy, as if to say: *now what?*

Emmy ate the first of her chocolate bars then craned her neck towards the entrance of the cave. 'It looks like it's getting dark out there and I don't think that's good for getting rescued.'

The cub blinked back at her while the blizzard howled on.

Emmy sighed. The cub licked a bit of banana off his nose.

'I'm not sure it's going to turn out well for either of us,' Emmy said. 'Because if the blizzard doesn't stop,

we're going to run out of food and water. And even if it does stop, I'm not sure I'll be able to find my parents. I was crawling through the storm for what felt like forever earlier so who knows how far I came? And as for a cub as little as you . . .'

Emmy trailed off. Surely the mother was alive somewhere and eventually she'd find her way back to the cub? But if that was the case, why hadn't she already?

The snow leopard had given up listening. He had padded beyond the shell of torchlight and was now trying, unsuccessfully, to pounce on his shadow.

Emmy couldn't help laughing. 'I'm trying my best to be a pessimist here and you're not helping.'

She moved the torch a fraction so that the cub's shadow moved too and, delighted, the snow leopard bounced after it. They went on like this for a while and Emmy wondered whether she'd ever seen anything so cute, and so tragic. Because what chance, really, did a cub as young as this have out in the wild if his mother was gone?

Eventually, the snow leopard squeaked out a

yawn and Emmy glanced at her watch. It was midnight already and still the blizzard raged. She reached inside her rucksack for the second lot of emergency hand warmers she'd packed. She cracked them into life and slid them inside her thermals. Then she eyed the torch. She knew she should switch it off to save the batteries, in case they were forced to spend longer in the cave, but she wanted to see the cub as she fell asleep. To remind herself that she wasn't alone.

Emmy lay down on the cave floor, with Half-Price tucked up to her chin again. The snow leopard padded softly past her, towards the entrance of the cave. For a moment, Emmy thought he was going to walk off into the blizzard. But then he returned, tail slung low, ears flat to his head. He slumped down at the other end of the cave. Whatever he had been thinking he might see out in the storm hadn't been there.

'It's dangerous to hope,' Emmy whispered into the gloom.

The cub huffed. Then he curled his tail around

himself and closed his eyes.

Emmy watched him for a while longer until he fell asleep, then her torch began to flicker before fizzling out completely. The darkness closed in and Emmy shrank inside her coat.

But then something unexpected happened: the cave grew a little bit lighter.

Emmy glanced up at the roof where the light seemed to be coming from. She hadn't noticed before that there were hundreds of hibernating butterflies tucked into the cracks. But she saw them now because their wings were edged with gold and that gold was glowing, bathing the cave in a soft, warm light.

Emmy blinked in disbelief. These were Mourning Cloak butterflies. She could tell from the wings: red mostly, then branching out into electric blue dots before finishing in that gold edge. But the reason Emmy was particularly startled to see them now was because they were the exact butterflies her mum had included in the story that had won them this trip to Mongolia.

Emmy stared at them. She'd researched these butterflies in the library with her mum back home.

And there had been no mention of glowing wings. Yet they were shining now and in her head, Emmy heard Chono's words again: *'up here, anything's possible.'*

Emmy was too tired to figure out why the butterflies were glowing and why they'd started at just the moment her torch had flickered off. All she knew was that seeing them was like feeling her mum's hand on her shoulder again, telling her that everything was going to be okay.

She settled back down to sleep. But she carried on watching the cub for a few more minutes because for all she knew he might be gone by morning. And she wanted to remember him as best she could so that if she did ever manage to find her parents again she could tell them that she had shared a cave with a miracle.

