

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES

from the SCBWI British Isles

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**2012**  
EDITION

UNDISCOVERED

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The third anthology of unpublished  
children's fiction by  
SCBWI British Isles members

published by  
The Society of Children's Book  
Writers and Illustrators  
British Isles  
and  
Working Partners Ltd



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We are so grateful for all your support.

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*Undiscovered Voices* co-editors

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# FROM MALORIE BLACKMAN

For most authors, writing isn't so much a profession as a compulsion. It's not hyperbole to state that authors tend to be driven souls, and we have to be. Authors who have their initial literary offering taken on by the first agent or publisher they send it to are rare indeed. Most of us serve an apprenticeship consisting of criticism and rejection. It is this apprenticeship which sorts the wheat from the chaff, and not just in terms of talent. I used to belong to a number of writing workshops, each of which I found invaluable, but I was constantly bewildered to see writers of great talent who would give up after their second or third rejection, after which we'd never see them at the workshop again. Becoming a published writer isn't just about talent, it's about perseverance and tenacity. It's about belief in oneself and one's voice. The first piece of advice I offer when asked for any hints and tips regarding becoming a writer is: 'Write from the heart. Write what you care about.' If the writer cares about their subject matter, this will shine through to the reader, and readers deserve no less. One of the final pieces of advice I offer is, 'DON'T GIVE UP!'

So why write? Is it a need to share ideas, to communicate, or simply to connect with others? Whatever the reason, writing gives us an excellent way to share not just a vision but our voice. It is each author's individual voice that makes their stories unique. I would encourage all would-be writers to develop their own voice, their own style – and never stop trying to develop that voice. Never be afraid to take risks with your writing. The stories that have worked best for me are the ones where I took risks with the subject matter or the style of writing. The first story I ever had published was a short story in a collection such as this. Not only did it provide a welcome boost to my self confidence after receiving rejection letter after rejection letter, but it spurred me on to continue with my writing, no matter what the setbacks.

That's why a publication such as *Undiscovered Voices* is so invaluable. Every year I'm amazed and thrilled by the range of stories in this anthology, but I truly believe that this year will prove to be a vintage year. The quality of the writing is outstanding. And this anthology presents not just self-contained

short stories but stories which represent the first few chapters of new, exciting novels. The range and quality of the stories make each and every one of them a 'must-read'.

The writers represented in this anthology should be proud and rightly so of their achievement. Each story contains that 'moreish' quality so essential in good writing. I know each author in this anthology can only go from strength to strength.

*Malorie Blackman is a novelist, scriptwriter and playwright, with over 50 books to her name, including the best-selling Noughts & Crosses, Pig-Heart Boy which was turned into a BAFTA-winning serial, Hacker and Boys Don't Cry.*

# FROM NICK SHARRATT

Congratulations to the illustrators whose work you'll find in this anthology. I've been drawing for a living for nearly 30 years now and I remember vividly the elation at seeing my first published illustrations. (I still get a huge buzz when the latest book project arrives in the post in printed form.)

I recall too how important those first printed pieces were as stepping stones in my career. They went straight into the portfolio and gave me the extra confidence needed in the search for work.

It took me a good while to carve a little niche for myself in the world of children's books and plenty of years were spent going round with the folio, gratefully seizing any job that might come my way as a result. I started off with tiny black and white drawings for give-away listings magazines, then worked my way through periodicals on every subject from accountancy to yoga. I did lots and lots of stuff for corporate and educational publishers and eventually I ended up in children's books.

Along the way I learnt that persistence and professionalism were as important for me as talent, so even on the toughest briefs, when seemingly impossible-to-illustrate subject matter was combined with an excruciatingly tight deadline, I somehow managed to get the job done and deliver on time. My confidence increased with every accepted piece of artwork and, wonderfully, the longer I illustrate the more I enjoy it. Even though I still get butterflies at the start of something new, I still have a list of things I find head-bangingly difficult to draw and I still fret that if I have more than a day or two away from the studio I am going to forget how to do it.

So best of luck to all the writers and illustrators in *Undiscovered Voices* and congratulations too to SCBWI and Working Partners for bringing about such a brilliant showcase for emerging talent.

*Nick graduated from St Martin's School of Art in 1984 and has been working as a freelance illustrator since then. He has illustrated over 200 children's books and has worked with authors including Jacqueline Wilson, Julia Donaldson, Michael Rosen and Giles Andreae, in addition to producing his own books. He has won numerous national and regional book awards and was official illustrator for World Book Day 2006.*



*Illustration by Nick Sharratt taken from Sapphire Battersea by Jacqueline Wilson, published by Random House Children's Books. Used by permission of The Random House Group Limited*



# FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

Welcome to *Undiscovered Voices 2012*, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) British Isles third anthology of new writers. In this edition, we are proud to feature for the first time the work of six unpublished illustrators in order to bring new illustration voices to the industry's attention, alongside that of novel writers'.

The SCBWI is a professional network for the exchange of knowledge and ideas among writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, agents, librarians, educators, booksellers and others involved with literature for children and young people. There are currently 19,000 members worldwide, in over seventy regions, making it the largest children's writing organization in the world. Through our conferences, seminars, critique groups, online resources and newsletter, the British Isles region aims to support and inspire writers and illustrators as they develop their craft.

Pieces published in the first two anthologies have led to over thirty books sold at home and around the world. These books have been included on prestigious literary lists, including the Blue Peter book award, the Waterstone's Children's Book Prize, the Branford Boase award and many others.

The SCBWI is honoured to once again be able to support an exciting wave of undiscovered talent. We know that it takes a great deal of perseverance, hard work and market-savvy to get published. But above all, it takes a compelling, new voice. We hope that editors, art directors and agents will find something that speaks to them in this book.

The SCBWI would like to thank the hardworking, enthusiastic team of editors and judges. We are also grateful to Working Partners for their continued dedication and generous funding of this exciting project.

**Natascha Biebow**

Regional Advisor (Chair)

SCBWI, British Isles region

[www.britishscbwi.org](http://www.britishscbwi.org)

# FROM WORKING PARTNERS

Working Partners is honoured to be sponsoring the third anthology of *Undiscovered Voices*. It is so exciting to see how this project has flourished. Thirteen of the twenty-four writers from the first two anthologies are now either published or under contract. This is quite an achievement in what have been quite straightened times in the UK market for new authors. Sarwat Chadda and Harriet Godwin were included in the inaugural 2008 anthology and were spotted and signed up by the Greenhouse Literary Agency, our sister company. Both of these talented authors will see new books launch in 2012 in their now established writing careers.

Working Partners is also proud to include a number of *Undiscovered Voices* contributors in its stable of writers; and we are hoping to see the number grow this year!

SCBWI are to be congratulated for having the vision to create what is becoming an increasingly important contributor of new authorial talent to children's publishing in the UK and beyond.

We would like to thank SCBWI, and especially Sara O'Connor and Sara Grant, for asking us to sponsor the competition four years ago. We are thoroughly enjoying the experience and look forward to partnering the project for many years to come!

**Chris Snowdon**  
Managing Director  
Working Partners

# HONORARY MENTIONS

Although not appearing in this anthology, the following pieces received honorary mentions.

## WRITERS

- **YOU'RE MAGIC, DUGGIE BONES** by Jan Carr
- **GRIMM TALES: THE BLACKWOOD LEGACY** by Liz de Jager
- **SPRINGPUNK** by Julianne Durber
- **HOW *NOT* TO GET NOTICED** by Jennifer Hicks
- **BUBBLE AND CAT** by Michael Marett-Crosby
- **THE LIFE AND TIMES OF CARLA GRIMES** by Stephanie McGregor
- **THE SILVER FISH** by Anne Mitchell
- **NORTH OF NOWHERE** by Chantel Marie Napier
- **THROUGH MORTAL EYES** by Sally-Jayne Poyton
- **BREAKWATER** by Melissa Rogerson
- **AT FAULT** by Joanna Sargent
- **BEAUTIFUL NIGHTMARE** by Lara Williamson

## ILLUSTRATORS

- Jennifer Graham
- Kim Geyer



## TALKING WITH BIRDS by Heather Kilgour



### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Heather studied fine art to master's level in Australia and New Zealand. She worked as a film sculptor on *Lord of the Rings* and found inspiration to write and illustrate picture books. On moving to the UK in 2007 Heather joined SCBWI as a means to further this dream.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"The girl's expression grabs you, and we liked how the composition mirrors the shapes of the birds. The image has great atmosphere and movement and draws in the viewer. There is a strong narrative quality – the idea of escape and letting go is vivid here."

[www.heatherkilgour.com](http://www.heatherkilgour.com)

# DEAD JEALOUS

by Sharon Jones

It was a good place, a peaceful place. The kind of place where the past could lie forever.

At the foot of the hill the lake was frozen in a dead calm, a dark mirror reflecting the clouds that rolled in above like a big duvet to tuck them in for the night. Not that they'd be turning in any time soon. No, those weirdoes down at the festival would be partying into the early hours. That's why it was best to do it now rather than wait.

Do it now and get it over with.

The earth was waterlogged after two days' rain. It would be heavy going, but that was OK.

Good, honest hard work: burying the dead.

\*

Took an hour to dig a hole deep enough that not even the full moon could penetrate the darkness. But still, her stiff pale hands were visible against the lacy black dress. And her eyes . . . her eyes were open like shining silver coins.

Staring.

Watching.

Sods of clay rained down until she was properly hidden, until there was nothing but trampled-down earth to remember that either of them was ever there.

Shit. What if someone noticed she was missing?

No. It would be OK.

People got lost all the time. Especially people like her.

It was a good place for her. A peaceful place.

A place to be forgotten.

## CHAPTER ONE

Poppy St. John hooked her thumbs into the back pockets of her jeans and snorted.

At the centre of the uneven half-circle of tipis, yurts, rusty caravans and nylon tents was the wicker man. Standing twenty foot tall, its body of tangled branches glowed golden-brown in the sinking sun. Ivy dripped from head and beard, and two tree branches protruded at angles, forming stag-like antlers.

In each spindly hand, the giant effigy held a three-foot wooden scythe. And if that wasn't off-putting enough, this year someone had seen fit to give him a little – no, *massive* – extra.

Mum slammed the boot of their beat-up silver Saab, glanced over her shoulder and grinned.

'Don't tell me that's where you're going to *do it*?' Poppy asked. 'You can't seriously be thinking of getting hitched under an enormous—'

'It's traditional.'

'For who? Porn stars? The guy's got a three-foot penis, Mum! What happened to the goddess? Thought this pagan lark was all about the sacred feminine, but no, it turns out it's about a guy with an enormous willy.'

'And there's something wrong with honouring male fecundity?' Jack asked, draping his arm around Mum's shoulders.

Mum smiled and nuzzled her face against his unshaven chin like a love-starved Siamese. Their matching brown curls mingled together.

'Ugh! Get a tipi.'

'Hmm?'

'*I said*, I thought we agreed that if you were going to be my step-father you would limit your use of *the F word*.'

Jack giggled in that slightly girly way that never failed to make Mum smile.

After all the pills, the Reiki, and the thousand and one other therapies Mum had tried when Dad left, turned out all she needed was Jack. Ironical, given she'd sworn off men for life and nearly moved them to a feminist commune.

Jack untangled his arms from Mum's shoulders and stretched. 'Want to give me a hand with the tents?'

Poppy shrugged. 'Nah. I wouldn't wanna get in the way of all the *male fecundity* that's floating around here.'

The secluded field was a brightly coloured mish-mash of canvas and cars. Instruments were being tuned, sound systems tested. People, who in the real world wore jeans and suits, were donning flowing cloaks and painting their faces with stars and flowers.

Poppy turned back to see Mum and Jack sucking face *again*. She considered reminding them that canvas was in no way soundproof and, for the sake of her mental health, she'd like her tent to be erected far, *far* away from the matrimonial tipi.

'Think I'll go and have a look round.'

'You will come back for the opening ceremony?' Mum asked, a note of pleading in her voice. 'It would be nice to go as a family.'

'No way!' She planted a kiss on Mum's cheek. 'I said I'd be there for your big . . . thing. Although that was before I knew it was happening under a *big thing*.'

'Poppy!'

Jack smirked. 'This something we need to talk about, Pops? I never had you down for being uncomfortable with the male form.'

'Ha! No thanks, Herr Freud. I'm out of here. You two have fun with your psycho-babble tantric whatever.'



‘Hey, hold on!’ Jack fished his wallet out of his shorts pocket. ‘Here, take this, just in case you need anything.’ He held out a tenner.

She hesitated. It still felt weird taking money from the guy, even after a year and a half of him living with Mum. ‘It’s OK, I don’t really need—’

He raised his eyebrows, and gave her his *I’m-serious* look. The one that was mostly followed by the *I’m-analysing-every-move-you-make* look. The trials of having a therapist for a stepfather.

‘Thanks.’ She stuffed the note in her pocket beside her iPod and made a run for it before she got roped into a conversation about the optimal alignment for the tipi, or some other psycho-spiritual crap.

She set off across the field and was immediately enveloped by jangling bells and blacked-up faces. The yellow and black striped Morris dancers swarmed around her like a cloud of angry wasps. She picked up speed and dodged between them only to walk smack into a column of billowing red silk. Fifteen feet up, a face grinned.

‘Ahoy down there!’ the guy shouted.

What the heck? She backed up and realised she’d barged into a stilt walker. ‘Sorry,’ she called, flashing an apologetic hand, and dashing between his legs.

The first time she’d been dragged to one of these gigs she was twelve years old and felt like she’d fallen down the rabbit hole into Wonderland. She’d thought all of this stuff pretty damned cool; crystals and auras, tarot cards and totem animals. What kid wouldn’t want to live in a world where fairies and elemental spirits were taken seriously? But she was a kid then and now she saw it for what it was, unlike Mum and Dad who seemed unable to live in the real world with normal people.

She pulled out her iPod, stuffed the buds into her ears and hit play. A line of sharp strings blocked out all the pagan noise. Vintage Verve – the album Michael had made her download at three that morning, his text message assuring her it was going to change her world. She'd heard some of it, but she'd never really listened to the lyrics before. She must have replayed the album at least ten times, until the words were buzzing in her veins.

Michael was right – the whole album was a work of crazy genius.

She fought her way to the edge of the festival ground, and found a clear passage between the woods and the backs of the various falafel vans and baked-potato sellers. Spicy smells prompted an ache in her stomach, reminding her that she'd skipped lunch. Jack's tenner would come in handy.

But as a guitar picked up the second track, a lump rose in Poppy's throat, banishing all thought of food. She flicked onto the next song before the lyrics could worm their way into her brain. Michael wouldn't have got the significance but she had. She'd been kept awake through the early hours by a barrage of angry tears.

Angry about wanting what she couldn't have.

That was it! No more, she told herself. She was finished feeling like that. The whole Michael thing was a phase. She'd known him her whole life; it was inevitable that at some point she would wonder whether their friendship was something . . . *more*. But it wasn't. Time to accept it and move on.

Sighing, Poppy gave in to her grumbling stomach and took a tour of the food vans. Organic this, wholefood that – it all looked disgustingly healthy, until she reached the very last one. The chipped white trailer would have looked more at home at a travelling fair or on the turning circle of the A57.

Poppy caught the unmistakable whiff of chip fat. Finally!

‘Chips please,’ she said, yanking the buds out of her ears and having to stand on her tiptoes to see over the counter. She fished in her jeans pocket for the ten pound note Jack had given her.

‘That’ll be two quid, love,’ a voice called back.

Still unable to lay her hands on the flaming tenner, she looked up and smiled. ‘Sorry I—’

The guy behind the counter wiped his brow with the back of his hand, and looked questioningly over the counter. On seeing Poppy, he grinned. ‘Salt and vinegar?’

A wave of heat billowed off the fryers, almost knocking her over. She swallowed against her dry throat. ‘Umm – maybe nothing, actually. I seem to have lost my money.’

For a moment he just looked at her, then he folded his arms on the counter and rested his chin on them so that his face was level with hers. ‘That’s unfortunate.’ His dark eyes twinkled and his cheek twitched as if he was trying to stop himself from laughing.

‘Yeah.’

He wet his lips and rubbed his cleft chin against his arm. ‘Tell you what, why don’t you take the chips and pay me later.’

‘But you don’t know me from Adam. I might run off and never come back, and *then* what would you do?’ Wow, that almost came out like flirting. But she never flirted. She was crap at it.

His grin widened. ‘Then I’d have to come looking for you.’ It sounded more like a promise than a threat. A delicious promise. Poppy ran her hand over her hair, trying to remember the last time she’d run a brush through it.

He straightened up and began shovelling chips into a white polystyrene tray. ‘Can I get you anything else?’

She caught herself smiling. Then, over the tightly muscled

and tattooed shoulder that stuck out of his sleeveless black vest, she spotted something. ‘Oh my God! You do burgers!’

‘Yeeeeeeeah?’

‘As in dead cow? As in a slice of flesh between two hunks of bread, not a vegetable in sight?’

His eyes narrowed. ‘Is that a problem?’

‘No! Jesus, it’s a flaming miracle! I’ve never been to one of these gigs where you can buy actual-honest-to-goodness dead animal. Normally it’s anaemic aubergine burgers all the way. How the hell did you smuggle them in?’

‘Friends in high places.’ He rested his hands on his hips. ‘Is this a roundabout way of saying that you’d like a burger?’

‘I think I might love you forever.’

The guy laughed and shook his head. He had the kind of laugh that was comfortable, the kind that made Poppy want to laugh too. ‘That seems like a fair deal. What would I get for cheese?’

‘That would take us to a whole other level.’

The guy took a deep breath and began building a burger. Three slices of cheese, she noticed. And a cheeky smile as he did it.

Her heart ticked like a clock that had fallen out of time. She felt giddy, slightly dizzy and not at all hungry.

She folded her arms and snuck another glance at him. Not her usual type. He clearly spent more time lifting weights than reading books, but to each their own, right?

‘Hope you don’t mind me saying so, but you’re not like the other people here,’ he said, glancing at her from beneath eyebrows that could do with taming.

‘My mum and step-dad are having their handfasting—err—wedding kind of thing tomorrow.’

‘Right. Families, huh?’ The guy handed over the burger and chips.

‘Yeah, families.’

He smiled and Poppy thought that she could look at that smile forever. It took several moments to realise that she no longer had any excuse to be standing there gawping at him. She cleared her throat. ‘I’ll bring you the money tomorrow—if—if—that’s OK?’

‘I’ll look forward to it. I’m Tariq, by the way.’

‘Poppy.’

‘It’s been a pleasure.’

She smiled and reluctantly walked away, carrying the warm glow of the van with her. Wow. Just, wow!

She’d only gone a few steps when she heard:

‘Hey, Poppy!’

She turned to see Tariq had jumped down from the trailer and was jogging after her, his white apron flapping over his black jeans and vest.

He pushed a can of Coke at her. ‘In case you get thirsty.’

She took the freezing cold can, unable to stop herself from grinning like a maniac.

Tariq shoved his hands in his pockets and shrugged. ‘I have to work tonight. But maybe tomorrow, after your mum’s thing, if you’re not doing anything, maybe I could buy you another hunk of dead animal?’

\*

The festival occupied a crescent-moon shaped field that hugged the pebbled beach of Scariswater, an hourglass-shaped lake that stretched out between an overhanging cliff edge on one side and a cushion of dense fir trees on the other.

Poppy floated away from the bustle of the festival ground. She needed somewhere quiet to sit and contemplate the burger, its maker and a rare moment of successful flirting. Was this it – the breakthrough?

Jack was always going on about the breakthroughs his patients made. *Yes! She figured out her dead grandmother was never coming back. Alleluia! Finally he saw that what happened wasn't his fault!*

Was this her *Yes!* moment; when she realised that she actually could fancy guys who weren't named Michael Quinn? And here, at this flaming festival, where the fit guys were usually at least ten years too old to notice her. But Tariq could be no more than twenty-one, twenty-two? Definitely within the margin of possibility. And talk about hot! You could fry an egg on his biceps. Maybe griddle a steak on his abs . . .?

She stumbled over a rock and realised she'd crossed the field in a hormone-fuelled dream. Before her rose the steep embankment that marked the edge of the campsite. The festival-goers were supposed to stick to the field, but what would it hurt to take a look at the view?

Behind her, a horn sounded. As if a blanket had been thrown over the whole crowd, a wary silence descended.

A deep sonorous voice called, 'Hail! Spirits of this place. Ancestors, friends!'

'Hail!' the crowd responded.

Somewhere back there, Mum would be searching the faces around the campfire, hoping to see her. But she just couldn't stomach it. Not when she had important, real life stuff to think about.

Carefully, she scrambled up the side of the gravelly bank. She was so caught up in trying to stay upright that she didn't see the lone figure standing looking out over the lake. Only the glint of moonlight in the bottle dangling from the woman's hand caught her eye.

The figure spun around. The woman's eyes were wild, furious. She pressed a hand to the pale skin between the lapels of her studded leather jacket.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to disturb you,’ Poppy said. ‘Wasn’t expecting anyone to be up here.’

The woman’s face relaxed into a smile. She tucked her bobbed black hair behind her ear. ‘You didn’t. I’m just keeping out of the way of the celebrations. Not really my kind of thing.’ Her voice was low, with a lilting Scottish accent. ‘Fancy a drink?’ she asked, shaking the half-empty bottle of Jack Daniels.

\*

‘If this isn’t your thing, what are you doing here?’ Poppy asked, when they’d sat down on the stubbly grass. She opened the white polystyrene container and released a tantalising whiff of steamy vinegar.

‘Ah. Now there’s a question with a long and complicated answer. Why aren’t *you* down there, dancing naked around the fire?’

‘I don’t think they allow skylad,’ Poppy replied, shoving a soggy chip into her mouth.

‘More’s the pity.’ Beth cast a glance at Poppy from under thick fake eyelashes. ‘You got a boyfriend?’

Poppy shook her head.

*‘Girlfriend?’*

Poppy inhaled the chip she was chewing. ‘No!’ She coughed and discreetly tried to wipe away the potato sludge that dribbled down her chin.

Beth smiled.

‘Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound—’

‘Like it’s the plague? That’s pretty much how my parents feel about it too.’

Poppy’s cheeks burned. She glanced across the field to where the opening ceremony was in full swing. The crowd had formed a large circle around four bonfires. White-robed figures stood around the wicker man, their hands outstretched to

the twilight. It looked like a scene from a seventies horror film.

‘How about you? Do you have a . . . girlfriend?’ Poppy asked, in an attempt to recover her live-and-let-live credentials.

Beth’s blood-red lips stretched into a smile. ‘Aye, well, I have a habit of falling in love with people who are never going to love me back.’

A sympathetic ‘hmmph’ escaped Poppy’s throat.

Beth unzipped her leather jacket and leaned back on her elbows. ‘A fellow sufferer!’

‘No, not really.’

‘You’re gonna have to try harder than that to convince me. Who is he?’

Poppy picked at a chip but then dropped it and wiped her fingers on her jeans.

Beth laughed. ‘Wow! Y’really do have it bad.’

Bad? Yeah. The secret had squatted in her chest for years. Some days it got bigger with every breath she took. She was petrified that one day the secret would burst and she’d say something – or worse, do something – that she’d never be able to take back. And that would be it. Finito. Her’s and Michael’s friendship would be over. Forever. And she wouldn’t let that happen. So much for her being finished with thinking about it!

*Tariq*, she reminded herself. Actual flirting with a cute, single guy. Probably single. Jesus, he’d better be single. Not like . . .

‘Michael,’ she murmured.

‘And you’re in love with him, but he doesn’t love you?’

Poppy pressed her lips together, unable to deny it, but not wanting to admit it either. She couldn’t deny the ache that sat in her chest. A throbbing, howling, boil of self-pity.

Beth turned her face to the sky. The heavens were closing in purple. The only light came from the pinky-orange glow that hovered like a celestial fried egg over the lake, and the newly



dawning stars that drew in the night. Beth closed her eyes and smiled, as if she could feel the heat of those distant suns on her skin.

‘I should tell you to walk away. Forget him if you can. But love’s not like that. Love’s a bitch that doesn’t let you go.’ Beth fell silent. Her kohl-lined eyes remained closed. Her shiny black hair fell around her shoulders like shards of onyx.

She wasn’t exactly pretty but she had strange angular features that reminded Poppy of a face from the cover of *Vogue*. And for a fleeting moment, she wondered what it would be like to kiss a girl. Was it so very different from kissing a boy? Were women less hassle than men? ‘Who is she? Your—’

‘Maya. *My Maya*.’ Beth sung the name like it was a love song. ‘She was *my* best friend.’

‘What happened?’

‘Last year she came to this bloody place with her bastard boyfriend and I never heard from her again.’

‘Is that why you’re here? To find her?’

‘That’s what I told myself. But I knew—’ Beth clawed chipped red nails to her chest, like she would rip out her heart if she could. ‘I knew in here that I wouldn’t find her.’ Her eyes flashed open. They were glassy with tears. ‘I fucking knew.’ She grabbed the bottle of Jack Daniels, swigged back several gulps and swiped the back of her hand across her mouth, smudging the edges of her lipstick.

Down below they were singing now. A happy-clappy pagan number. Lines of bodies danced in concentric circles. Drums beat, keeping time, keeping them in line.

‘So this guy, he straight?’ Beth asked, eventually.

‘Yeah.’

‘Girlfriend?’

A billboard image of Julia nuzzling up to Michael filled her

head. Her perfect blonde hair, her perfect little up-turned nose. Poppy screwed her eyes shut and forced the image away.

‘Have you kissed him?’

‘No.’

‘Have you tried?’

‘No! He’s my friend. I can’t—can’t risk losing him.’

‘Seems to me, that’s exactly what you’re risking,’ Beth sat forward. ‘Look, I’m in no position to tell you what to do. But what’ll happen if you do nothing? If you say nothing? Watching him with someone else, it’ll eat you up, Poppy, until there’s nothing left. Love is like fire: unless it’s channelled it destroys everything.’

Beth got to her feet and glared at the lake, so flat that it could be sheet of glass. With a grunt, she launched the bottle into the sky. Droplets of whisky formed an arc, a perverse black rainbow. The bottle hit the water with a splash sending shockwaves towards the shore.

Beth raked both hands through her hair and sniffed. She turned to Poppy and laughed, but there were tears in her eyes.

‘Y’know, when I first saw ya, I thought I was seeing her ghost, or sommat. But it was just this place playing games with me.’

‘What will you do?’ Poppy asked.

Beth didn’t seem to hear. She stared down at the festival ground where lines of people were snaking around, to a reel of fiddles and drums. If it wasn’t for the flickering bonfires and the smell of burning, it could have been a kid’s fancy dress party.

‘They’d like this place to be about peace and the earth and all that crap. But something stinks,’ Beth muttered.

‘Yeah, it’s called self-delusion.’

‘No. They believe something. I can respect that. Maya was into all this stuff. Was always going on about me being psychic.’

Beth snorted and shook her head. 'But this place, don't you feel it? It's a dark place.'

'I'm not sure I—'

'Stinks of shit. And the thing about shit is that eventually some of it floats.' Beth zipped up her jacket and stuffed her hands into the pockets. The attitude vanished and suddenly she looked small and exposed. 'What would you do?' she whispered. 'If it were you looking for this *Michael*? Would you give up, even if you knew he'd never love you back?'

Michael. With his slightly down-turned mouth that always made him look so damned sullen. Eyes so steady, so knowing, that they sometimes frightened her. Would she ever be able to let him go?

Beth glanced up at the pale moon and nodded. 'Aye, I reckon I'll keep looking.'

## SYNOPSIS:

Poppy St. John knew jealousy could tear you apart. She didn't realise it could get you killed. When Poppy finds a body in the lake the police call the death accidental. She calls it murder. Determined to prove she's right, Poppy begins an investigation of her own. In the web of lies, drugs, jealousy and magic, no one is who they seem to be, and love might be the one thing that can save her.

## BIOGRAPHY:

Back in Secondary school, Sharon Jones used to spend hours co-writing stories with one of her best mates. They were the Anne Shirley and Diana Barry of Lancashire. Although most people grow out of making-up stories, Sharon never did. She's still writing tales about teenagers faced with extraordinary situations.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"I really responded to the way the writer conveys the raw, hopeless feeling of unrequited love."

"The dialogue is good . . . The flirtations between Tariq and Poppy succeed in making Tariq attractive more than any physical description could."

"You come away really wanting to know what happens."

"Intriguing prologue, snappy dialogue and Poppy is an engaging character."

# THE EXECUTIONER'S CHILD

by Jane Hardstaff

## CHAPTER ONE

She'd never get used to beheadings. No matter what Pa said.

Peering through the arrow-slit window, Moss tried to catch a glimpse of the fields beyond Tower Hill. All she could see were people. Crazy people. Spilling out of the city. Laughing and shouting and fighting. Madder than a sack of badgers.

'Get your stinking arse off my spot!'

'Son-of-a-pikestaff, I ain't goin' nowhere!'

'What are you? Dumb as a stump? Move your arse I said! I've been camping here all night!'

'Then camp on this, coloppe-breath!'

She shook her head in disgust. The more they got, the more they wanted. Like a dog with worms.

Of course, London had always been execution-mad. If there was a monk to be drawn and quartered or a catholic to be burned, the people liked nothing better than to stand around and watch. Preferably while eating a pie. But beheadings were another thing entirely. Up there on the scaffold was someone rich. Someone famous. A Royal, even. That's what people went crazy for, figured Moss. The blood and the *glamour*. It made her feel sick just thinking about it.

'Moss! MOSS!'

Pa's calls echoed across Tower Green. He'd be panicking by now. *Well let him panic.*

Quickly she tripped down the twist of steps and made her way along one of the slim passageways that marked the entrance to the dungeons. Squeezing herself into a corner, she

crouched. She knew Pa would find her eventually, but it wasn't the first place he'd look.

It was very dark and she could feel the damp poking through the patches on her dress. But there was something else. A smell that made her want to cough. And she could hear a faint shuffling. Coming from the dungeons, up the passageway towards her. Shuffle-shuffle-drag. Like the limp of tired feet. Closer it came. Curling her body into a ball, she willed it to pass her by. Shuffle-shuffle-drag. And all at once it stopped.

Moss blinked. She couldn't see a thing. Now the smell was scraping the back of her throat. There was something familiar about it – like a pig that had been left too long on the spit.

Without warning, a hand shot from the darkness and seized Moss by the neck. Just for a second, lit by a shaft of light as it passed under the grate, there was a face. Hooded and covered by a cracked, black mask.

Moss' scream stuck in her mouth. Next to her, so close she could feel the heat from his skin, a man whispered, 'And who would miss *you*, I wonder?'

'Get off me!' She tore at his hands, but his grip was fierce and he pressed the hollow at the base of her throat until she thought she would choke.

Twisting her body wildly, Moss kicked out with her heel. As her boot made contact, she heard a strange sigh. Of pleasure almost. Then a brittle laugh and the grip on her neck went slack.

Moss wrenched her body free and tore down the corridor, throwing herself through the door and onto the cobbles of Tower Green.

'Well there you are!'

'Pa . . .'

‘Don’t *do* that to me. You know what day it is and we’ve got a job to do.’ He thrust the basket into Moss’ arms. ‘Take it and get behind me.’

Before she could object, a blast of trumpets screeched from the turrets. The Armoury doors yawned and two hundred red and yellow-liveried soldiers marched onto the Green. With a cranking of chains, the portcullis opened and Moss was knocked back by the roar of the crowd.

‘Carvings, carvings. Last true likeness of a condemned man!’

‘Tragic Tom on a tankard! A little piece of history to take home!’

‘Exclusive! Sir Thomas More tells all! Tastefully set to music, ladies and gents . . .’

Dragging her basket with one hand, Moss touched her throat with the other. It felt tender and she guessed there would be bruises. Not that Pa would notice. He walked in front of her. His head bowed slightly, just like always. His axe held respectfully by his side, just like always. And just like always, it made Moss cringe.

‘Out of the way you wretches!’ Soldiers were shoving the front row of women, who shoved viciously back. ‘Make way for the prisoner!’

A small path cleared and Moss watched Sir Thomas More walk up the scaffold steps, slow as an old bull. The crowd broke into a spontaneous boo that echoed from the Hill down to the Tower below. Hard to believe, thought Moss, that he’d once been the King’s best friend. And yet . . . there were people in the Tower who whispered Sir Thomas was a good man. A devout man. Whose only crime had been to stand up to the King. All Moss knew was that since he’d arrived in the Tower, he’d been nothing but kind, slipping her scraps of salt-pork and once even an orange. But

here he was. His white cotton gown laced loosely about his neck. White so the blood would show. And at that moment, Moss wished so desperately that Pa would lay down his axe. Punch a soldier. Leap off the scaffold, grab her and dive into the crowd. Let them take their chances in one glorious dash for freedom.

She drilled her gaze at Pa. He wasn't going anywhere. That was obvious. He knelt, nodding thanks when Sir Thomas pressed a pouch of coins into his hands. Sure, it was the custom, but she hated that Pa took it. She fixed her eyes on the straw. Spread in a wide arc around the block, it would soon be soaking in wine-dark blood. Behind her the crowd hushed, looking on hungrily as Sir Thomas let Pa guide his neck into position.

The Hill held its breath.

Pa raised his axe.

With a single blow it hit the block. Clean. Just like always.

The crowd exhaled. From inside the Tower a cannon fired and a cloud of white doves spluttered over the turrets, their heads dyed red. Everyone gasped. It was all Moss could do to stop herself throwing up.

On the scaffold, Pa stood over the slumped body of Sir Thomas, wiping his axe on the sack. That was her cue.

She thumped the basket on the ground. A soldier plucked Sir Thomas' dripping head from the straw and lobbed it over the edge of the scaffold where it landed with a whack in the basket. The crowd went wild.

Moss picked up the basket. Pa was by her side now. His hood was off but she couldn't meet his eye. Instead she concentrated on getting down the hill without stumbling. She was glad of the distraction and tried not to look at Sir Thomas' unmoving eyes, rolled forever to the sky.



## CHAPTER TWO

‘You’re quiet this evening.’

Pa was cleaning his axe. Moss had her back to him, saying nothing. What was there to say? All her life she’d just accepted it somehow. That Pa was the Tower Executioner. That she was his helper. That they were prisoners and they were never getting out. But today he’d executed a good man. He’d done it without so much as a blink. And today she’d decided. She was sure. Sure as rats have tails. That she couldn’t be a part of it any more.

‘Moss?’

‘Forget it.’

‘There’s a fog rolling in from the river.’

‘So?’

‘Take the extra blanket tonight.’

Moss snorted and climbed into her pallet. But she didn’t protest when he unfolded the blanket and tucked it tight around her.

The forge was damp with fog. Pa frowned at the gap under the door and began plugging it with rushes. Though it was not really cold, Moss saw him shiver.

Both of them jumped as the door banged open. Moss’ nose wrinkled at the familiar smell of ale and old wee.

‘Dear friends, you wouldn’t happen to have a drop to soothe a sore throat?’

‘Come in, Nell,’ said Moss, and was out of her pallet before Pa could object. ‘No ale, but we’ve a little cheese. Take it, it’s good and soft.’

‘Thank you, child,’ said Nell. ‘Makes a nice change from rats.’

Moss led her to a chair, feeling Pa’s frown on her back.

Nell cocked her head to the door.

‘You’re wasting your time, Samuel. Bulrushes won’t keep the Nyx out.’

‘Nell, please,’ said Pa, ‘there’ll be no superstitious talk in here. You’re frightening the child . . .’

‘No, she’s not!’ Moss threw a defiant look at Pa. ‘*He* might be scared of the river. I’m not!’

‘Is that right?’ said Nell. ‘Well perhaps you should be, girl.’

She began to croon softly. An old song, that Moss had heard many times, its melody lilting and incomplete.

*Silver river stained with blood  
Take care of its depths, my girl  
For there is the lair of the ancient Nyx  
You don’t want to drown in the river*

*She comes for the ones on the edge of death  
For your eyes, my girl, for your eyes  
She’ll bargain with you when your hope is gone  
You don’t want to drown in the river*

*Nyrid she was, serpent she is,  
No kindness you’ll find from the Nyx  
Fear she seeks, tricky she’ll be  
And you’ll wish for an end my girl*

‘Superstitious nonsense,’ growled Pa.

‘So *you* don’t believe in any of that?’ said Moss.

‘No,’ said Pa. ‘And nor should you.’

Moss ignored him and turned back to Nell. ‘Have you ever seen the Nyx?’

‘I have not and thankful for it.’

‘Then they’re just stories . . .’

‘Stories. Memories. Who’s to say what’s true and what’s not? My grandmother, rest her rotten bones, told me tales of the river that would scare the skin off an apple.’

‘Tell me one now then,’ said Moss. Maybe they were just stories, but she loved to hear them.

‘That’s enough!’ snapped Pa. ‘I’ll not have you filling her head with all that rubbish.’

‘What else is there to fill it with, then?’ snapped back Moss. ‘Executions? *Vous* haven’t been locked in a fortress all your life. I’m nearly thirteen and I’ve never seen a forest, or a lake. Or . . .’

‘Moss, please . . . I know it’s hard. But it’s not like we have a choice. We keep our heads down and get on with it. This is our home.’

‘Our tomb, more like.’

‘I know, I know . . . It’s not *ideal*.’

‘You’re telling me!’

‘Well, there’s nothing I can do about it.’

Moss opened her mouth to reply, then shut it again. What was the point? She’d asked Pa a thousand times how they’d ended up in the Tower. Each time she got the same story and each time it seemed less likely. Pa had been a soldier. He’d killed a man in his regiment, so he and Ma had gone on the run. They’d hidden in a river where the shock of the icy water sent Ma into labour.

‘If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes, I would never have believed it,’ Pa had said, ‘It was a miracle. You swam from your mother until your fingers broke the surface. Then you held on to me with those fierce little fists. And I didn’t let go.’

Of course, the soldiers got Pa in the end. And he would have been executed there and then, had it not been for his captain, Ridley Levitt. Pa was the captain’s finest swordsman. His kills were clean and accurate. Levitt realised he could put that talent to excellent use. For Levitt was the new Lieutenant of the Tower of London. And he wanted Pa to be his Executioner.

End of story, thought Moss. Because the worst of it was, Pa didn't really seem that bothered. He'd given up.

The forge was quiet, save for the last spits on the dying fire. Nell was asleep, a trickle of cheese making its way down her chin.

'Pa,' whispered Moss.

'What?'

'We could find . . . a way out? Don't shake your head like that. Remember the Lady Tankerville last summer?'

'One escape. *One*. In a hundred years.' Pa shook his head. 'Since that night, the Tower is more fortress than she's ever been . . .'

'I know, I know. But isn't it worth a try?'

'And risk getting caught? Hung? It may be a half-life in here, but at least it's a life.'

'But . . .'

'Trust me on this one. There's no way out.'

### **CHAPTER THREE**

The day after a beheading was always quiet. It was eight o'clock in the morning and half the Tower were still in their pallets. Pa was watching from the forge door.

'Don't lean over the wall.'

'Okay.'

'Careful up on those turrets.'

'Okay, I said!'

'And don't go near the moat.'

'Right, like I haven't heard *that* a thousand times.'

Moss hurried across Tower Green and was soon bobbing up and down behind the turrets on the South Wall. Halfway along she found her spot and wedged her boot into a hole where the wall had worn away. With a push she launched her head and

shoulders above the battlements. Her heart soared. It was here she had the best view of the great River Thames.

Moss leaned out as far as she dared, feeling the freedom of a head and shoulders cut loose from the wall. For a few moments she was blinded by the water, a plate of dazzling silver that threw the sun back into the sky. Then a forest of sails came into focus and she drank in the sight of the river at work. How many times had she wondered how different her life could have been? If she'd been one of the children down there on the quay, fetching and carrying for the traders. Bet none of *their* baskets had heads in. The thought tugged at Moss' chest. It would be the easiest thing in the world to throw herself from the top of the wall, to take her chances in the river. But Pa was right, the currents were fierce. London Bridge saw to that. Sucking the wide river through its arches with a force that could rip a tree from its roots. She knew a leap from the Tower was as good as signing her own death warrant.

A flash of red and yellow on the bridge caught Moss' eye. Soldiers. It didn't take a genius to work out what they were up to. A small crowd was gathering. Sure enough there was a cheer as Sir Thomas' boiled head was raised on a pikestaff and skewered to the bridge. Moss inhaled the salt air and turned away. The outside world was cruel. But more than anything, she longed to be in it.

The Green was quiet as Moss dropped down from the wall. She didn't see him coming until it was too late. Before she could react, her legs were whipped from under her and Moss found herself falling backwards into the horse trough, where she landed with an almighty splash. She peeled the wet hair from her eyes and scowled at the face leering down at her.

William 'Two Bellies' Levitt. That was all she needed.

'What's the matter, forge-rat? Never had a bath?' Two Bellies

grabbed her dress with his thick fists and plunged her head under. Suddenly she was gulping filthy water, spluttering as he yanked her back out. He grinned at her, drunk as a tick on the sight of Moss rasping lungfuls of air.

‘Scum always floats to the surface,’ he said.

‘And pigs can’t help that they stink so bad.’

‘Got a job that’ll shut that mouth of yours, basket girl.’ He shoved her down the steps to the garderobe drop. ‘Toilet needs a clean. Off you go.’

Moss had to give him credit. He was organised enough to throw a bucket and shovel after her.

She sighed and pushed at the door.

The stink in the garderobe drop was eye-wateringly bad. It was ten feet from the toilet-holes above. Whatever came hurtling down ended spattered halfway back up the brickwork. Moss dumped the bucket at one end and began shovelling.

Half an hour later, Two Bellies had grown tired of laughing at Moss lugging buckets to the cess-pit and had fallen asleep at the top of the steps. Carefully, Moss prised the soft shoes off his feet and poured a dollop of foul slops into each. She allowed herself a smile. It was the little things that made life worth living.

Moss left the filthy bucket on the steps while she went back down to get the shovel. The stone floor was still slimy in places and as Moss picked up the heavy iron shovel, she slipped, sending it clanging against the wall. As she picked herself up off the floor, Moss noticed one of the wall-stones had moved. And now there was a gap where the stone used to be. She bent down to have a look. A draught hissed across her face and Moss put her hands to the gap, plugging the sharp breath of wind. That was strange. Where was the wind coming from? She pushed one of the stones. It moved. Curious, she pressed the full weight of her shoulder against it. Without too much resistance, the stone swivelled

and she found herself peering down into blackness. As her eyes adjusted she could see a ledge and beyond that the gaping dark of what looked like a very steep drop. Slipping easily through the gap, Moss scuffled onto the ledge and poked underneath it with her boot. There was a foothold. And another below that one. She eased herself over the edge and began to climb, the ladder of footholds taking her on a steep descent. With every step the air grew colder, and by the time she hit the bottom, Moss figured she must be deep in the foundations of the Tower. Planting both feet in what felt like mud, she turned and gasped. A distant speck of light pricked the pitch dark.

It was obvious.

She was in a tunnel.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

Moss' feet could barely keep pace with her brain as she scrambled towards the light. Where did the tunnel go? Who else knew about it? She hardly noticed the flints in the mud as they nicked her thin-soled boots. It took her less than a minute to reach the tunnel's end. Gripping the rough walls, she hauled herself up onto a ledge towards the shaft of light and found herself in front of a hole in the outer wall, blocked by several large stones. Carefully Moss dislodged them and stuck her head into the sunlight.

In front of her, slapping quietly against the outer wall in glorious silver, was the river.

Staggering back, Moss gulped the salt air. Two strides and she'd be out of the Tower. If she could make it to the banks she'd be free. She could just run and run and really, what would they do? Her head was bursting and all the while she felt a tug-tug, deep inside, drawing her to the river. Before she could stop herself, Moss had hitched her dress and dropped into the water.

It wasn't very deep at all. She waded swiftly, enjoying the tingle of icy water as it rinsed around her boots. She knew this might be her only chance, but she also knew she couldn't just leave Pa.

Okay, this was her plan. Find a way to the banks, take a look around, then go back and get him.

The wind began to pick up and now Moss could feel the pull of the water around her shins. It lashed the bank, peeling back in a snarl of froth. Once or twice Moss slipped on the shingle.

The hole took her by complete surprise.

One minute she was wading. The next she was under.

No sooner had she lost her balance, Moss was snatched from the shore by a hard fist of current. She felt her body barrel under the waves, over and over, cracking her head on something hard. She tried to open her eyes, but all she got was a wall of dark. Panicking for breath she felt salt water fill her lungs, while useless legs thrashed against the flow that towed her as easily as a piece of rope. Her head was numb in the freezing river. Dizzy pictures flickered in and out of her sight, Pa raising his axe, Two Bellies leering at her, the swirling crowd on the Hill. Then the images sank away, deep down into the silt, and Moss was bursting, her chest a choked balloon of water. Which way was up? Which was down? Both were gone, dissolved in the hideous pull that sucked her into darkness. That was when she saw the face.

A woman. Her hair spiralling upwards, lifted by the current. A pale face, lit by strange eyes, with no expression, no smile or frown. Around her face and body, seaweed fanned out like a cloak. Her bare arms drifted outwards. Drowned. A poor drowned soul, lost to the river. And Moss knew, sure as rotten teeth on a rich man, that she would soon be joining her.



The suck of the current stopped. She felt her dress billow as her feet tipped upwards.

Without warning, there was a sudden jerking at her legs. She felt the dead weight of her body being dragged from above. Beneath her, the drowned woman shrank backwards into the black river.

Feet first, Moss felt herself hauled through the waves until her head broke the surface in a splutter of foam. Arms were pulling her now, dragging her body until it cracked on the side of something hard. More heaving and she flopped onto her back on the bottom of a boat, her lips spitting frothy vomit. Then the grey sky went white.

\*

‘Take a punt up to Old Swan . . . No time for anything else now . . .’

Fuzzy words buffeted Moss’ ears.

‘Stupid piss-pot of a shore-girl. Ain’t nothin here worth havin . . .’

She felt hands patting her dress.

‘Should have known you’d be good fer nothing but a boat-full of sick.’

Moss squeezed her eyes open. Sifting through her pockets was a boy. He shot her a furious glance.

‘Stay on yer back, yer nubbin loach!’

Moss heaved herself up and felt the ground wobble violently.

‘Great Harry’s piles! I said stay *still*! You’ll have me boat over!’

Moss stopped moving and looked about. She was sitting in a small flat boat, bobbing near the shore. The boy glared at her. She stared back.

‘What . . . happened?’

‘You fell in the river, I pulled you out, you puked in me boat.’

Moss felt her body begin to shake with cold. Her woollen

dress was sodden and grey water was pooling where she sat. She noticed her feet were bare.

‘Where are my boots? I was wearing them when I fell in.’

‘Don’t ask me. Probably at the bottom of the river, stinkin out the fish, in’t they?’

‘Okay, okay. I was only asking. I’m . . . Moss.’

‘Sounds about right. Useless green stuff, soaks up water.’

The boy was punting the boat towards the bank with one oar.

‘Don’t just stand there like a nun givin thanks for her own farts. Hop off now, shore-girl.’ He held the boat fast with the oar and Moss wobbled to the front.

‘Won’t you tell me your name?’

‘Out! Count yerself lucky I didn’t tip you back in!’

Moss jumped onto the shingle.

As the little boat nudged into deeper water, the boy reached over the side and fished out something from a trailing net. Moss squinted at his catch. It didn’t look much like fish.

*My boots!* The little thief had stolen her boots!

‘Those are mine! Give them back!’

But the boy just grinned and rowed up the river.

## SYNOPSIS:

Moss hates her life. She's a prisoner. Her father is an executioner. But when she discovers a hidden tunnel that takes her to freedom, she also unearths a terrible secret. A bargain, made by Pa years ago, promising her soul to a river creature – the Nyx. Now Moss must work out a way to cheat her destiny. But it's complicated and to save someone she loves, she may have to pay a far greater price.

## BIOGRAPHY:

Jane Hardstaff didn't always want to write about executions, but if she's honest she really enjoyed it. She loves swimming in wild places and wondering what might be lurking below. Her story is full of river spirits and made-up sixteenth-century swearwords. She's a TV producer.

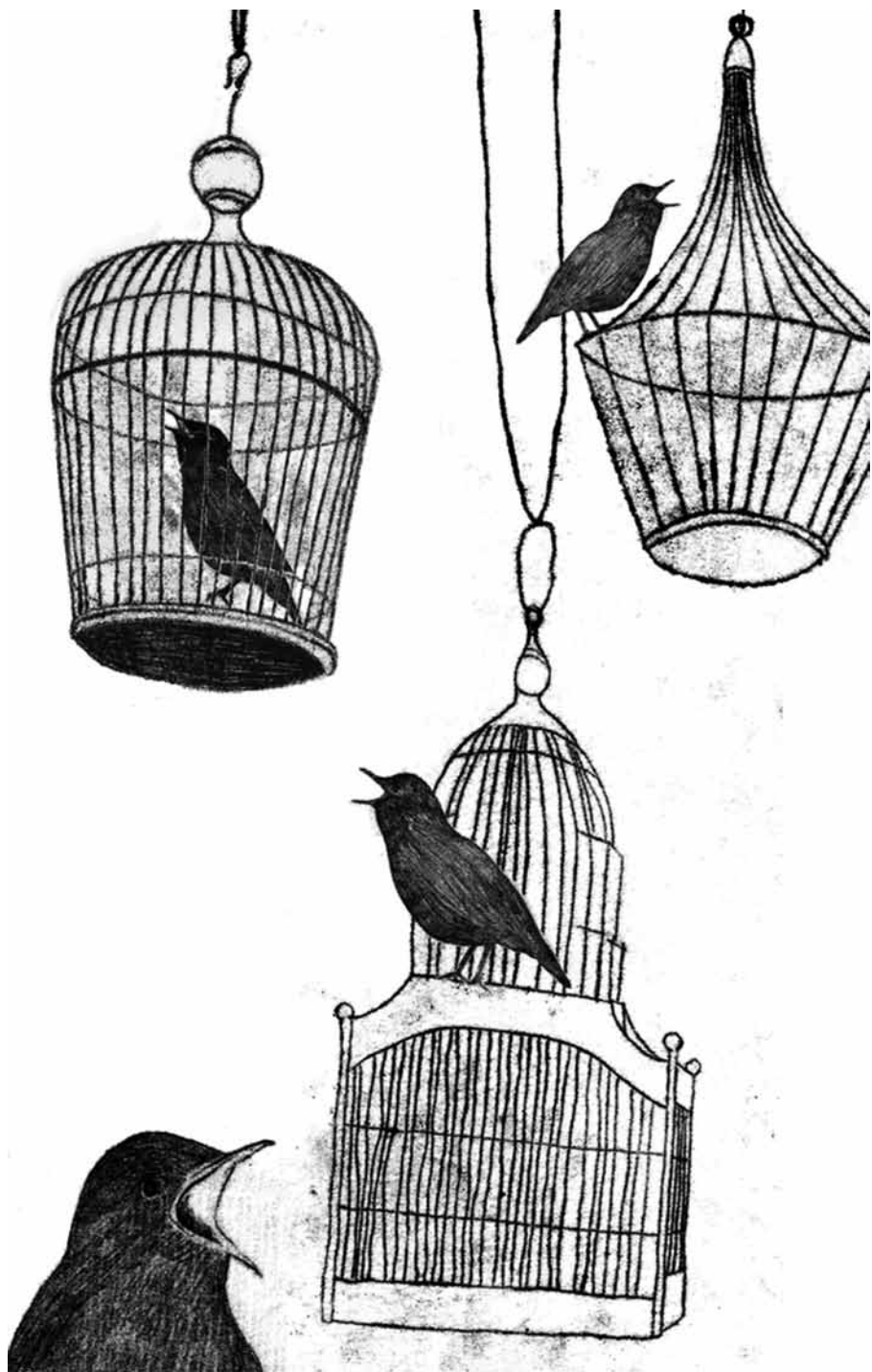
**Contact:** [janehardstaff@gmail.com](mailto:janehardstaff@gmail.com)

## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"Moss's personality comes through and is fitting for the Tudor setting . . . A very interesting premise for a female protagonist."

"This is GREAT. Great sense of place, lovely idea, good character. Fresh and original voice. It's sparky and it's not often you can say that about manuscripts with historical settings."

"Moss is a lively, feisty character that readers will instantly identify with."



## BIRDSONG by Julia Groves



### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Julia studied Illustration at Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge and Printmaking at Brighton University. Her recent work combines traditional and digital media, drawing inspiration from the natural world, old architecture and vintage toys. Julia enjoys creating illustrations for children of all ages.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"The use of contrast and line-work with the splodges is interesting and makes this illustration stylish and classy. The illustrator uses unusual shapes in this composition. This could work well in contemporary fiction layouts that stretch across the page. This piece shows the potential to cater for a slightly older audience."

[www.flickr.com/photos/gwengroves/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/gwengroves/)

# TOUCH

by Rachel Wolfreys

## KWAME

The Mercedes at the bottom of Crondall St. is waiting for something; I can hear the note of expectation in its low purr. I glance down the street – no-one's around. Food wrappers skitter down the pavement in the night breeze; in the distance, sirens. And then, something else: a tapping sound, getting louder. Footsteps. Light ones. A child. I can see him half walking, half running up Great Western Street. The car revs its engine. *No*, I think. Not *him*. He's just a young kid. But the Mercedes lurches forward and screeches up the road towards the boy. He looks up, blinded by the headlamps, frozen for a second. Then he speeds to a sprint, but it's too late. No-one can outrun a Mercedes.

The driver opens the window and leans out, staring at the twitching body of the boy. He waits there, engine purring, until the body is still, then speeds off into the slick night.

A crowd forms. First the residents of the houses left on the street, then the paramedics, then neighbours and passers-by from surrounding streets. After a while, a woman pushes her way through the crowd, face tight, mouth formed into a big, shocked 'O'. When she sees the body laying in the road her face crumples. She cries out and falls, but the people standing by catch her. I'm guessing she's the boy's mother. I see others with children clasp them up and move away, as if danger might be contagious. The body is taken up and stretchered and locked up inside the ambulance. It twists through streets with sirens wailing and lights flashing as if something could still be done.

Of course, nothing can be done. I know that, even if no-one else does.

In the space where the ambulance and the people and the body and the screaming and sirens and fuss had been, there's a small figure. He's staring up and down the street with forlorn eyes. He looks lost. Now it's time for me to come out of the shadows and do my job. If I could still feel, I think I would be sick. I step forward anyway. *Have to.*

I smile and put out my hand to shake, as if I'm welcoming him to some kind of party.

'Hi – I'm Kwame,' I say.

He doesn't smile.

'What – what's happened to me?' he says, his voice all cracked and broken.

I would try to make it sound pretty if I could but I can't, so I just tell him straight.

'You're dead, kid. Sorry.'

His face crumples, just like his mum's did before.

\* \* \*

'So – why did that car run me down? It seemed like it were on purpose.'

I sigh. Some of Crow's gang just tell people straight but I can't do that. Not with such a young kid anyway.

'I'm not sure,' I say. 'Did you – have you ever spoken to a dead person before?'

The boy falls silent. 'Dunno,' he says, after a while.

We're walking down Yarbrough St. It's empty, save for a few cats. More debris and litter. I stop at the end of the street by the Caribbean takeaway. Dad used to send me out for fried dumpling. Long time ago. I turn away from it but I'm not sure where I'm going. Don't really know what to do with him. I should be sweetening him up – persuading him to do

Crow's work – but I can't. Not yet. Got to give him a bit of time.

'What's your name?' I say after a while.

'Sam,' he mumbles, barely listening to me. He's still grieving for his life. I remember the feeling well.

'Come on Sam. Let's go find somewhere to . . . um . . . rest,' I say. Ghosts don't need to rest but I don't tell him that. Let him think that death will be a bit like life for a bit – until he gets used to it. I think of the park on Alexandra Road and turn back up Yarburgh Street. It's nice by the pond and the night breeze ruffling through the summer leaves is always comforting.

We sit by the pond, on the grassy bank that surrounds it. So far I've only seen a few drunks – no ghosts and no seers, thank goodness. That might really freak the poor kid out. Sam sits with his knees pulled up to his chest. He's watching the water as it ripples in the light wind.

'Will I see me mum again?' he says.

There he goes again with the difficult questions.

'Um . . . well, *you'll* see *her* again – she just won't be able to see you. Probably not anyway.' Unless she's a seer and I doubt that. Crow would have known.

Sam sniffs but says nothing. He carries on looking out at the pond.

I'm trying not to remember the emptiness I felt when I first left the living world. The ache inside. I stand up and pace about, looking at the green leaves above us.

'It's not so bad you know,' I say, trying to make him feel better. 'You can travel around anywhere you want when you're dead. Cool, eh?'

Sam looks up at me, a dull expression on his face. 'Dunno.'

He says dunno a lot. After another silence, he speaks again.

'How did *you* die?'



Well, I suppose that question was inevitable, after a while.  
'Oh, I just passed away in my sleep,' I say. Think I'll spare him the truth for now; he's had enough horror for one night.

'How old were you?'

'Fifteen.'

'Do fifteen-year-olds die in their sleep?'

'I did,' I say, trying to think of a way to change the subject. Then it rains and I don't have to. He's too freaked out by the fact that he can't feel it. He holds up his hands and turns his face skyward, staring at the water droplets falling.

'You'll get used to that. Don't worry,' I say.

'Why can't I feel it?'

'Sam – you're a ghost now, remember.'

The boy shakes his head. 'But – I can see and hear . . . why can't I *feel*?'

'To feel – to *touch* – that's the only sense we lose.'

He looks confused for a minute, and then he stretches out and lies back on the grassy bank, staring up at the sky. I sit down next to him.

'Kwame . . . ?' he says after a while.

'Yeah?'

'Is – is there someone in *charge*? You know – like God or somebody?'

I sigh. 'Dunno.' (It's my turn now.)

He looks up at me with his big eyes. 'Then – how do you know what to *do*?'

*I don't, Sam. Can't you tell that yet?*

'Oh – well – there are lots of people – ghosts – around. They help,' I say.

He nods, then looks back up at the wet stars. After a while, I lie back too. We stay there until the grey dawn streaks the sky.

## NAOMI

I can hear a dull thudding sound outside my window. It wakes me up. My eye-lids are stuck together – too much crying – but I pull them apart and flinch; the sun's far too bright. Something's bothering me about the noise. At first I can't work out what it is – then I realise. I know that sound well. It's a sound that used to annoy me – have me banging on the window and shouting. A sound that can't be happening – not now. A thrill of fear runs through me and I leap out of bed and rush to the window and pull the faded curtains apart. The whiteness of the sun makes my eyes water. There's nothing there. No little boy kicking a ball against the side of the house over and over again. I get back into bed and pull the covers back over my head, trying to shut out the silence.

Dad knocks later, says its 'high time' I get up. I think he's trying to sound cross just to make everything seem normal so I don't ask why, for once. Don't want any arguments today. He closes the door and I hear him pause outside Sam's room. He doesn't go in.

I drag on my tracksuit bottoms and a T-shirt. Can't be bothered with finding something nice to wear. The sun's still shining brightly, like its taunting me, somehow. I leave my curtains closed, eyeing myself in the mirror in the half-light. My face looks black from tears and mascara and my hair's a mass of tangles. I don't really care.

I pause outside Sam's room too. Something makes me stop. Did I hear the sound of his favourite cartoon? Or maybe it's something else – just a feeling that he's nearby. I want to rush downstairs to the kitchen and Mum and Dad but I stop myself. One day, one of us will have to open the door. It might as well be now. I reach out and clasp the smooth metal of the door handle and pull it down, hearing the familiar creak as the door opens.

Dad's always saying he'll fix that. I find myself wondering if he would bother now.

Someone should have shut the curtains. There's far too much sunlight and warmth in the room – it doesn't seem right, somehow. The usual mess is everywhere – derailed trains, bricks and blocks, the debris of chipped and broken toys that bear no resemblance now to what they were once supposed to be. The jumble of it all reminds me of the streets outside. But it's the smell that gets to me. A weird mix of fabric conditioner, sweaty trainers and milk: Sam's smell. I feel fresh tears on my face before I even see Nosey. He's lying face down on the floor next to the bed; as if Sam had been lying in it the night before and had tossed him out whilst he dreamt. I pick the soft toy up and sit down on the bed. Nosey is a dog, a blue one. He was called Bluey originally I think, but became Nosey when he lost his nose after our real dog pulled it off. I hug him to me, bury my face in the blue fur and weep. I never knew I had so many tears.

I lie back on the pillows and wipe my face on Sam's blankets. I sniff and clear my throat. I feel dehydrated, as if I've cried all the water out of my body. I think about going downstairs to get a cup of tea when something catches my eye. Next to the bed is a dog-eared exercise book with the word 'Diary' scrawled across it. I pick it up, expecting it to be a typical eight-year-olds' diary: *Got up, had breakfast, played football, had tea, went to bed.*

But no.

What I read makes me forget about tears and breakfast and Nosey and everything else. What I read makes my flesh creep. I curl up on his bed and start to read. Then I start to wonder if Sam's death was really just a tragic accident after all.

## KWAME

Sam's not coping with being dead very well.

He hasn't been home yet – don't blame him. I found that hard at first. Now he's refusing to go to his funeral. Not good.

'You need to go, Sam. It helps – it really does. *Closure*, and all that.'

I'm not sure if he knows what I mean by closure – he's only eight. Or *was* should I say. Come to think of it, I'm not really sure what closure means either. I saw it on some TV chat-show or something. Now I hear it a lot at funerals. Attending them is a little hobby of mine.

'Why don't you wanna go, Sam? You'll see your family and everything!'

He sits down on the curb. We're on Princess Road, watching the early morning traffic. I want to play Car Dodge but then realise that might not be Sam's cup of tea right now. I sit next to him, staring at the pigeons roosting in the derelict bus depot opposite.

'Don't wanna see them,' he says, resting his chin on his knees.

'Why not?'

'Dunno.'

One of the pigeons swoops down right near us. I swear they can tell we're there.

'Sam – it won't be bad you know – you'll feel better seeing them all again.'

He shrugs and doesn't answer. I start to wonder why I've come over all Oprah anyway. I should be doing Crow's work. That's what this is all supposed to be about – and Crow won't be happy if I don't get on with it.

'Did *you* feel better?' he says after a while.

'When? Seeing my family again?'

He nods.

I pause. How do I answer? Tell the truth – that it tore my heart out? Or lie?

‘Course I did.’ Lying seems the better option. Besides – I did feel better, eventually. It’s like taking a plaster off healed skin. Better to rip it off then peel slowly.

‘Do you still see them now?’

‘My family? Well – yes – I do go and see them sometimes.’

But not as often as I should. Can’t resist the urge to touch . . .

‘Can I meet – see them?’ he asks.

‘You want to see my family? Why?’

‘I . . . want to see what it’s like. Seeing them but . . . not really being there.’

‘We are there, Sam. They just can’t see us. But – well – I suppose we can go, if it’ll help.’

Not like I’ve got anything planned.

‘Maybe you’ll decide to see yours after you’ve met mine, eh?’ I smile.

He shrugs again and I know what he’s going to say before he says it.

‘Dunno.’

The street around us is beginning to get busy. People trudging to work – a few kids – a few pensioners, getting their morning papers and milk. Sam gets up, dodging out the way of footsteps, forgetting no-one can feel his presence. I stand up too and we head down Broadfield Road, for no particular reason.

‘Kwame?’ he says after a while.

‘Yes, Sam?’

‘Do you know someone called Crow Mancet?’

I stop walking. Can’t really put this off any longer can I?

‘Why?’ I ask, not looking at him.

‘Well – you wanted to know if I’d talked with a dead person and I did. That was his name – Crow.’

‘Oh. Well – yes, Sam – I do know him. Matter of fact, he wants to meet you.’

Sam says nothing. He stops walking.

‘What’s wrong?’ I ask.

‘Don’t want to meet him. He scares me.’

‘Why?’ As if I didn’t know. Man’s a raving psychopath, as I’ve learnt to my cost.

‘He used to say things – about me dying – like he *knew* I was going to.’

Course he knew you were going to Sam. He ordered your death – just like mine. Can’t say that though, can I? The poor kid’s already a state.

‘Don’t worry about him, Sam. He’s just one of those things that you’ll get used to, after a while.’

Just like you’ll get used to spying, informing, recruiting and driving people mad, eventually, I think to myself. Poor Sam.

We walk on in silence after that.

## NAOMI

Finally the black shift dress Mum bought me two birthdays ago will get a wearing. She bought it because she said she’d rather see me in anything but jeans and trackies. Now I think she’d rather see me scruffy as hell and not have the occasion that’s making me wear it. It’s not every day you bury your eight-year-old brother.

So we’ve got a house full of all the grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, second cousins once-removed and probably anyone else with the surname of Jones. No open coffin or anything like that. Grandma complained but when Mum told her the body was in no fit state she shut right up, never went through her usual list of everything that was wrong in the place or anything. Funny how death makes everyone so polite.

So here I am, squashed between Auntie Sue and a cousin I'm not sure the name of. My dress is too tight and I feel like I can't breathe – though that might not be the dress. That might be because I can't forget the contents of Sam's untidy scrawl in his diary upstairs. Auntie Sue says *such a shame* for the fiftieth time and sighs and I nod and sigh and the cousin whose name I don't know nods and sighs.

I catch a glimpse of Dad weaving between guests to get to the cupboard where he keeps the whiskey. We haven't even had the funeral yet.

*Such a shame.*

I nod and sigh again, make my excuses and get up. I feel like I should do something – make coffee for the guests, wash the dishes – anything. I just want to keep busy; to not have to look at the small box laden with flowers in the centre of the room anymore.

I get to the kitchen but Mum's already elbow deep in soap suds. She got there before me. Her arms look red raw as if the heat of the water is too much. Her face is red as well though and she's screwing up her face from the effort of scrubbing the saucepan in the water, as if removing the remains of last night's pasta-bake will solve everything.

I want to say something but I don't know what so I go upstairs instead.

As soon as I'm in my room I'm wishing I was downstairs again. The company of others makes me able to hold back my tears but as soon as I'm alone . . .

I don't want to cry anymore. My eyes are sore and I feel dry, as if I've cried all the energy and life out of myself.

I reach for the only thing I know that will distract me from crying: the diary. It's hidden under my pillow, in the pajama case I never use. I open it at the page where I stopped yesterday;

the page where I had to give up reading because my hands were shaking too much.

*‘Crow talks to me every day now. He says he’s looking forward to meeting me. He says it will be someday soon. He says I’m special. That I have a talent and that talent can only be brought out by being dead. I wish he would just go away but I hear his voice everywhere. I can’t shut him out – not even when I sleep.’*

I shut the book, shaking again. I wish it was just a child’s story – silly imagination running wild. Or a coincidence. Anything. I can’t bring myself to believe this is the truth – that someone wanted my little brother dead. I think of all the times when he knocked on my door, wanting to talk and I would shout at him to go away and not bother me. I wish I could see him now. Hug him. Tell him how sorry I am.

## **KWAME**

You can’t touch when you’re dead but you can still smell. Mum’s cooking chicken. There’s scotch-bonnet peppers and garlic and all kinds of spice in with that chicken – just the way Jamaicans like it. Just the way I liked it. Dumplings and rice and peas too. Torture.

I sit on the sofa in the lounge. Marcie’s at the other end of it but her head-phones are on full – blasting her R&B – so the small amount of ghost perception she has isn’t working. I think I’ve only spooked her once and that was when she came to my grave. That was just to get her back for all the times she ratted me out to Dad when I was still alive. Sisters, eh?

Sam’s standing by the mantelpiece looking at all the pictures of me when I was alive. Me on the first day of school. Me at the Caribbean Carnival. (I wish Mum would get rid of that one –



I'm in a black and green doctor bird costume and I look like a girl). Me with the football team at school. I don't like looking at them, really. It's still hard to accept it's all gone.

But it's time for me to get serious with Sam – tell him what's really going on. I can't pretend I'm just doing all this to be his friend or a big brother figure. I'm doing my job. Just like me, he's part of Crow's gang now. He'll be up for hire soon, just like I am, available to the living or the dead. Specialties: blackmailing, spying, digging up dirt, haunting or driving mad. If you're really lucky someone might just hire you for the ultimate job: assassin. Let's hope not. Assassin at eight years old: not good. Even if you're dead.

I look up at Marcie. She's oblivious to everything, caught up in her own little world. Mum comes in and screams at her.

'Time for your food – turn that off, girl!' she says. The smell of the chillies and garlic wafts in with her. Man, if only I could have some of that chicken . . .

I move off the sofa and out of Mum's way. Her ghost perception is good and I don't want her getting spooked. Might ruin her dinner. She flicks her tea towel at Marcie who screams but gets off the sofa anyway. They walk off to the kitchen to eat, neither of them aware of the two ghosts in their living room. And that's just how it should be. That's what all this is about, at the end of the day. Family.

I have a gift see. Not all the dead can communicate with the living, just as not all the living can communicate with the dead. Those of us who can do it are special, wanted, sought out. Now just because I'm special doesn't mean I want to blackmail, lie, cheat – even kill if it comes to it. Course I don't. But if I don't do it, Crow says every one of my family will die. And not in a nice way. Not if Crow has anything to do with it. Well I can't let that happen. I *won't*. And that's why I'm here

now, recruiting a little boy into a criminal gang of ghosts. I've got no choice.

Sam looks up and smiles at me. He doesn't smile often so it makes me flinch, a little. This would be so much easier if he wasn't so small and helpless.

'Sam, you and I have got to talk,' I say, giving him my serious look.

'What about? Your family? Have you got more pictures to show me?'

'Um . . . no. Not now anyway.'

'Your family seem all right. I think they miss you though.'

I nod. And smile. Weakly.

This is going to be so much harder than I thought.

'Sam – it's time for you to meet Crow now. We can't put it off any longer.'

Sam stops smiling.

'No – I ain't going to meet him. I don't want to see that man.'

'You might not want to but . . .'

'I said I ain't going to!' Sam wails, making a lot of noise for such a little ghost.

Then something happens. Something strange. He vanishes into the air. Ghosts aren't supposed to learn how to do that for a long time. I can't even do it properly yet. I look around my house but he's nowhere to be seen – not in the garden either.

Oh great. I've lost a ghost – an eight-year-old newly formed one. All that anguish let loose on the world.

What will I tell Crow now?

## SYNOPSIS:

I'm Kwame, a fifteen-year-old ghost, available for hire: black-mail, spying, haunting – you name it, I'll do it. Maybe even kill, if it comes to it. Don't judge me though. Crow Mancet and his gang will kill my family if I don't do what they say – my wonderful, living, thriving family. I can't let that happen. Not ever.

If I can figure out how to break away, I will. But it won't be easy.

## BIOGRAPHY:

Rachel Wolfreys lives in Manchester with her family. She is lucky enough to have a job in which she talks about books all day – she's an English teacher. As well as books, she loves music, theatre, her dog, the seaside and spending time with family. And Manchester United, of course.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

“The book has a fascinating premise which is really unique and makes you want to keep reading.”

“Intriguingly original premise . . . Sam seems like a good character with depth to him. He's clearly no ordinary eight-year-old.”

“The concept and voice work so well – the two most important things. I want to read the rest.”

# KALAHARI

by David Hofmeyr and Zoë Crookes

## 1

The scream tore through the night. I woke with a start, heart thumping like a drum.

It wasn't a leopard. The baboons would have barked their warning from the treetops. Not wild dogs either. I would have heard the pack calling out to each other. At night the farm was unpredictable and dangerous but animal cries were common as bush fires.

It could only mean one thing. A human scream.

Another cry cut the black night. In the darkness I struggled to control my breathing and listened, petrified, to the night.

Muffled voices, frantic shouts, feet drumming the corridor.

My door flew open and in burst Pa. The lantern swinging from his hand threw arcs of light across the walls and shadows danced on his pale face.

I watched him haul open drawers and throw clothes on my bed.

'Pa. What's out there?'

But I knew. I knew, because it was my fault.

When he spoke his voice was tense. 'There's no time, Maisha.' He slammed a drawer shut. 'Get dressed and meet me in the hall. Now!'

And then he was gone.

I scrambled out of bed and fumbled for my clothes: jacket, hat and boots. I grabbed my leather satchel, stuffed it with a box of matches, my water flask, sticks of dried meat I'd cured myself. On the farm you had to be prepared.

At the door I paused. I'd almost forgotten.

I rushed back to the bed, groped under the mattress and pulled out the cowrie shell on its leather thong. I slung it around my neck and stood in front of the mirror.

*What have you done, Maisha?*

I stared at myself. My thick dark hair. My frightened green eyes.

The shell lay cool against my skin. I tucked it inside my shirt and scraped my hair into a ponytail.

Pa stormed into the room with his side-by-side shotgun gripped in his hand. He grabbed me by the arm and pulled me to the sash window.

'We can't use the front door. It's being watched.'

He undid the latch and pushed up the frame. It squealed in its grooves. Then he poked his head out, scanned the dark and climbed through.

'Come on.'

I hesitated.

'Maisha, come on!'

He leaned through the open window and, with his free hand, pulled me by the straps of my satchel into the cool night.

Something sliced the air.

So close I felt a rush of wind on my face. It clattered into the wall behind us, gauging out a chunk of plaster.

A spear.

I heard Pa grunt. Felt him slump against me. He reached behind his back and when his hand returned, it was dark with blood.

'Pa!'

'It's nothing,' he hissed. 'A flesh wound.'

He grabbed my wrist and pulled me across the cold stone veranda.

I squeezed my eyes shut and listened to the shallow gasp of Pa's breath.

*This can't be happening.*

We flew across the silver-grey lawn to the avenue of jacaranda trees, where we scrambled behind a thick trunk.

I was shaking, trying to order my thoughts.

Pa clamped a bloody hand to my mouth and pointed.

A shadowy figure moved across the veranda – sniffing, crouching.

Another lurched into view. And another. All three were cloaked in dark hides – hyena-skins. They carried short throwing spears – assegais – lit by the moon.

The nearest turned. Its face was hidden in the shadow folds of its cloak. I fought to turn my head away but I was powerless. Trapped.

Pa squeezed my hand and we moved again. We hurdled the small hedge guarding the path to the animal enclosure. We ran full-pace down the gravel track. Pa stumbled and I reached for him and felt the damp of his shirt. Sweat? Or blood?

We arrived at the gate, wheezing and breathless.

No-one followed.

Pa leaned against the fence post, gasping as he worked the lock. He pushed aside the rusting chain and hauled the gate open. Then he staggered to a tree and dropped to his knees.

I was sick with fear. I couldn't move.

In the pale moonlight I saw a dark stain spreading across his back.

'You're bleeding.'

He turned and slumped against the tree.

'Listen to me, Maisha . . .' He paused for breath. 'Shaka . . . he'll find you. When he comes, you ride like the wind . . . the way I taught you.'

‘But —’

‘Just listen. I’m going to set the animals free from their nursing pens. Meanwhile you ride to the gate on the far side of the enclosure and . . . when you get there . . . open it wide so the animals can escape. Can you do that?’

I stared at him in disbelief. Even in the dim light I could see how pale he was.

‘They’ll kill them, Maisha. Their only chance is out there.’

‘But . . . what about *you*?’

‘Once you’re sure the gate won’t swing shut, head for the baobab. Wait for me there.’ He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the back of a hand. ‘But if the sun rises over the ridge and I’m not there . . . leave. Ride north-west. To the Kalahari. You know the way. Find her. Find your grandmother. I’ll meet you later.’

‘Please let me stay with you.’ I threw my arms around his neck, felt the oiliness of his skin.

He pushed me away. ‘Just listen to me. I want you to promise you’ll keep going until you find your grandmother. You understand? Don’t stop until you find her.’

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t speak.

‘Maisha, I asked you to promise me. *Promise me!*’

‘I-I promise.’ The words were torn from my mouth.

Pa squeezed my shoulder and looked at me. ‘Do you remember that morning last spring? When we tracked that wounded wildebeest and startled the korhaan?’

I nodded, numb with shock.

‘Remember how she flew straight up in the air . . . then folded her wings, pretended to be shot, and fell to the ground like a stone? We were so busy watching we forgot the hatchlings.’

‘I remember.’

‘I’m the korhaan, okay? All you have to do is run.’

His voice, though filled with urgency, was quiet – almost inaudible – so quiet I had to lean in to hear the words. Close enough to smell the tobacco on his breath.

‘Never let your guard down, Maisha. Trust your instincts. You can do this. Remember who you are and where you come from. I *will* find you. That’s *my* promise.’

‘It’s my fault,’ I blurted, feeling the burn of tears.

‘It’s not your fault. It’s no one’s fault.’ He looked back towards the farmhouse, hidden behind the trees. ‘They were always going to come. It was just a matter of time.’

‘What do you mean? Who are they? What do they want?’

‘Never mind that.’ Pa pulled a damp roll of paper from his chest pocket and pressed it into my hands. ‘Here. The star map. You’ll need it.’

I stuffed the map inside my satchel, trying not to let him see the tears. My hands were shaking as I struggled with the clasp. Pa must have seen, because he gripped me by the shoulders and turned me towards him.

‘We’re going to get through this. We’re going to be fine.’

A hoarse cry rose from beyond the trees. I jumped and turned to see bright flames lashing the sky. A sharp smell of smoke stung my nostrils.

Pa broke the shotgun, fetched two cartridges from his shirt pocket – red with gold tips – loaded them and cracked the gun closed again. *Tchuck!*

I stared at the loaded weapon across his knees. I’d seen him dart animals as they flew through the bush. He was a dead shot. He never missed.

But this was no tranquilliser gun.

Pa grabbed my arm at the elbow. ‘Go Maisha. Go! And don’t look back.’



## 2

*'Come on. Live!'*

*It's Pa. He's at his hydrangeas again.*

*I kick off the sheets, tangled at my feet, and stare through the gauze mosquito netting at the teak ceiling fan chugging stale air. A trapped fly smacks the sunlit glass of my window. It buzzes against the pane.*

*I lift the net, roll off the bed and push up the wooden frame. It comes unstuck with a squeal, releasing the dazed fly into a square of sunlight. A scent of jacaranda and kikuyu grass hits me and a hazy, wheat-coloured lawn comes into focus.*

*Pa stoops at the veranda edge tilting a watering can into the ragged hydrangeas, begging them to live.*

*They're not listening.*

*I see his mouth curl. His eyes are hidden beneath his weathered fedora. He smooths a crease in his shirt and talks to his plants.*

*A sharp knock comes from the door.*

*'Wake up, Child. Tea's in the kitchen.'*

*Outside my room on the sun-warmed floorboards sits a porcelain jug, hand-painted with sprigs of flowers. I look up and down the deserted passage. Then I flick the door shut and lug the jug to my night-stand. Wash time takes a few minutes then I'm skidding down the passage, bunching the foot-worn Persian rug.*

*I slide to a stop outside your room. The door is closed.*

*Always closed. Locked.*

*'Don't be late for breakfast, Child.'*

*Frieda is at the stove, stirring a steaming pot. She speaks softly, without turning. 'You know he likes to eat at eight.'*

*'I won't,' I lie, gulping a mug of sweet, milky tea laid out on the kitchen table.*

*I grab a carrot from the vegetable basket.*

*Frieda watches me, side-on. Aiee. That elephant. He thinks he owns the farm.'*

*I smile, fly through the kitchen door and kick it shut with the heel of a boot. Across the veranda. Down the stone steps to the lawn. The grass crackles underfoot. There's been a drought as far back as I can remember.*

*Heat, dust, sun. That's all there is left.*

*I glance back at the farmhouse in the purple shade of the jacarandas, with its wide veranda, whitewashed walls and green corrugated iron roof.*

*I say farmhouse, but it isn't a farm. Not really.*

*Not an ordinary one anyway. There are no bales of hay and cows and chickens here. This is a conservation estate for wild animals wounded in poacher's snares and poisoned by farmers.*

*A blue-headed lizard scurries out my way as I veer from the dead grass to the path. I run down to the dust-covered umdoni tree, where Pa built my tree-house.*

*Djembe is waiting for me, plucking dry leaves. He's here every morning, always in the same place. His trunk snakes upward, tasting the carrot on the air.*

*'Morning Djembe.'*

*He lumbers up to me. I offer the carrot and the delicate lip of his trunk curls around my hand. He allows himself to be guided down the path to the animal pens.*

*Pa kneels beside a prone male lion in the enclosure. His assistant, Simon, is at the animal's head, pinning down the forelegs. A pink tongue lolls out the side of the lion's mouth. He's been sedated but they're taking no risks.*

*I lean over the fence. 'What happened?'*

*'Snare.' Simon glances up and nods. 'Caught by the hind leg.'*

*'Can I help?'*

*Pa looks up from inspecting the leg. 'You can see we're busy.'*

*I watch them work in silence.*

*'Don't you have to feed the raptors, Maisha?' Pa says this without looking up. It isn't really a question. 'Not so much water this time. Rations are low.'*

*A strutting lappet-faced vulture follows me the length of the raptor fence. Pa*

*says a flock of fifty can consume an impala carcass in just three minutes. They're mean-looking birds. Ugly as hell. Djembe watches from the gate as I pull on the leather gloves and grab the bucket of chopped meat. I throw gibbets to the ground and watch the vultures leap at the flesh with loud cries and beating wings.*

*It's Ingonyi's turn next. The fish eagle. White head and russet wings. I clutch a dead fish in a gloved fist and hold it at arm's length.*

*Ingonyi descends with her wings out-flung.*

*Her claws hook onto the leather and she stabs the meat with her sharp beak. My arm sags under her weight, then jerks upward as she pulls away with her prize.*

*I pass a group of farm-workers' children on my way back to the house. Stick-fighting under the umdoni tree. When they see me, they stop and stare.*

*One of the boys turns to his friend and whispers something. They point and snigger. I know them. All of them. But I avoid them and they avoid me. It's an unwritten rule.*

*I put my head down and keep walking. I don't bother stopping. I can hear them behind me, still laughing.*

*Then I start to run. I run and run until I can't breathe. I run all the way down the avenue of jacarandas. I run until I collapse on my knees at the entrance to the farm. I feel the stones digging into my skin and I glare at the name etched onto the wooden sign hanging from our gate.*

*PAZULA. The Zulu word for sky.*

### **3**

A booming sound echoed in the hills. A gunshot. I fixed my eyes on the ground and tried to erase the image of Pa slumped against the tree. The gunshot rang in my ears. I wiped Pa's blood from my mouth and ran. I ran faster than I'd ever run before.

*We're going to get through this. We're going to be fine.*

I felt, rather than heard, the distinctive rumble of a horse's galloping hooves.

*Shaka.*

A huge black horse thundered to a standstill in front of me. The stark whites of his eyes stood out as bright as the white star on his chest.

I leapt at his mane and hauled myself onto his back.

Another gunshot exploded. Shaka reared and turned in the air, flashing wild hooves. I clamped my knees to him, twisted his mane, and he swerved away.

Pa taught me to ride bareback when I was little.

It was all about balance. I shifted my weight and used my feet to guide Shaka. A nudge with the left foot told him to veer right and my right foot persuaded him left.

Shaka galloped through a throng of animals. Pa must have opened the pens. On all sides they ran wild: maimed animals injured in poacher's snares, a three-legged leopard, a young rhino with sawn-off horns, a poisoned eagle with stunted wings.

I jammed my feet into Shaka's flank and we surged forward.

When I reached the gate at the far side of the enclosure I pulled Shaka to a halt and dismounted. I dragged the gate open and pushed a rock up against it, just as Pa said. Then I climbed back onto Shaka and turned him uphill and downwind.

We raced up a rutted slope, followed a path worn by years of thoroughfare. Halfway up the slope I reined Shaka in and listened. I knew I'd be able to see the farmhouse now, but I was afraid to look. I could still hear the roar and crackle of the fire. A haze of smoke hung in the air.

I turned and cried out. Down the hill I could see twin lines of fire. The jacaranda trees were ablaze and the leaping flames created a halo of yellow light over the farm. The farmhouse was buried beneath a dense cloud.

I couldn't see any movement against the flames.

*Don't look back.*

I smeared hot tears across my cheeks, turned Shaka and bolted.

At the top of the ridge we were forced to a slow trot through dense scrub. In the moonlight I found the path to the cliff edge, where the ground dropped away and the world opened up. I came to the edge and looked out over a vast gulf.

Pa called it the Balcony.

It commanded the best view of the area. Lion, leopard and cheetah came here to hunt. If anything moved in a three-mile radius, they would see it. Far below a meandering river, thick with reeds, wound its way to the distant sea. Floating above the waving stalks a thousand fireflies flickered and pulsed.

It was a beautiful view, but it filled me with dread.

Because lying in wait for me, beyond the river, was an endless stretch of arid sand. The Kalahari. And somewhere behind me, *they* were coming.

The shadow creatures.

In the distance hyenas yapped and howled. Shaka snorted and pawed the ground. I gathered his mane and nudged him to a secret gully.

The path was steep and rocky. Shaka's hooves crunched on the loose gravel. I leaned back as he picked his way down an almost vertical gully.

We passed a dipping tank shadowed by a clump of camelthorn trees. The tank walls were crumbling. Deep cracks had opened where roots forced their way through. Beyond the

tank the path levelled out under tall teak and tamboti trees. Their huge intertwining roots offered barriers for many hidden lairs. Ant bears, warthogs, even hyenas burrowed out their nests among the knotted roots, deep under the trees.

I craned my head back, scanned each branch for distinctive amber eyes.

If I were a leopard this is *exactly* where I would spend the night, eyeing each bend of the riverbed from the trees. But all I could see now were thick clusters of weaver nests weighing down the branches.

The air buzzed with the churring of a nightjar, the crunch of Shaka's hooves, and the muffled grunt of a pride of lion.

They had begun their hunt for the night.

I figured them to be about two miles away but that didn't stop my heart racing.

Ahead was the island of sand where the river branched out. One branch of the river was completely dry, while the other was little more than a stream.

On the far side of the dry riverbed stood the upside-down tree – the baobab. A wise old spirit, observing the winding rivers and the dry veldt. Pa said it was more than five hundred years old. It was over seventy feet tall, with a fat trunk as wide as an elephant's belly. Its branches spread like roots in the sky. It was like a tree thrust upside-down in the ground.

*They were always going to come. It was just a matter of time.*

*What did Pa mean?*

Everything was upside-down.

I peered through the long grass and the scrawny jackal-berry trees growing down the riverbank. Dangerous predators might be lurking in the shadows. I nudged Shaka onto the sand. A cool breeze struck my face.

The river sand was thick and loose. One false move and we were leopard bait for sure.

In the faint moonlight I could see no sign of fresh tracks.

I looked left and right. Nothing.

Shaka's hooves sank into the shifting sand and he bridled uneasily.

'Shh, boy.'

A figure darted from a bank of thickets.

Shaka kicked and reared, and I fell back but managed to hold on. I turned in time to see a grey duiker antelope leaping into the long grass.

I clung to Shaka. Patted his neck to soothe his nerves. To soothe mine.

We climbed the bank on the far side and waded the long grass to the baobab. Sometimes Pa and I used it as a post office, leaving notes stuffed into knots and crevices. I dismounted and ran my hand over the rhubarb-coloured bark.

No message.

A brightly coloured bird perched on a branch and ruffled its brilliant feathers.

I watched the Lilac-Breasted Roller groom itself. Then it dropped from the branch and skipped across the veldt.

I stared after it, remembering Frieda's story:

*The first creature to fall from the tree of life was Ingonghulu, the Bateleur Eagle. Ingonghulu opened her wings and beat them, GHU-GHU-GHU, and creation was announced. As the last bird, Langazana, the Lilac-Breasted Roller, fell from the tree, the gods said let her be the bird of peace. Now Langazana is sacrificed by Kings to make peace – its throat cut with a battle spear to purify the blade of evil.*

The air was cool and damp with dew. Nearby a frog croaked. In the thickets beside the riverbed, insects ticked. A mosquito buzzed at my ear. Shaka shook his mane and bridled

restlessly. I moved a calming hand against his flank.

Dawn. A crescent of mercury light cast the first long shadow. Shaka tossed his mane and stamped the ground with hard hooves.

Then a thunderous crash boomed from high on the cliff-face.

A rock-fall.

From the direction of the gully, someone, *something*, was crashing down the steep slope.

'It's him!' I whispered, hauling myself onto Shaka's back and nudging Shaka to the path across the riverbed.

Left. Right. All clear.

I urged Shaka across the sand through a cloud of hovering insects. We lurched up the far bank and broke into a gallop on the dipping tank path.

The sky grew lighter with every hoof-fall and the tall teak and tamboti trees were far less ominous now.

We were fifty yards or so from the gully, when an avalanche of rocks crashed to the ground, sending shrapnel flying. I flung an arm across my face. Shaka broke his gallop and swerved, pitching me forward. I grabbed at his mane but it slipped through my fingers and I catapulted over his head.

Blackness. Pain.

I lay on my back winded and dazed. Something dripped in my eye. Blood.

I rolled onto all fours, coughing and gasping for breath.

Every bone in my body ached. My head throbbed.

Then a roar came from the gully. Another rock-fall – more explosive.

A cloud of dust rose and a stark silence descended.

Out of the quiet broke a startling trumpet and a massive



grey shape barged through the swirling dust. A giant African bull elephant.

‘Djembe!’

He ground to a halt before me, wrapped his trunk around my waist, and plucked me clean off the ground. I felt like laughing and crying at the same time.

‘Djembe!’ I choked. ‘I can’t breathe!’

He lowered me to my feet, shook his head and flapped his enormous ears, dispersing the dust. The earthy smell of his thick hide filled my nostrils.

His grey skin was bone dry, raked with furrows and cracks. Gigantic ears, Africa-shaped. His eyes, dark under coarse black lashes. His trunk curled and uncurled between huge curving tusks. He breathed in slow rumbles.

The air stirred with his power.

‘I knew you’d come.’

Djembe was a survivor. Pa had found him in the desert, with snarling hyenas and black-backed jackals, circling for the kill. He was only a young calf then, standing guard over his mutilated herd. The poachers had hacked out their ivory trophies while he watched. And then they left him there to die.

They say an elephant never forgets. Well that felt true with Djembe. He was a loner. Moody and quiet. Didn’t allow anyone near him. Except me.

We were the same.

I scanned the cliff top behind him. ‘Where’s Pa, Djembe?’

Then I froze.

A figure moved along the crest. It paused, bent double at the waist, sniffed the sand. A dark cloak billowed on the breeze. From its head sprang a ring of shimmering black feathers.

The figure slung its head towards me. At its side, appeared

a second and a third. Their faces hidden in the dark mouths of their cloaks.

My hands shot up to feel the smooth curves of the cowrie shell and I waited for the space behind the figures to fill with the outline of Pa.

Nothing came.

## SYNOPSIS:

Maisha lives with her father on a remote farm on the edge of the desert.

When the farm is attacked, and her father abducted, she flees across the desert to find her grandmother, a woman she has never met.

Maisha will stop at nothing to reach her grandmother. But she will need more than courage to survive the Kalahari.

*Kalahari* is an epic African adventure. A story of death, survival and magic.

## BIOGRAPHY:

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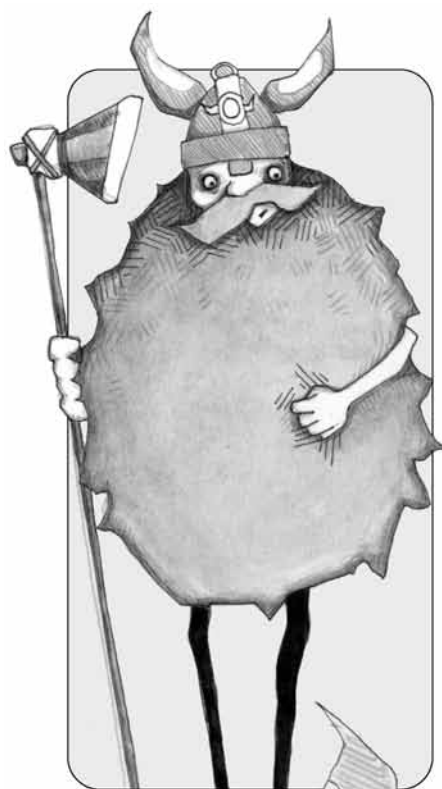
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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

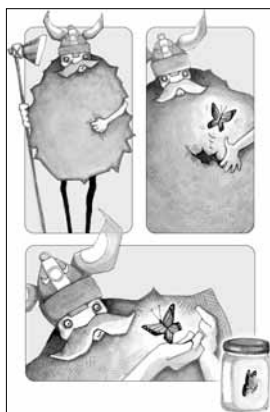
"The immediate sense of urgency draws readers in and makes for a fast read . . . I really want this published so I can find out what happens."

"The African setting is great and Maisha is a strong, interesting character . . . The book gets off to a dramatic and gripping start."

"The opening chapter is completely gripping. The tension, despair and urgency of the situation is palpable."



## VIKING MAKES A DISCOVERY by Nicola Patten



### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Nicola graduated from the Illustration course at University College Falmouth in the summer of 2010, having spent three wonderful years by the sea that introduced her to the delights of Chinese tea, Aubrey Beardsley, and the art of putting out rubbish without the seagulls getting to it.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"This piece is really strong, with lots of commercial appeal. The quirky, funny, confident style uses an accomplished line and strong characterization. The draughtsmanship is excellent and the different uses of tone would work well in fiction work, appealing to a large age range."

[www.nicolapatten.com](http://www.nicolapatten.com)

# DRAGONS DO. DODOS DON'T.

by Veronica Cossanteli

The weird stuff all began with £3.72.

I didn't know it was £3.72, of course, until I picked it up – a scattering of coins on a wet pavement – and counted it.

*George Drake, it's your lucky day!* Three strikes at Thunder Bowl with Josh and Matt; now FREE MONEY! I let the coins trickle out of my hand, into my pocket, and got back on my bike.

What do you do with £3.72? If you're me, you buy sweets.

I was in the shop for about a minute. When I came out, my bike had gone. Not completely gone. I could still see it, being pedalled into the distance by what looked like a hippopotamus but was actually Nathan Knoblock.

"Hey!" I yelled. I didn't yell it very loudly. Nathan Knoblock is in my year at school. He's a mutant, with three and a half brain cells, but he's not the sort of mutant you accuse of stealing your bike. There's your bike, and there's your life. Which do you want?

So there I was, with a paper bag full of gummy caterpillars and strawberry laces and foam bananas – and no bike. And it was raining. And it was a long walk home.

*Sorry, George Drake, just kidding. Not your lucky day after all.*

Great. I bit the head off a gummy caterpillar.

I was feeling a bit sick by the time I got home. I'm not totally sure I like foam bananas. Mum was upside down in the garden. Other people don't do yoga in the garden when it's raining: just Mum.

She looked at me from between her knees.

“Electricity bill,” she said. “HUGE! Seriously, George – it’s MONSTROUS!”

Mum only does yoga when she’s worried about something: bills, the washing machine breaking down, Parents’ Evening at school, Dad leaving. She unfolded herself, balancing on one leg, like a flamingo – except flamingos can do it without wobbling. Then she noticed.

“Where’s your bike?”

I told her the truth, then I wished I hadn’t. A good mother would have agreed with me that Nathan Knoblock was a gross, snot-for-brains, waste of space who deserved something very, very horrible to happen to him. But no – apparently it was all *my* fault.

“You left your bike on the pavement? You didn’t lock it? George, what were you *thinking*?”

Then I had to listen to a whole load of yabber-yabber blah-blah parenty stuff about Being More Careful. It went on and on for ages, until she lost her balance and fell into a rose bush.

I pulled her out, scratched and bleeding, and put her back on her feet.

“You were saying? About being *Careful*?”

“Oh . . .well . . .” Mum sucked the blood from her fingers. “Stuff happens . . .”

Half an hour later, I was taking my mind off my lost bike with a game of All Star Zombie Smackdown. I was just about to poke the eyeballs out of a Zombie that looked a lot like Nathan Knoblock, when I heard Mum calling my name.

“Just a minute . . .”

Too late. The Nathan Knoblock zombie had chewed my arm off. I called it something very rude, and pressed PAUSE.

Mum was outside the back door.

“Look!” she said proudly. “It was right at the back of the shed. A perfectly good bike.”

She brushed a cobweb off the rusting handlebars. “Nothing wrong with it.”

Except it was pink.

Mum’s famous for forgetting things, but you’d think she might remember . . .

“Mum, I’m a *boy*!”

“Oh, that! That’s all poppycock!” She flapped her hands. “Real men aren’t afraid of pink!”

What does Mum know about Real Men? She married Dad.

Dad used to live with us. He wore a suit and tie and drove to the office every day. Now he’s on a beach in Australia, wearing flowery shorts and flip flops. He sent us an email. It said the weather in Australia was lovely and he was learning how to surf. Mum emailed him back. She said the weather in England was rubbish, and she hoped he got eaten by a shark. They’re very mature for their ages, my parents. Not.

I looked at the bike. No gears. No suspension. No anything, unless you counted a rusty Barbie bell and a little wicker basket. I tried to imagine riding that around town on a Saturday afternoon.

“No! No, Mum, I can’t!”

She looked hurt, which made me feel bad. Why don’t parents *see* things? Things that are perfectly obvious. Grown-ups are all the same. Is there a part of the brain that just stops working when people get to twenty-one, or something? That’s quite scary. I’ve only got nine years left of being normal.

“If you want a new bike, you’ll have to save up for it.” Now she was in a mood. “I don’t know how I’m going to pay that electricity bill, as it is.”

Mum’s shop isn’t doing too well at the moment. I think



people have already got as many smelly candles and bead curtains and wind chimes as they want.

“You could earn some money,” she suggested, a bit less grumpily. “You can wash the car. I’ll give you 50p.”

Wow. Very generous. Especially as . . .

“Mum, we haven’t got a car.”

It was sold, after Dad left. We needed the money.

“I forgot.” Mum stroked the old bike’s saddle. I really, really hoped she wasn’t going to cry. “Are you sure this wouldn’t do? Harry and Frank both rode it.”

“Yes, but,” I reminded her, in case she had forgotten this too, “Harry and Frank are girls.”

My sisters are older than me, but not so old that they have Grown-Up Brain Rot yet. They can be very annoying, but they did see why I couldn’t ride a pink bike with a Barbie bell.

“Get a paper round,” suggested Harry. She was spraying herself green, for an Aliens and Robots party. Harry goes to college, and some very odd parties. “I had one, when I was your age. I needed the cash. Mum didn’t understand about my needing hair-straighteners.”

Harry has loads of hair. When she isn’t green, she looks a bit like Rapunzel, or one of those Disney princesses. Except that she has Super Mario tattooed on her bottom, and a tongue piercing, which princesses mostly don’t.

“If you promise not to do anything stupid, you can work for me.” Frankie has short hair and glasses – less like a princess, more like an owl. She runs a dog-walking business, after school. “I’ve got heaps of revision, and my art project to finish. I could do with some help. There’ll be Terms and Conditions, obviously.”

The Terms and Conditions, which Frankie printed out and made me sign, meant:

- a) She kept half the money I earned.
- b) I had to go to the shop for chocolate and/or cheese and onion crisps whenever she wanted.
- c) I had to clean her gerbil's cage out once a week.

The gerbil used to be called Gerald. Then we got to know him. Now he's called Dracula. He has very sharp teeth, and he doesn't like being cleaned out. But I needed the money.

It was on a Saturday morning cheese and onion crisp mission that I noticed the card in the shop window.

**HELP WANTED  
INTEREST IN WILDLIFE NECESSARY  
MUST BE THE RIGHT PERSON  
APPLY TO MRS LIND, WORMESTALL FARM**

"Where's Wormestall Farm?" I asked, at lunch. It was Vegetable Thing again. Mum's a Herbivore. She murders innocent vegetables and makes us eat them.

"In the middle of nowhere," said Mum. "The other side of Wyvernchase Woods. You're not going all that way by yourself, George. Take one of your sisters."

"Party," said Harry, with her mouth full.

"Homework," said Frank. "And you're working for me this afternoon, remember?" She jabbed me with her fork. "Tyson, Bonnie and Buster, and Sir Crispin all need a walk, and I've got a history essay to hand in on Monday."

"And," said Mum, "Prudence is coming."

"*Her?*" I choked on a lump of cauliflower. "Why? What for?"

"Tea," said Mum. "She came into the shop – it was Tuesday. I know that because she was my only customer. She bought some incense sticks – and I asked her to tea."

“Prue’s cute,” said Harry.

I gave her an evil look. Prue is not cute. Prue’s annoying. She lives in a massive house, with a swimming pool and a tennis court, and her parents are always jetting off on business trips. Prue is a child model. As a baby, she was the face – or rather the bottom – of Happi Nappies.

“It’ll be nice,” said Mum. “You’re the same age. You were at school together.”

Back in Year 4, Prue was on TV, in an advertisement for constipation medicine. It wasn’t a good time to turn up as a new girl. Nathan Knoblock started it: for a whole year everyone called her Poo and made going-to-the-toilet faces all through lessons. To be fair, we were only eight. Then her parents took her away and put her in an all-girls posh school instead.

“Loads of people were the same age as Adolf Hitler, or Vlad the Impaler, or Jack the Ripper,” I pointed out. “It doesn’t mean they wanted to have tea with them.” Although I was willing to bet that Adolf or Vlad or Jack would have played a better game of *Zombie Smackdown*, once they got the hang of it, than Precious Prue.

“I feel sorry for her,” said Mum. “Her parents are away again. They’re always away. She says she doesn’t mind. There’s something very *sensible* about that child.”

“Mum, she’s been on TV, pretending to be constipated. Which means that she is never ever ever not going to get teased. How sensible is that? You can’t *make* me have tea with her!”

“Suit yourself,” said Mum. “But you’re not going to Wormestall Farm by yourself. Not through those woods.”

There were stories about Wyvernchase Woods. People had disappeared from there. Bits of those people had been found, a long way away. There were rumours about Axe Murderers.

But even a wood full of Axe Murderers was better than tea with Prudence.

I didn't go to Wormestall Farm by myself. I took Tyson, and Bonnie and Buster – and Sir Crispin too.

This was a mistake.

Tyson, the Boxer, and Bonnie and Buster, the Labradors, were big, happy, bouncy dogs who enjoyed a long walk. Sir Crispin wasn't, and didn't.

Sir Crispin was Mrs Poker-Peagrim's pug. He was so fat, his fur hardly joined up round the middle, and he breathed like someone with a really bad cold. His eyes bulged in a squeezed-frog sort of way. By the time I had got him into his little tartan coat and coaxed him out of the door and as far as the postbox on the corner, he was ready to turn round and go home again. After that it was more of a drag than a walk. Long before we reached Wyvernchase Woods I had given up and was carrying him.

At the gate that led into the woods, I stopped. I stood, with my hand on the latch, while the dogs pulled on their leads, round and round in circles, tying me in knots. Was there an Axe Murderer in there, hiding behind a tree? Of course not. All that had happened years ago. Probably the stories weren't even true. Today, the woods were full of dappled sunlight and squirrels and bird-twitter. All the same . . .

If Josh had been with me, it might have been fun, but Josh was away, with his Dad for the weekend, and Matt had been grounded again. I was on my own.

*Chicken.* Sometimes, if you're rude to yourself, it helps. *It'll take half an hour longer if you go round by the road. Do you want this job – and a bike – or don't you?*

I did. Of course I did. I unwound the dog leads from

around my knees, tucked Sir Crispin under my arm, and swung open the gate.

Nothing happened. I kept to the path, and I admit I looked over my shoulder a couple of times. Once, a big bird – a pheasant, I think – burst out of a bush and took off with a clatter, making me jump. I wasn't sorry when we came out of the trees, into the sunshine again. A little way down the road, a track twisted off to the right. Tyson cocked his leg on a rickety wooden sign. In wobbly painted capitals, now running with yellow dog wee, it said:

### **WORMESTALL FARM**

“Here we are,” I told the dogs. “Best behaviour! No barking. No crapping. No jumping up.”

We passed a field full of hairy cows with ginger fringes, like those Scottish ones on biscuit tins. They stared at us, blowing through their noses. The front of the house looked blind and dead, with blank windows and little toadstools growing out of the doorstep. I knocked, but there was no answer. The door didn't look as if it had been opened for years.

I led the dogs round to the back, into a cobbled stable yard. There were white doves, *prou-prouing* in the branches of an old, gnarled tree. The window boxes were full of flowers and the door to the porch was flung open. Inside was a jumble of Wellington Boots and more fire extinguishers than I had ever seen in one place. Quite a lot of them seemed to have been used. Somewhere in the stable block, a television was on. Inside the house, a baby was crying.

The doorbell was an old-fashioned brass thing, with a clapper. I rang it. The dogs all went mad, barking their heads

off, but nothing else happened. I waited a few moments, then rang it again, long and loud. Nothing.

It seemed a terrible waste of an afternoon to have come all this way for nothing. I tied the dogs to a handy metal ring set in the wall. They were panting, tongues lolling. Under the window boxes was a row of red buckets marked FIRE, all full of water. I gave them a bucket between them. Sir Crispin couldn't reach, so I slopped some water into a flowerpot saucer, then crossed the yard towards the stables, and the sound of the TV.

" . . . chance of showers . . . good news for gardeners . . . brighter in the West . . ."

The Weather Report, in a chirpy female voice, was coming from a stable with its doors shut and bolted.

I knocked, then felt stupid. With the doors bolted on the outside, I could hardly expect whoever was in there to let me in.

"Hello?" I called, one hand on the top bolt. "Is anyone there?"

There was.

The stable doors quivered on their hinges as something heavy hurled itself against them, with a splintering crash. A nose was pressed to the crack between upper and lower door. I could hear it huffing, and feel hot, furious breath.

I shot back across that yard fast enough to win Olympic Gold.

*Get the dogs! Run! Don't come back.*

But by the time I had untied Sir Crispin, my heart had stopped racing and I'd changed my mind. There had not been any more crashes. Whatever was in that stable, it obviously just wanted to be left alone, to listen to the Weather in peace. My grandad's a bit like that, and I'm not frightened of him; he gives me sherbet lemons.

And what about the baby? There was something desperate about the way it was crying now – as though there was

something really, properly wrong. Suppose whoever was looking after it was lying at the bottom of the stairs with a broken neck? I couldn't just walk away.

"Come on, you." Tugging on Sir Crispin's lead, I dragged him past the heap of wellies and fire extinguishers and into the house.

There was nothing much to see: a stone-flagged floor and a bare wooden staircase – no unconscious bodies anywhere. Sir Crispin's claws click-clacked on the flagstones behind me. The crying was coming from upstairs, so up we went. The stairs creaked horribly. If someone arrived now, they would think they had caught a burglar creeping up their staircase. They would call the police. Or they'd just shoot me. People who live in farmhouses always have shotguns, don't they? On TV, they do.

But nobody came. The doors leading off the upstairs corridor were all closed, except for one. The curtains were drawn and the room was in shadow.

Which is why I so nearly trod on the baby.

I don't know much about babies, and I don't want to. They're weird. Josh's sister has one. It looks like an alien and smells of old yogurt pots. But I do know you're not supposed to leave them lying around on the floor, like yesterday's socks.

Sir Crispin didn't like babies either. He backed off, yapping.

"Stop fussing, FrogFace." Looping his lead around the door handle, I looked at the screaming blob on the floor. I guessed it had fallen off the bed. It was tangled up in a blanket, purple in the face and kicking like an angry rabbit.

"Hey. Hey, baby." I gave it a prod with the toe of my trainer. "Stop crying. Please?"

It wasn't listening. I was going to have to pick it up. I'd no idea how, so I pretended it was Frankie's guinea pig, Brian, and grabbed it round the middle.

Brian's not keen on being picked up. He wriggles and squeaks and, usually, wees on you. The baby gave a shuddery sigh and a sad little hiccup; then it went quiet, flopped against my shoulder. Slowly, its colour changed from Beetroot to Bubblegum, back to Basic Baby. It didn't smell of yogurt pots; it smelled of peppermint.

Who owned this peppermint-flavoured baby, and where were they?

The room didn't look much like a nursery. No toys, no teddies. On the bedside table was a pair of spectacles with gold rims, like my Gran wears, and a book. I looked at the title:

*What's Wrong With Your Reptile? A Care and Treatment Manual For The Enthusiast.*

I didn't know what to do. If I put the baby down on the bed, it would fall off again. If I put it back on the floor, it would start yelling again. I could wait, until somebody came – but supposing nobody did come?

I'm better at thinking sitting down, so I sat on the edge of the unmade bed, with the baby on my lap. It didn't seem to be wearing very much, under its blanket. I was just stuffing a pillow between it and my jeans, in case it did what Brian does, when a loud thud, right above our heads, made me jump. Sir Crispin whined, sharply, and I felt my heart kick. Something had crash-landed on the roof.

Had we been hit by a meteorite? Or an alien spaceship? Or a pigeon? Josh's dad tells this story about how a dead pigeon fell out of the sky and landed slap-bang in the middle of his barbecue. Then somebody swore, loudly and rudely, the way



dead pigeons definitely don't. There was a rustling of branches outside the open window. Then there was a boy.

He sat astride the window sill: older than me, about Frankie's age, maybe, with a thin, moody face, twigs in his spiky black hair, and a winged skull on his tee-shirt. It was a sunny day, but he was wearing a heavy, hooded jacket, several sizes too big.

It's not the most comfortable thing, being caught, uninvited, in someone else's house, on someone else's bed, holding someone else's baby. It's hard to know what to say.

But the boy didn't seem to care. He was looking at the baby, the same way as I look at carrots when Mum dumps them on my plate without asking.

"Not again!" he complained. "That's twice in one week!"

"I wasn't stealing it!" I said, quickly.

The boy shrugged. "Take it. It's no use to me."

Something about him reminded me of my aunt's Siamese cat – blue eyes and a bad temper. It loves my aunt and bites everybody else. He swung his leg over the sill and dropped to the floor. Crouching by the bed, he pushed his face close to the baby's.

"I'm hungry!" he told it, fiercely. "D'you hear me? I've been gone for hours, hunting high and low for You Know What – I come back starving and there clearly isn't any point asking what's for supper because, clearly, there isn't going to *be* any supper! Again. I shall have to go out and ki—" He broke off, blue eyes flicking to my face, then away. "I shall have to cook something."

It wasn't what he was going to say. I knew it wasn't.

I held the baby out to him, but he didn't take it.

"It was crying," I explained. "It wouldn't stop."

"Good," said the boy, standing up. "Serves it right. What on

earth's that?" He had seen Sir Crispin. "Cryptoid or Lingerling?"

"Erm – it's Mrs Poker-Peagrim's pug."

He shook his head. "Never heard of it. Is it endangered?"

I looked at Sir Crispin, stretched out on the floor, pop-eyed and wheezy. "He's had a long walk. I don't think he's *endangered*, exactly." I hoped not. If Sir Crispin died of too much exercise, I was dead too. Frankie and Mrs PP would see to that.

"So what are *you*?" He stood with his hands in his pockets, watching me.

"Me? I'm – er – I'm here about the job."

"Numpty Numbskull's job?" He looked me up and down. "Reckon you're up to it, do you?"

"Yes," I said firmly. If somebody called Numpty Numbskull was up to it, so was I.

He shrugged. "Nothing to do with me. She'll decide. You can't talk to her today." He glanced at the baby. "You'll have to come back."

Fair enough. "When should I come?"

"I haven't the faintest idea," said the boy.

It would have felt good to be rude back, but it was his house, not mine, and I wanted the job. I stood up, holding out the baby. He took it between long, pale fingers, and it snuggled against the skull on his tee-shirt.

"I didn't know where to put it. There wasn't a cot."

The boy looked blank "Wasn't a what?"

I didn't have a clue what cryptoids were, or lingerlings, and I am no expert on babies, but everyone knows what a cot is.

"You know – for babies. To sleep in." I spoke ve-e-ry slowly, as if to somebody very stupid. I was getting my own back. "With bars."

"Bars? Like a cage? You put babies in cages?" He seemed to find it funny. "She'd never go for that. She doesn't approve

of cages. It might be better if she did,” he added, darkly. “We might not be going round in circles, searching for a slithering, toxic great—”

He stopped. A furious squawking had started up downstairs. It sounded like a chicken trying to lay a square egg.

“Dumbcluck bird’s stuck in the cat flap again. All feathers and no brain. No wonder it’s meant to be extinct – it deserves to be. I would show you around, but . . .” He paused, sniffing the air, like Tyson scenting a squirrel. “Is that fresh?”

He was looking at the plaster on my finger. Frankie had put me on gerbil duty after breakfast.

“This morning.” I put my hand behind my back.

“It’s just – they haven’t been fed. They get – fidgety. It might be better not to smell of blood.” He smiled at me. At least, his mouth did – not his eyes. “It might be better if you went home.”

On the whole, I agreed with him.

## SYNOPSIS:

*Help Wanted. Interest in Wildlife Necessary.*

The wildlife at Wormestall Farm is wilder than George expected. Wormestall shelters those who don't fit in anywhere else: Daphne, the left-over dodo, ancient Grissel, who once met St George and didn't like him, and Lo, who wears dead men's shoes.

Prudence doesn't "fit in" either: not at school, anyway. George doesn't speak to her if he can help it. But when danger threatens, Wormestall needs them both . . .

## BIOGRAPHY:

Veronica lives on the south coast with three over-indulged cats, a bearded dragon and her long-suffering son. She works in a multicultural junior school, where she has learnt far more from the children than she has ever succeeded in teaching them.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"I liked that the unexpected happens – a lot!"

"The characters are great – especially George and his sisters. Sir Crispin makes for a great sidekick."

"The extract reads like a published work and you just want to keep reading. I love the quirkiness of it . . ."

"A sensible everyboy voice telling a fun and out-of-the-ordinary story – what's not to like?"

# SKULK

by Rosie Best

## CHAPTER ONE

Sitting half in and half out of my bedroom window, one foot resting on the fire escape, I checked myself over one last time.

*Phone. Oystercard. Keys. Mace. Paint.*

I hoped I wasn't going to need the first four.

I climbed out and the window slid into place behind me with the kind of silence you have to work at. It'd taken a week and four whole cans of WD-40.

The freezing air hit the back of my throat and I shivered. There's something about the night between 2 and 5am that crawls into your bones if you let it, leaves you breathless and shivering. You can do one of two things – stay safe and warm in bed, or get out and keep moving.

I tiptoed down the fire escape and landed with a crunch in the alley round the back of the house, between the big black cars. Their polished bodywork glittered in the moonlight, like the carapaces of giant sleeping beetles. At the security gates I tapped out the code that kept our little bunch of houses locked away from the rest of the city; fortress, madhouse and ghetto in one neat silky package.

Lingering in the shadow by the wall, I zipped up my old grey hoodie and pulled the hood up over my face. I shifted the backpack on my shoulders, feeling the reassuring slosh-clank of the aerosol cans against my back as I slipped away down the street.

Even at this time of night the footpath through the park wasn't

deserted. For a start, a flock of CCTV cameras perched all along the top of the fence, silently judging the passers-by. A homeless man sat in one of the patches of light beneath a wrought-iron streetlamp with a scabby terrier at his side, and a lone mad jogger bounced past me in skin-tight lycra shorts, fluorescent headphones swinging with every stride.

I heard a screech of drunken laughter and four girls stumbled onto the path in front of me. Their vintage frocks hung wonkily off their shoulders and one of them was limping along in a single Jimmy Choo.

They wove close enough for me to make out their faces, and my hands flew to my hood, pulling it right down. Cold water seemed to flood through my veins. I stumbled and nearly stopped in my tracks, but forced myself to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

It was Ameera and Jewel, and Mary Kelso, and that flautist Mary plays with in the orchestra with whose name I can never remember.

I hung my head and swallowed. A hot flush of embarrassment flooded up my neck. I knew they'd be out tonight – they'd talked about nothing else at school that day. They'd invited me with them, but . . .

Well, they were walking home pissed at 2am with one Jimmy Choo on. I'm not some anti-alcohol nut or anything, I just don't see the point.

I fixed my gaze on the floor and tried to keep my pace steady and my heart from pounding right out of my throat and off down the street. A tangled, distinctive ringlet escaped from under my hood and hung right in front of my eyes, glowing dirty blonde in the street light, like a flashing neon sign saying *MEG IS HERE*. It dangled just too close to focus on, taunting me. Should I ignore it, and risk them knowing it was

me, or should I move to tuck it back and risk drawing attention to myself . . . ?

And then, while I was lost in the indecision, the girls had passed me and were gone into the patchy darkness.

They were drunk. It was dark. And I looked like a tramp. We might as well have been on different continents.

I came out of the park and onto the main road, blinking in the glare. The lights here were still bright. Crowded night buses crawled along the road. Workers in fluorescent jackets carried engineering parts out of a truck and down into the tube station.

I crossed the road and dived into the back streets. The cold air folded over me again and I could see my breath clouding in front of me as I hurried past darkened bistros and glossy converted townhouses. Finally I found myself in front of a building on the edge of a leafy square. A subtle brass plaque and some collages in the windows were all that told the world this was the home of Kensington College For Girls.

I wished I could go to work on the front of the building. It was painted a pristine, uniform white, dotted with windows. A massive empty canvas. I could make it beautiful and alive, and *fantastically* embarrassing for the school. But it was too public. Just loitering on the other side of the square I guessed my image was burning onto the hard drives of eight or ten surveillance cameras.

Maybe one day. When I was Banksy. But not this time.

The walls around the back of the school building were just as blank and inviting, and a lot safer. They faced the garden/playground/thunderdome where the year seven to nine girls, who weren't allowed out on the Square yet, spent their breaks and lunchtimes. They'd play under the big oak tree, gossip in the mud, or try to sneak a stealthy fag behind the Kit Shed.

My first and not-quite-only cigarette was smoked behind that shed. To this day I can't get a lungful of second-hand smoke without flashing back to the leathery wooden polished smell of PE equipment and the way Jewel's hands shook as she tried to light a cigarette from a safety match in the rain.

Tomorrow, if luck was on my side, the girls out in the playground would get an eyeful of searingly insightful political graffiti art. Or the deluded scrawlings of a ridiculous poser. It could really go either way.

But first I had to get back there.

The gate was around the side of the building, half in the next street. Beyond it there was an alley just wide enough for a car (but not wide enough for a minibus, as Miss Eggersham and Elite Coach Transport's insurance company found out that one time). A dirty bronze padlock the size of both my fists gleamed on the black metal gate, but the gate itself was only about six feet high. I guess the school thought perverts wouldn't bother with the climb. Actually, they were right – the perverts generally hung out in the Square behind the bushes, risking humiliating arrest at the hands of the school's stealthy plain-clothes policeman, and occasionally getting nettle stings in embarrassing places.

There was a stone statue by the side of the gate, a sort of knee-high roaring lion thing called Henry, with at least fifty years' worth of old chewing gum stuck behind its ears. I hoisted myself up with one foot on Henry's head, one hand clutching for the cold metal spikes on top of the gate. My other foot scrabbled for a toehold on the brickwork as I flexed my arm muscles and pulled myself up.

Suddenly Henry shifted and tipped, rearing up on its hind legs, and there was a sickening second where I thought I'd lose my grip and fall hard on the spikes and be found next morning



strung up on the gate in a tragic, mangled mess of blood and spray paint . . .

I snatched my foot up, wobbled wildly for a second and then pushed up and over the gate, toppling across the spikes. Henry slammed back into the pavement with a crash, and I hit the ground hard on the other side, the cans in my backpack digging into my ribs.

I tried to gasp for air without making a sound. Pain flared all along my side. I stuffed a hand into my mouth, balled in the sleeve of my hoodie. The dark emptiness of the sky overhead seemed to swirl around me and my head rang with the echoes of cracking stone, long after they'd faded from the street.

Nobody came running. Nothing moved in the square.

I managed to peel myself up from the ground and settled into a crouch at the foot of the wall, staying there while five minutes ticked away, just to be certain. A mangy urban fox trotted along the road as if it owned the place, but nothing else happened.

I was going to have massive bruises in the morning . . . but I'd got away with it. For now.

'Jesus Christ,' I breathed, getting to my feet and stumbling down the dark path towards the garden.

When I finally made it I shrugged off the backpack and stretched out my shoulders, taking a second to perch on one of the picnic benches, catching my breath and staring up at my canvas.

I've been doing graffiti since I was ten. I started out mimicking the tags I saw on the street, scrawling a mixed-up form of my name on exercise books and lampposts and my mother's Bentley (never got caught!). I've expanded my artistic horizons a little since then.

I opened my backpack and pulled out the aerosol cans,

and got to work with a wary glance up at the CCTV cameras that dotted the top floor. Maybe when the caretaker arrived in the morning to find the graffiti on the wall and the security computer mysteriously unplugged, they'd know for certain it was an inside job. Maybe it'd lead them straight to me. I shook up the can of black, placed my finger on the button. If I was going to get expelled for this, I might as well make it worth the trouble.

Once I was into it, I hardly knew how quickly time was passing until my phone buzzed once to let me know it was 3:30. Time to step up the pace. I should be gone by 4:30, because at 5am the cleaners came in and the street began to wake up. The light would change from the grimy yellow streetlight-darkness to a weird grey pre-dawn light that seemed to come from everywhere all at once, and by then I ought to be already gone.

I stepped back and looked up at my work, the sketchy lines of colour that formed school desks and unemployment lines, bank statements cascading into thousands of pounds of debt, young faces twisted in despair, withering under the stress as they fought each other to get to the top of the heap. I reached into my bag for the last can, the fluorescent turquoise. Just the right colour to highlight the sickness of it all.

Don't get me wrong – *I'll* never have to claim unemployment benefit. I may never have a single penny of debt. My mother would never allow it. But that's not the point.

Or maybe it is exactly the point.

I stepped up to the wall to scrawl a shadow of stinging turquoise around the head of one of the girls.

A plastic *tunning* sound rang in the air right behind me, and I yelped and spun around, my heart hammering. For a second I blinked against a patch of painfully bright light. The

motion sensitive light by the bins – I'd been careful to avoid it, but something had turned it on. My mind's eye filled the empty garden with ghouls and knife-wielding mask-wearing psychopaths, before a patch of grubby orange and grey fur stirred and my eyes adjusted enough to yank it into focus.

It was just a fox, jumping down from the high wall onto the bins. Maybe even the same one I'd seen earlier. It stood gazing right at me for a second in the piercing spotlight. There was something dark in its jaws. I wondered if it was a rat, but it seemed too small.

I couldn't hang around wildlife-watching. I could almost taste the dawn, the sharp tangy dip in temperature that happens around 4am. I shivered and wrapped my arms around my chest. Leaping around painting the wall had worked up a sweat, and now it was prickling on my scalp as it cooled, like dew on the grass, but more likely to give me a cold. I had to get moving – even after I was done, I still had to get back over the fence . . .

As the fox leapt down from the bin to the ground it stumbled, and I realised there was a patch of darkness on its flank, black against the halo of backlit orange fur. Something glistened on the ground.

It was blood.

The fox turned towards me, took a couple of unsteady steps, and collapsed, panting. It turned its orange-and-black eyes on me, and then closed them and let out a pathetic whine. The thing in its mouth tumbled out onto the grass.

I should have left it alone. But I couldn't just let it die where it sat – even though I had no idea what I could do for it. As I inched towards the animal I could see that there was lots of blood, caked around a deep gash along its side.

Maybe the kind thing to do would be to try to put it out of its misery. But could I kill it in cold blood, even to end its

suffering? How would I do it? Bludgeon it with a cricket bat from the Kit Shed?

Tears pricked my eyes and I blinked them away. 'Well that's not going to help,' I whispered.

I was about six feet away, crouching in the dewy grass, when the fox stirred. I froze, not wanting to scare it, as if it didn't have bigger problems than a paint-splattered human right now.

Its legs spasmed. It hunched down and then threw its head back. Its fur rippled along its length, like the ground during an earthquake. Its eyes opened.

A scream curled up and died in the back of my throat, and I twitched away, falling back onto my elbows.

They were human eyes. Bloodshot, but human, with white whites and grey-green irises. I whimpered, trying to crawl away, but found myself up against the Kit Shed, watching through my hands as the fox writhed and hissed and grew. A paw reached out, and then dirty fingers were clutching at the grass. Hair shrank back into naked skin and sprouted on top of the head. Leg joints popped and clicked as they twisted into elbows. The tail was gone, the ears were gone, the snout was gone, the teeth that gritted at me were blunt and square.

He was naked. And a man. And blood was streaming from the stretched wound in his side.

He looked at me, with those human eyes, red-rimmed and desperate. He made a deep, rattling, bubbling sound in his throat.

'No,' he groaned, and his head drooped, his elbows bent. He toppled to the ground on his good side. Deep red blood trickled across his chest like a theatre curtain coming down. *Exuente Omnes*. 'Oh god. Please,' he mouthed.

My skin crawled across my flesh like it was trying to run away, whether the rest of me was coming or not – but I couldn't move. I couldn't think. Naked man. Fox. Blood. Blood, everywhere.

Except then there was a thought, absurd and sudden:

*He's human now.*

My hands slid into my pockets, numb and slippery fingers grasping. *Keys. Mace. Oystercard.*

*Phone.*

999.

'Ambulance please.' It was someone else's voice, hoarse and squeaky.

The man-fox – the fox-man – his head rose and his eyes widened. Shock? A tear trickled down his face and he suddenly reached around, a trembling hand swishing through the pool of dew and blood. It closed on something and he cradled it to his chest.

'He's – I think he's been stabbed. His side. Kensington College for Girls. Kensington Square. Round the back in the garden.' The voice – still not mine, surely I'd be stammering – fell silent. My hand fell into my lap. The phone was turned off. It felt heavy as I slipped it back into my pocket.

'Girl,' he whispered. 'Please.'

He held out his hand. There was something lying in the palm, small and softly rounded. It was a stone. That was what the fox had had in its mouth. Not prey, but a stone.

'Please,' he said again. 'The fog.'

There was no fog. The night sky had been cloudy, but the air was clear.

'Take it.' His gaze focused and flickered to the stone.

For a moment I still didn't move or speak. Then I think I shook my head, and swallowed.

'I called an ambulance.'

'No,' he breathed. 'You . . . have to take it away . . . from here . . .' The strain of uttering a full sentence looked devastating and his head drooped again, his mouth hanging open. A thin

line of pink-tinged saliva dripped from it onto the grass. ‘Take.’ He managed to raise his head just enough to look me in the eye. More tears were fighting their way down his face. He said nothing else, but that look did something to me.

I tipped onto my knees and shuffled towards him.

‘Do – do you have –’ The absurdity of choosing whether to say *children* or *cubs* made me stop.

‘Nnn . . . nn . . .’ he couldn’t form the word but I think he shook his head.

Blood bubbled at the corner of his mouth as I reached his outstretched hand. The stone was a gem, I thought – a polished black cabochon with a bright white star in its depths. Surely he wanted it to go to someone?

‘Take it where?’ I asked. Warm tears stung my cheeks.

‘. . . way,’ he whispered.

As I reached out and touched the stone, he fell back, his eyes half-open and empty.

I should have felt something, when he died – a shiver, *something*. But all I felt was the cold surface of the stone in my blood-slippery palm.

I heard sirens.

## SYNOPSIS:

When Meg Banks receives a mysterious stone from a dying shapeshifter, her life changes forever. As a fox she finds freedom from her shallow friends and tyrannical mother, but someone is after the stone, commanding an army of spy pigeons and fog that can crush your skull. Meg must unite the bickering Skulk to prevent a dark sorceress gaining a weapon of unimaginable power.

## BIOGRAPHY:

Rosie Best lives in London and loves all things nerdy. When she's not writing or indulging in video games she sings in the Crouch End Festival Chorus. She is an editor for Working Partners and has also worked for them as a freelance writer.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"A confident, intelligent voice."

"Interesting opening idea with the fox transforming into a human. It is unexpected and really intriguing, which makes the reader want to keep turning the pages – a great start!"

"The description of the fox's transformation is very powerful."





## ISOLYA by Shana Nieburg-Suschitzky



### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Following an architectural degree and a career in film set design, Shana found her heart's desire in the world of storytelling and illustration for children. Having versatile skills enables Shana to work on a variety of projects, such as her recent commission to create an inventive flat-packed maquette set.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"This piece has an interesting, oval composition and a lovely narrative quality – the idea of freedom to express yourself. The night-time scene is difficult to pull off confidently in black and white, yet this strong contrasting imagery shows a confidence and skill that could work across different markets from supermarkets to gift. It is contemporary, whilst still being traditional in feel. This illustrator shows the capacity to reflect a text sensitively and to capture its emotional content."

# MAGPIE

by Jo Wyton

Do you remember that song, the one about the magpies? It was always as if it was just for us and nobody else. For some reason I haven't been able to stop thinking about it recently. Maybe because I always thought of myself as part of a two for mirth and now, well, now I guess I'm all about the sorrow.

I think God must be a little like a magpie, stealing the shiny things from people's lives and keeping them to himself up in his nest. Maybe one day you'll fall out and I'll wake up and there you'll be, chattering away in my ear as ever. Maybe not.

I never went to the hospital you know. I mean, I did, in a way, but I couldn't make myself walk through the doors. I just stood there, listening to them swishing open and shut, smelling the sadness on the air as it swept outside, a smell that wrapped itself around me until I couldn't breathe. Dad knew I was out there, and that seemed to be enough for him. Sometimes, when she wasn't doing too well, he'd come and sit with me, and we'd just be, just the two of us, still and quiet, watching cars breathe new visitors into the hospital like dead leaves on the wind. Maybe someday she'll forgive me for that.

You're in the ground now. It's weird that it's taken me so long to grasp that. But today it came, realisation quickly followed by nausea (I threw up in the kitchen sink with Dad holding my hair back). I suddenly remembered that flimsy red velvet curtain, the one that looked too small to cover up a whole life like that, closing around you at the funeral, and then it just replayed in my head, over and over again.

They never tell you what it feels like, when your heart

breaks. Because it doesn't break easily. It's not like someone's taken a sharp piece of glass and sliced straight through it, or even like it just tears and falls apart. No, it's like someone has taken one of those knives from the Stone Age – one of those flints with the jagged edges – and shoved it right into your chest, through your ribs and everything, and your whole body fills with the pain and you know you can never go back, not ever.

Dad planted a tree in the garden – that's where you are by the way. We mixed your ashes in with the soil and then put the tree in on top. You were never exactly the church type, so I think he tried to make the memorial at least a little bit fun. Turns out it's not like it is in the movies though – they make having fun at a funeral look so easy. It's all blurry around the edges and colourful and full of people telling stories about the dead person's life and then they all laugh about it and they only remember the good stuff. It's not like that. All you can think about is the shit. All I could think about was that tiny red velvet curtain, and the fact that you left me.

But it wasn't your leaving that was the problem, not really. I know that now.

It was all the other stuff you did.

So as much as I love you, and as much as I need you right now, I have to tell you something. Then I'm going to fold this piece of paper in half, put it in an envelope and tie it to your tree. I know there's no way you'll ever see or read it, but hell, I'll do it anyway.

Like I said, that song has been echoing in my head. You do remember it, don't you? It went:

*One for sorrow, two for mirth,  
Three for a death, four for a birth.*

*Five for silver, six for gold,  
Seven for a secret, never to be told.*

Well here's mine.  
I wish I could forgive you.

## **ELEVEN MONTHS EARLIER**

*January 14th, 8:15am*

There are some secrets you should never tell. Some things should be locked away and never given words.

You can always spot the secret-keepers. It's a look in the eyes, a slight hanging of the head and stoop of the shoulders, because they're heavy, those secrets. I know. I remember the day I discovered mine.

But now isn't the time to stand and think.

I grind my hands deep into my pockets to keep them warm and my fingers automatically wrap around the boy's wallet. The leather is fake but it feels full enough.

People are trudging up and down the pavement in front of me. I tend to lose track of what day it is sometimes, but today I can tell it's a Monday. I'm waiting for the right gap in the crowd so that I can slot in without attracting too much attention. Most people slide past with their gaze fixed on the pavement and their heads bowed against the winter air but every now and then someone spots me lurking and their eyes narrow at my straw hair and the holes in my clothes and my face that's too worn to belong to a teenager.

Eventually I step forwards to join the army of people, marching further away from the shelter until I reach Main Street.

Dog-eared shops loom out of nowhere as I break the crest of the hill. Charity shops, cafes, newsagents, banks and

hairdressers, all waiting for the day's trade to start. Patch-works of bright posters and luminous cardboard notices lie in wait in the windows, adverts for piano teachers and second-hand bikes.

The crowd thins out as people branch off into shops and offices. I'm more exposed now.

"There she is!" The voice booms down the street behind me.

I flick a glance over my shoulder but I don't need to – I already know who it is, because I can still feel his wallet warm in my pocket. I accidentally catch the boy's eye – the one I took it from. Mistake. Now he knows he's found the right girl and he's got four other boys with him. They're only schoolboys but they're a hell of a lot bigger than I am.

I start walking faster but I trip on my shoelace and stumble.

They're running now. I can hear their expensive trainers pounding the pavement behind me.

I look over my shoulder to check.

Damn. They're shouting, egging each other on, getting closer and closer.

Run. Don't trip on anything. Run!

But my legs are filling with pain. I used to be on the cross-country team. Now look at me.

I grit my teeth.

Quick right, left onto Roundhill Road, right again.

Out of time. They're closing in too fast.

I grab the boy's wallet and with one last longing look I throw it backwards over my shoulder. It thumps onto the pavement with a jangle of coins that sounds like a hamburger and a room for the night.

The footsteps behind me slow down and then I can't hear them at all. Good – they've stopped to pick up the wallet.

I turn the corner into Wendover Street and slow down.

Ouch ouch ouch – stitch. I press my side with my hand until the pain recedes. Any other day I'd be listening out – for anything, really. Footsteps. Cars. Voices. But I've got a stitch so I don't hear the boys coming round the corner. It's funny how the smallest things change everything.

Suddenly they're standing right in front of me, curled around in a semi-circle.

I'm in trouble. I was stupid; I left the main road and now I'm standing in a dingy little side street, surrounded. Nice one, Cassie.

The boy I took the wallet from is standing at the front. His eyes are bright blue, cold against his dark hair and honey skin. He's staring at me. Standing next to him is a boy who reminds me of a toad, squat and fat with bad skin and a haircut that I think he maybe did himself with grass shears.

I step backwards but there's a wall behind me. I can feel my hair catching on the bricks. They've fallen silent, trying to work out where this is going, eyes flicking between the boy at the front and me.

"You took my wallet," he says. His eyes never leave mine. He's staring so hard he's probably boring holes in the back of my head.

I don't know what to say, so I say nothing.

He doesn't take a step forward, although I'm waiting for him to. He doesn't move towards me at all. Doesn't flex his muscles, or threaten me, or ball his hand into a fist. He just stands there, staring. I bet this guy could spot a rabbit from space with those eyes, like a hawk.

"Why did you take my wallet?" His voice is husky, sort of sitting low on the ground between us. The boy with the toad face starts to edge forwards, cracking his knuckles. Hawk sticks his arm out without even looking.

She's Mine, he's saying. Stay Back.

"Come on, there must have been a reason why you picked me. My wallet."

Because I needed it.

Because I wanted something to eat.

Because you can afford it.

But none of that comes out of my mouth. Instead I shrug and say, "Easy target."

Bad move. Hawk's eyes narrow and his upper lip curls.

I try to sidestep around them. Toad Face moves in to cut me off. I bump into his torso and bounce off like a rubber ball.

This isn't going to be as easy as I was hoping. Time for Plan B.

"Have I seen you before?" says Hawk suddenly. They all stare at him, even Toad Face. Now that, I wasn't expecting. But it's as good a chance as any to start my escape, so I shake my head and say, "I don't think so," except what comes out is "I d—" as my voice disappears into the pit of my stomach.

Hawk smiles to himself.

This guy *knows* I'm not going to bite. He *knows* he can do and say whatever he likes.

Well that's where he's wrong. He doesn't know anything.

My bite is the best thing I've got.

I clear my throat and divert my gaze to the ground, making myself look as small as possible. "Move out of my way," I say in a small voice. "Or I'll make you." I shuffle my feet for extra effect. That should do it.

For a second I stay put, waiting for the signal to move, and then it comes.

They start laughing like a pack of hyenas, all of them except Hawk, who cocks his head to one side, sizing me up. I flick my eyes over his shoulder and smile as if there's somebody

there, ignoring the hyena cackles around me. He hesitates but eventually takes the bait and turns to see what I'm looking at.

Time to test out the knuckles. I aim my fist at his stomach and feel it sink into him. Then the steel toecap of my boot connects with what must be his shin. I fling myself away from the wall and shove my way through the group before they can react and after skidding briefly on the wet pavement I'm running down the road and away from the stunned silence they've fallen into.

Footsteps give chase. There's not many. Two, maybe three of them have bothered. But I know this town better than they do. A swift left turn, a quick right and then right again and there's the big wheelie bins behind the chippy and there's plenty of space for me to crouch and hide and watch as they run past.

Sliding my back down the wall I sit down and cringe as dampness from the ground seeps into my trousers. My heart won't slow down. This has happened to me a couple of times before, but I'm still not used to it. I try counting to ten. It doesn't work.

A year ago I was certain that leaving home was the only thing I could do. I needed to get away. The air in that house was stifling, pressing down on me all the time, and I couldn't forget. I tried, I really did, but I just kept picturing Mum dying, over and over again until I couldn't remember what was real and what was pretend. There's only so many times you can watch your mum die before you have to escape.

In the end, whether the memory was real or not, there was no way to stay at home and there was nowhere else to go. So I came to live out here.

Maybe not the best decision I've ever made.

The shelter on Smetherton Street is fine on nights when I can get the money but that's not often and it's not great.



The women on the front desk try to smile nicely for you but you can see something else behind their eyes. Mostly I think they must have kids like me, living rough. Mostly they just look guilty and sad. When I can't get a room it's sleeping in the park or the doorway of the crummy Spar on Main Street.

As the water from the ground reaches my pants I start wondering how much longer I can do this, how much longer I can survive, because I don't seem to be getting any better at it. Some people like it out here. I don't.

Something rears up in my chest and tears climb into my eyes. I scrunch my hand into a fist and punch the wall.

I can't believe I thought this would be easy.

I can't believe it's been twelve months.

But most of all, I can't *believe* I've sat in a puddle.

*January 14th, 8:21am*

One day everything was normal, and then it wasn't.

One day Rachel had a family, and a life, and then it all vanished.

No warning, no alarm bell ringing out. All Cassie had left was a note. A stupid note that barely said anything.

Rachel felt her mood darken further as the school buildings loomed into view at the top of the hill. Today was going to be bad day. She just knew it. Today was one of those days that made you want to curl up under your duvet and ignore it completely. *And* she was having a bad-hair day. The scarecrow effect. Nice.

"Is it supposed to be this hard, do you think?" said Rachel.

"I don't mean to put a downer on things," answered Anita beside her, kicking a rusty coke can along the pavement, "but I'm pretty sure we have it worse than most. I mean, Year 11 is supposed to be about boys and falling out with your mates

and skipping school to smoke round the back of the bike sheds. Instead we've got actual problems. I reckon most of the kids at school would cry if we even *told* them what we have to deal with."

Rachel pictured her dad at home. He probably hadn't even moved yet. He was probably still sitting at the kitchen table clutching his mug of whiskey-laced coffee. Most days he didn't even bother to add the coffee.

That morning, for the first time in ages, Rachel had noticed how much he'd changed. His hair had gotten longer, curling now where it met his shoulder, grey quickly replacing brown as the colour of choice. The blue flannel dressing gown she remembered cuddling comfortably against years ago had become thin and worn. Washed out, like him.

They had *both* cocked up, *both* missed the signs, missed every chance to help, to *save* her, and now to top it all they'd become strangers to each other, both fading at the same time. Sometimes Rachel's dad got a look in his eyes, and she knew.

He blamed her for Cassie leaving.

He blamed her, and there was nothing she could do about it. Not unless she could somehow fix it, bring Cassie back.

Rachel sighed. "Maybe I should just leave home," she said.

"Yeah, right," said Anita.

"No, seriously," said Rachel. "Cassie probably has some cushy job by now, a flat with some guy she's met and a totally blissful life."

"Forty-two-inch TV on the wall."

"Huge group of amazing friends who are round there all the time. She's probably living it up."

"Except she probably isn't, and you know it," said Anita.

Rachel hitched her rucksack back onto her shoulder. "Doesn't really matter. Either way, she has it easy. She doesn't

have to live with Dad and she doesn't have to go to school and she doesn't have to sit stupid exams that aren't going to get her anywhere."

An elbow skewered Rachel's side as a line of boys trundled past doing their best troll impressions.

Rachel scowled. "Boys at this school are so *disgusting*," she said loudly, staring at the Marks & Spencer's underpants sticking out from their trousers.

"I know," said Anita as one boy stuck his finger up at them over his shoulder. "Like untrained toddlers."

"So, I've decided," said Rachel.

"Decided what?" said Anita uncertainly.

Rachel took a deep breath. "To do something about it." She had been thinking that thought for weeks, but now that the words were out of her mouth they felt all too real.

"About what?"

"About home, about all of it. Things aren't getting any better and I can't go on like this. I can't fix school. I can't fix Dad. That stuff I just have to put up with. But maybe I *can* try to work out why Cassie left and then try to get her back."

Rachel carried on walking for a few steps before she realised that Anita wasn't following her.

"Annie?"

"Are you serious?" Anita said, her voice strained.

"Sure, why not?" shrugged Rachel.

"Bit of a change of heart isn't it?" said Anita. "You're sure?"

"Nothing will come of it anyway," answered Rachel, but her conviction had evaporated.

Perhaps she *should* leave Cassie to the past, relegate her to a vague memory only to be remembered on birthdays and at Christmas. That was what Cassie had asked her to do in the letter. But how much more Dad could Rachel really take?

“Jesus, I won’t really be *doing* anything,” she said eventually. “I mean, I’m not a flippin’ private detective. It’s just that if I can work out why she left, maybe I can somehow work out where she went. Dad doesn’t even have to know.”

“Yeah because that usually works,” said Anita, rolling her eyes. “Look, I’m your best friend. If you want to do this, I’m there all the way, just make sure it’s what you want, OK? Don’t leave it till you’ve found something out about Cassie to realise it’s something you’d rather not know.”

“Of course, oh wise and great Annie,” said Rachel, bowing theatrically from the waist.

Anita grinned. “I try.”

Rachel threw her arm round Anita’s shoulder. “Let’s go to mine after school,” she said. “You haven’t had to withstand Dad’s verbal torture for a while.”

“Rach, I was at your place four days ago.”

“That’s long enough to forget the true awkwardness of trying to have a conversation with my father.”

Truth was, Rachel couldn’t stand another evening sitting watching TV with the smell of stale alcohol filling her lungs.

“Yeah alright, fair enough,” said Anita. They’d reached the second floor of the science block. “See you later,” she said, disappearing into her form room. As Rachel continued to her own form room, she wondered if Anita was right.

Cassie *did* say not to look for her.

But so what? Rachel was the one who had to deal with everything. And who was to say that Cassie knew best? Who was to say that Rachel shouldn’t think for herself, form her own opinion? Cassie was gone. She’d abandoned Rachel, left her with a drunken dad for company – so why should she still do what Cassie said? She’d do what the hell she liked.

Suddenly a figure reared up in front of her.

“Good morning, Miss Harris.” Mrs Broule was standing in the doorway to the classroom, her finger tapping her watch.

Rachel didn’t say anything. She stared as hard as she could at her tutor’s small, muddy-green eyes as they peered down her thin nose.

“Aren’t you going to apologise for being late?” prompted Mrs Broule.

Rachel shrugged. “No.”

“Inside.” A vein in Mrs Broule’s neck was pulsing so hard that Rachel wondered if it might explode. “Now.”

Sighing, she walked through the door and slumped into her chair. Obviously the horrors that awaited any student in their form room were unspeakable, but Rachel’s tutor was Mrs Broule. Surely that meant she automatically had it worse than most. After all, this woman was advising them on how they should live their lives, and she smelled of a combination of vinegar and bleach.

Today just isn’t going to be my day, thought Rachel. She ran her hand over the haystack on her head, wondering if a brush existed in the world that could get through it while Vinegar And Bleach droned on about their exams. Again.

“This is the most important year of your lives,” she said. “You need to make the most of the opportunities given to you in these exam papers. Anybody who doesn’t believe me when I say that good grades will see you through the rest of your lives is either an idiot or already has a career lined up at McDonalds.”

Like everyone else in the room, Rachel knew the sales pitch. She didn’t need reminding *every single morning*. And it wasn’t as though it was just form room where they had to listen to it; every teacher was stuck on the exams like a never-ending merry-go-round. Minus the merry.

They all knew it was a lie. At least, they knew it wasn’t the

whole truth. There were more important things than exam results.

She looked around the room. Paul Watson in the back row – he knew; he'd lost his brother to cancer last year. Sarah Jenkins – her parents had gone through a messy divorce when it had, very publicly, turned out that her dad had been embezzling money from his company. The rumour was that she and her mum had been left penniless with the bailiffs on their doorstep.

But the teachers? *They* didn't know.

Sure, they knew how to do simultaneous equations and how to decipher Shakespeare. They knew what would happen if you added hydrochloric acid to magnesium and all about the precise military movements that led up to the start of World War Two.

What they didn't know *anything* about was life. How many of them had asked Rachel how things were at home after her sister went missing? Exactly none. How many of them could she ask how exactly you're supposed to deal with a drunken, out-of-work dad? Zippo. None of them could answer questions about anything *real*, anything that Rachel actually needed to know.

She already had to be the parent at home. She had to wash her clothes, clean the house, buy food, make sure she had enough money for lunch. But at school she could be whoever she wanted to be.

Who knew, maybe there were some people in the room who really thought these exams would define the rest of their lives. If they were lucky, they'd be right. If they were lucky, they'd have nothing more than that to worry about.

If they were lucky.

Rachel wasn't.

## SYNOPSIS:

Cassie ran away after discovering the truth behind her mum's death. A year on, all she wants is to go home. Left behind, things are all wrong for her sister Rachel, now convinced she needs to find Cassie if things are ever going to be OK again. But every day Cassie stays away brings both her and Rachel closer to something that will change them forever. As their fates twist together, can either be saved?

## BIOGRAPHY:

Jo Wyton is a geologist with a thoroughly impractical interest in rocks and an even more impractical interest in writing. She can usually be found scribbling madly with one hand whilst propping up a growing tower of notebooks with the other. Occasionally, she can be found buried under them.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"Each chapter works well to complement the others . . . I really want to read more to find out what happened between the sisters."

"I love the opening couple of paragraphs, particularly the idea of God being like a magpie with a nest full of beautiful, shiny things from people's lives."

"Great voice. Touching. Great hook at the end of first chapter. Means you just HAVE to read on. Lovely title. Nice and resonant, clever too. And funny. I want to read more!"

# GABBLERATCHET

by Sandra Greaves

## **Matt**

You've probably never heard of the gabblerratchet. Believe me, that's a good thing. Some things you don't want to mess with. And some things you don't want messing with you.

When the birds first came I didn't pay much attention. I wish I had, but it's too late now. There's no going back.

The trees crowd round me in the darkness, jostling, hooking their fingers into my hair. They're covered in what feels like fur. I'm hoping it's just lichen. I slow my breath right down, even though my heart's thumping like a set of bongos. If I keep my nerve I'll get through. They're not the real problem. There's something much worse.

I've got to strike a bargain. The question is how much am I going to lose? And who?

Up in the sky I can see it coming. It's coming for me.

## **CHAPTER ONE: Matt**

Eleven forty-seven. Already the train was slowing into Exeter station and the tannoy was telling me not to leave my luggage behind and to please remember to close the doors. They must think the passengers are seriously thick or something. As the platform approached I wondered whether I should bother to get off at all. Unfortunately this train was only going to Penzance, and being stuck somewhere right at the bum end of England probably wasn't much of an alternative to where I was heading. I steelled myself, heaved my bag onto my shoulder and stepped out.



I couldn't believe this was happening. My family didn't seem to realise that this was *my* Easter holiday and I should maybe be allowed to enjoy myself just a tiny bit. Instead they were abandoning me here in the middle of nowhere. And it stank.

Twelve and a half minutes overdue, Uncle Jack rocked up, looking hassled.

'Goodness, there you are, Matthew,' he said, as if it was me who was late, not him. He peered at me from under wind-swept grey hair and a grey beard, which was pretty much how I remembered him, even though it was ages since I'd seen him last.

'It *is* Matthew, isn't it?' he said when I kept my mouth shut. 'Heavens, you've shot up a bit! What are you now, thirteen? That's right, isn't it? A year older than Tilda. Good to see you after all this time.'

I grunted a hello and that seemed to be enough for him. He led me over to his crappy old clapped-out Land Rover. Then he glanced at me sideways.

'Your mum all right then?' he asked.

'Yeah,' I said, and lapsed into silence. Uncle Jack took the hint and switched on the radio. As we drove, he chatted vaguely about the farm and my two cousins and the awfulness of the weather. At least he had the decency not to bring up why I was here. And then, just as I was beginning to calm down, we were on the moor.

Imagine a wilderness that just goes on and on and on. That's Dartmoor. Sure, there's the odd house and the odd cow. But mostly it's just fields and then vast chunks of wild moorland covered in dead bracken. It could easily win top prize as the most boring place in the universe.

Mum and Dad had really excelled themselves here. Dad sails off to America, Mum lives it up in London with Paul the

four-eyed git, and I'm parcelled out to this godforsaken hole. It's partly my fault, I accept that. There was no way I was staying with Mum if the four-eyed git was going to be around.

It was only for two weeks over the Easter holiday, but the thought of being stuck here for more than a day – no, more than half an hour – was doing my head in. As far as I was concerned, this was child abuse. OK, not the really bad, social worker in the middle of the night kind, but still, child abuse. And I felt seriously pissed off.

I'd been here before, just not for a very long time. I didn't remember much of it. The farm, obviously, and the cows and the sheep. Walks into the depths of nowhere. A load of mud. It's kind of strange we never visit now. We used to see Uncle Jack and Auntie Rose at ours, or at family parties. But ever since Auntie Rose died we've barely set eyes on my uncle and cousins. Mum doesn't seem to want to come here. Dartmoor gives her the creeps, she says. God knows why. It's not like anything ever happens.

After a long twisty road that went precisely nowhere, we turned off onto an even tinier lane. And there, at the bottom of a hollow was Parson's Farm – a ramshackle old stone building with a load of barns and nothing to see for miles around, unless you're into sheep in a big way.

My cousin Tilda appeared at the front door as we drove up. She didn't look like the annoying little kid who'd always wanted to tag around after me any more. Instead she was tall, almost as tall as me, and her dark red hair was piled onto the top of her head in a kind of untidy fountain. She watched us approach, with one hand at the neck of a huge black dog that looked disturbingly like a wolf, and this massive scowl on her face. Evidently she was just as pleased to see me as I was to be there.

She didn't even bother to come out and say hello. As I picked my way through the puddles, she stood there curling her lip and staring at my shoes like they were alien beings. They were perfectly OK shoes, let me tell you, black loafers, and pretty nice. It wasn't as if she had anything to be smug about, in mud-spattered wellingtons and some sort of mud-coloured coat. In fact if you left out the pale face and violent red hair she could have been auditioning as a swamp.

Uncle Jack was busy saying the usual welcome stuff, but Tilda didn't join in with anything even vaguely polite. Finally she looked up at me.

'Thought you were coming to some posh party, did you?' she said, and her mouth was one big sneer she didn't even attempt to disguise. Then she turned and disappeared with the hairy hound following her like she was a plate of pork chops.

Uncle Jack rolled his eyes.

'Sorry about that,' he said. 'She's in a bit of a strop just now. She'll be fine later. You always liked each other when you were little. I'm sure you'll get on fine.' Frankly, I doubted it, but I kept that to myself.

My uncle showed me up to the room I was to stay in, then left me to 'acclimatise' – apparently meaning, get on with it, you're on your own now. He had to see to the cows, he said. Tilda clearly wasn't going to offer to help me settle in. And my baby cousin Kitty hadn't even put in an appearance so far. Charming.

Anyway. The room's at the back of the farmhouse, looking out onto a bit of garden and then fields, and in the distance, this grim old stack of stones on top of a hill. I know about this – it's a tor, a load of eroded granite left by the ice. Geography last year, Mr Perrin, 72%. After design and technology, it's definitely my best subject.

Inside it's all pretty basic: rough white walls and an iron bedstead with a cover in every colour under the sun, the kind your granny might have knitted if she had a lorry-load of wool and plenty of time on her hands. Then there's a white wardrobe, a pine chest of drawers, a couple of shelves full of old books, and a stool beside the bed with a frilly lampshade that's frankly embarrassing. That's it. No telly. No computer. Not even a radio, and I hadn't thought to bring one. And my mobile has no bars at all out here. It really sucks.

There wasn't much else to do but unpack. I shoved my stuff away and tucked my ship's flag into a loose piece of cable round the top of the wall. I had a couple of books – *Treasure Island* and *Knots and their Uses* – heaven knows why I brought those, but they just felt familiar – which I put on the shelves. And finally my camera and my Game Boy. That was the lot.

I went to the window and stared into the gloom. The garden immediately below seemed to be full of black birds – crows, I guess. Or rooks. Whatever they were, they were making a right din. Then I saw that they were attacking another bird, a black and white one with a kind of crest on its head. The poor thing flew off, and a whole lot of black ones belted after it. For some reason I felt cold inside.

So it was good to have a visitor. As I was wishing I was back in London or anywhere else in the whole of the British Isles except here, the door burst open. In the flail of arms and legs I could make out a tousled halo of red-gold hair, rainbow-patched jeans and a giant-sized navy fleece. A small girl emerged – my cousin Kitty.

'You're Matt,' she accused me, plumping herself on the bed. 'Do you like this?' She patted the cover. 'My granny made it before I was born.' Bull's-eye. The Crimmond brain as sharp as ever.

‘Well, it’s a bit more homey than I’m used to,’ I said guardedly. Kitty took this as a massive compliment and beamed like a demented frog.

‘I put it there,’ she said. ‘I wanted it to be all nice for you.’ Ahhh. Be still my stony heart, like my dad always says. But at least someone in the Parson family was looking out for me.

‘What’s that?’ she said. She was prowling round the room, checking out my additions. The ship’s flag had caught her eye.

‘It’s a burgee, for a sailing boat,’ I said. ‘A flag. It was my dad’s from the racing club he belonged to.’

‘Why have you got it?’ said Kitty.

I shrugged. ‘It’s old. He was going to throw it away so I kept it.’

‘Why?’

To my horror I could feel tears sneaking their way into the corners of my eyes. I blinked them back fast.

‘Look, I just did.’ It came out a bit sharp, but I wasn’t exactly going to tell her that Dad had left the burgee behind when he cleared out of our house eighteen months ago. I’d salvaged it from the box of his things Mum was chucking in the bin.

Kitty switched tack abruptly. ‘Let’s go downstairs,’ she said. ‘There’s juice and biscuits. Come on.’

It wasn’t like I had a better offer right now.

‘Yeah, OK then,’ I said.

Kitty took me down to their vast bare kitchen. She clambered onto a stool and handed me a couple of mismatched glasses. ‘Take these,’ she said. ‘And one for Tilda. I’ll call her.’ Brilliant, I thought. Let’s make it a bloody party.

Tilda slouched down in response to Kitty’s bellow. The wellingtons were gone now and replaced with outsize fluffy slippers. She looked ridiculous.

‘Making yourself at home, are you?’ she asked me nastily. ‘There’s biscuits,’ said Kitty, ‘but they’re only custard creams.’ I helped myself to one and turned to Tilda.

‘Yeah, I am, thanks. The room’s nice,’ I said. Kitty beamed. Tilda scowled.

‘Not up to your usual standard, though?’ she said. I ignored the jibe. Some of us know how to be polite.

‘How long are you staying?’ asked Tilda, her arms folded across her chest.

‘Most of the Easter holidays, I think, unless my dad gets home sooner.’

‘Great,’ she said flatly. She couldn’t have summed up more enthusiasm if I were a cockroach. ‘What fun.’

I didn’t get it. Why was she being like this? It’s not like I’d done anything to her, apart from refusing to play with her when we were kids and, now I come to think of it, putting worms down her back one summer. But that was a long time ago.

‘Why aren’t you staying with your mum?’ asked Tilda. ‘Why do you have to come here?’ She stared at me, her eyes narrow and hard.

There was no sense in letting her walk all over me. I injected about a litre of acid into my voice. ‘So sorry if I’m trespassing,’ I said. ‘I thought I was invited.’

‘It’s because your mum’s gone off with someone else, isn’t it?’ she said. She was smirking now. ‘Like, your new dad.’

I couldn’t believe she’d just come out with that. My forehead started to burn.

‘Shut up,’ I said. ‘Just shut up.’ I could hear my voice shaking, and when I looked down, my hand was in the air.

‘Yeah well,’ she said, stepping right back. ‘You’ve been dumped, haven’t you? Dumped by your dad, dumped by your mum. And now you’re dumped on us.’

That was it. I made a grab for her across the table. Tilda side-stepped fast. All I succeeded in doing was knocking over the juice, which pooled on the wooden table and began dripping over the edge. Kitty sat open-mouthed. Tilda was smiling. A dark patch of liquid expanded slowly on the red stone floor. I pushed my chair back so hard it fell over, walked out and slammed the door.

## **CHAPTER TWO: Tilda**

‘I wouldn’t be doing this if Dad hadn’t made me, but he did, so I am,’ I said to the door of Matt’s bedroom.

Matt hadn’t even emerged for lunch. We got out the special Christmas pickle but he didn’t show, so I ate the last of it. Tough titty, I thought, but Dad told me we had to be kind to poor little refugee boy. I said that if he didn’t want to live in his posh house then maybe he should stay with one of his posh friends instead of us. Dad sighed and told me to get upstairs and apologise, pronto. So there I was.

Refugee boy made me pay, mind you. First he wouldn’t open the door. Then when I kept on knocking for about five minutes, really hard, he opened it so fast that I just about fell into the room.

‘Go on, then, apologise if that’s what Daddy wants,’ he snapped at me as I got my balance back.

His dark hair was all ruffled and he looked a bit red-eyed, which is kind of pathetic for a thirteen-year-old, but I thought I’d do my Florence Nightingale act and not draw attention to it – for now at least.

‘Well, you know. Sorry.’ Fingers crossed, of course.

‘Is that it?’

‘Sorry I said that about you being dumped.’

He glared at me. ‘I haven’t been,’ he said. ‘Dad’s been

planning to go for ages. It was just that I refused to stay with Mum. Not if that git was there.' He shrugged. 'I suppose I kind of dumped myself. Sorry.'

The atmosphere lightened by several notches. You could almost see the air turning from red to rose and the little tweetie bluebirds start edging out of the wardrobe.

'Where is your dad now?' I asked.

'Somewhere between America and the Azores. He's not calling much while he's at sea. But he's supposed to reach the Azores next week.'

'What are they?'

He shot me a smug look. 'A bunch of islands in the middle of America and Portugal, dummy. Half-way point for sailors.'

'Oh,' I said. I remember Dad telling me Matt's quite a good sailor himself. Not that I care. 'And then he's got to come all the way back to England?'

'Yeah. So he's not going to be around for a while.'

I smiled sweetly. 'Looks like you're going to have put up with your mum's boyfriend then,' I said. 'Because you can't stay here forever.'

Direct hit. Refugee boy looked completely stricken. I decided to be generous.

'But I suppose we'd better get used to you in the meantime.'

It was a truce, though there was no way I wanted Matt around. He must know why, surely. I mean, our families have barely communicated for the last few years. And when Mum died, Auntie Caroline never came here, not once. She just kept inviting us to London, like we would want to go away when everything was so awful. Then there's the question of the farm and what will happen to it, and just thinking about that makes me so furious I can't speak.

But we haven't got much choice about Matt staying unless



we put him out onto the moor and leave him for the wolves to find. Too bad there aren't any now, just ponies and cows and sheep. Still. Peace-offering time.

'Want to come on a walk?' I said. 'I'll show you the farm. Tell you what, I'll even lend you some sensible boots instead of those idiotic things.'

When we finally got outside – Matt in a long striped scarf and a fancy jacket, but wearing my dad's old wellies – I thought I'd better give him a tour of the farm. Chickies first – I look after them, which is a total pain in the mornings when I have to get them up, but mostly brilliant. I called them over for a bit of corn. My favourites, Flo and Mabel, started pecking from my hand.

'Want to give them some?' I asked. I offered Matt the jug, but he pushed it away.

'No chance,' he said. 'They've got evil eyes. Like velociraptors.'

'What, scared of a little chicken, are we?'

'No, I'm serious. Chickens share more than half their DNA with *Tyrannosaurus Rex*.'

He's like that, a bit of a show-off. Must be that posh London school of his. But he had a point. When chickens run, they *are* kind of *Jurassic Park*.

'Let's go and see the rest then.' I whistled for Jezebel who came bounding up.

'The hairy hound again,' Matt said. 'What is it?'

'It's a she, and she's a black German Shepherd,' I said. Jez smiled her doggy smile and danced ahead. Matt didn't make any move to pet her. I don't think he's the animals type. Not a good omen, if you ask me.

I did my best, I swear. I showed Matt the machinery and the lambing shed, and piled it on thick about animal emergencies

and having to stick your hand up a ewe's bum. Only he didn't seem much interested. He'd gone all quiet. Time for the Florence act again.

'OK,' I said. 'Let's go up to the tor. We'll pass the Far Field and see the lambs there.'

Matt brightened a bit at that and we headed out. Gabe, who helps Dad on the farm, was up at the gate, shifting hurdles. I tried to sneak past him without catching his eye but he wasn't having any of it.

'Off again?' he said.

'Just to the tor,' I said. 'We're in a bit of a hurry. Sorry.'

Gabe frowned. Then he turned to Matt.

'Caroline's boy, isn't it?' he said. 'I saw you when you were little, once or twice. She doesn't come here now.' He eyed Matt like he was figuring out how much he'd fetch at market. Matt shifted uneasily.

'Be careful of the moor,' said Gabe. 'It's a dangerous place, and I don't just mean the weather. There's dark things happen here.' He muttered a word under his breath that I'd never heard before – 'gabbleratchet' or something weird like that. Gobbledegook, more like.

Matt was looking a bit taken aback, which was fair enough really. Gabe is pretty odd at the best of times. Even though his wife Alba's dead nice and used to be my favourite dinner lady.

'Sorry, Gabe, got to go,' I said. I waved and pushed Matt through the gate.

'What did he mean?' Matt asked in a low voice as we walked away. 'And what's the gabbleratchet when it's at home?'

'I've no idea and honestly, it's not worth the effort. He's always like that,' I said.

'Like what?'

'Oh, you know. Death and destruction.' I put on a gruff

Gabe-like voice. 'Strange things happen on the moor, stranger than you can imagine.'

Matt was frowning.

'Don't worry, it's a load of old rubbish,' I said. 'Dartmoor's great. You'll see.'

'You must be off your head,' said Matt. 'I don't know how you can stand living here. If it were me, I'd be counting the days till I could leave. Bet you are too, deep down.'

I flinched. Matt had only been here two minutes and already it sounded like he couldn't wait to get me off the farm. Surely he knows that it's because of his mum we're going to lose it? Aunt Caroline owns half of this place. When Dad retires, she wants her share, even though she's got loads of money. Dad only told me a few months ago and I can't bear it. And now here was her son gloating over the fact that I wouldn't be able to stay forever.

'Get lost,' I said, and my voice came out like a hiss. 'Go and see the tor on your own. Just don't bother coming back.'

I pulled my hood up and marched away. As I glanced behind me, I could see Matt looking confused. Beyond the gate, Gabe was watching us, slowly shaking his head.

I cleared Long Field and turned at the dry-stone wall towards the ridge. Matt followed me at a distance, shivering. Maybe that'll teach him not to wear poncy London clothes next time. Poor little refugee boy. My heart bleeds for him.

But up on the ridge it was pretty bitter, even for me. I stuck my furry earflaps down so the wind didn't make my head hurt. That's why I didn't hear the screeching straightaway. Black shapes were rising at the end corner of Far Field. Crows. Not good. Not good at all.

I started running, with Jez right behind me.

'Blimey, Tilda, wait for me,' Matt was saying, but we didn't stop.

‘Come on! Quick!’ I shouted and the wind whipped my words away and sent them whistling in all directions.

A small white shape lay by the hedge. Its middle was a raw-red pulpy mess. A crow fluttered up from it, barely bothered by our arrival. Something pink and stringy hung from the side of its beak. Nearby, a ewe was on her side, twitching her legs pathetically. Where there should have been an eye was a dark, bloody socket. The air smelt of iron and disaster.

Now Matt was on it and looking as if he’d been socked in the jaw.

‘What can we do?’ he asked me.

‘Nothing.’

‘God, Tilda, there must be something.’

‘No. Except put her out of her misery. I’m going to get Dad.’

I turned away from the ewe. She wasn’t even bleating. Just lying there, taking it. She knew her lamb was dead, and she’d given up too. Jez whimpered and followed me. As we went down the ridge the crows flapped down again. I ran on ahead to deliver the news.

Dad brought his gun but he didn’t need it. She’d gone. Died, I mean, not disappeared. Dad slung her over his shoulders. His Jesus pose I call it, but it’s normally with a live sheep – a happy picture. This wasn’t.

‘Get the lamb, Tilda,’ he told me. I picked up the sad little body, and shoved it in his bag. Matt stood with his mouth open, being useless. He’d clearly never seen anything dead before. Townie.

Then we all trooped slowly back to the farmhouse.

## SYNOPSIS:

Thirteen-year-old Matt Crimmond thinks there's nothing worse than being exiled to dreary Dartmoor over Easter – unless it's his cousin Tilda, who's out to get him.

But when they discover a curlew skull buried in an ancient wood, a local folk tale stirs into life. Birds of ill omen haunt the warring cousins, harbingers of a terrifying apparition that feeds on bad blood.

And soon the real battle is for Matt's soul.

## BIOGRAPHY:

Sandra Greaves was born in Edinburgh and lives in Devon. Formerly in journalism, TV and communications, she now works as a copywriter (and is also an award-winning poet). She and her partner keep several badly-behaved chickens on a smallholding midway between the moor and the sea.

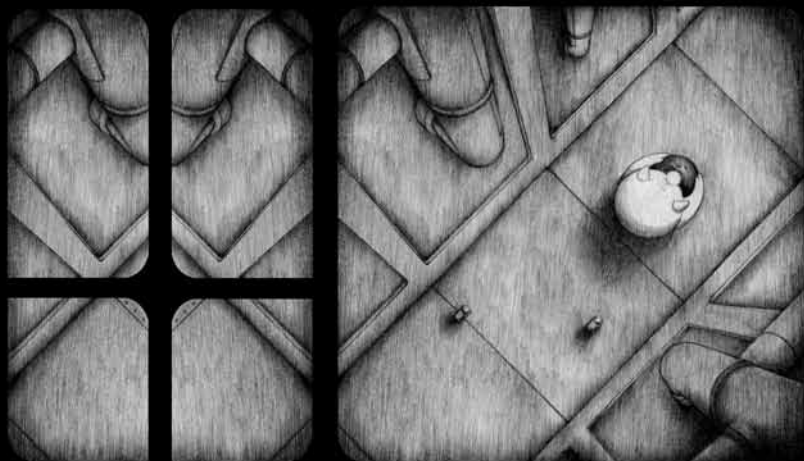
**Contact:** [srgreaves@btinternet.com](mailto:srgreaves@btinternet.com)

## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

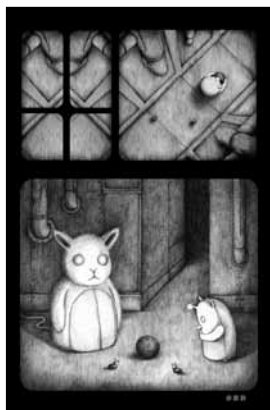
"Both children seem real to me... the sense of foreboding and mystery piques interest without revealing too much."

"The Dartmoor setting is intriguing and full of possibilities."

"Creepy, great sense of place. Strong on characters, especially the little cousin."



## AND SO CHAIROGO BROUGHT FORTH THE STOLEN VOICE . . . by Amber Hsu



### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Amber Hsu is a Chinese-born, US-raised, UK-based artist. She is a graduate of Central St. Martins and has designed and exhibited in the UK and abroad. She recently co-founded a theatre company dedicated to the promotion of transcultural arts and drama.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"We'd like to know what goes on in this illustrator's head – this picture is fascinating in terms of colour and tone. There is a clear sense that this illustrator can create great characters and tell a story as a sequence of events. The quirky imagery taps into what children are currently playing with. This style would work well in the gift/crossover market."

[www.hsubili.com](http://www.hsubili.com)

# BOONIE

by Richard Masson

## **CHAPTER ONE: The Silver Men**

JD sat on a tuft of sawgrass and watched the smoke rise over the remains of the old shack. From time to time some piece of grey, bleached wood cracked in the heat as a new orange fire worm crept over it. JD watched all day 'til there was nothing left 'cept a pile of hot ash and that small twist of smoke. Then he watched the livid purple sun sink through the chemical sunset and the dark shadows stretch out from the red hills. He watched until the whole Dry Marsh was dark.

That night JD tucked his hands under his armpits, stared at the heap of ash that had once been home and tried to figure out what to do next.

He couldn't have known it was going to happen. That morning, just like every morning when the temperature had risen too high to stay in bed, he'd dressed in his dungarees and shirt, pulled on his cracked leather boots, tied his leggings up to his knees, put his old cap into his pocket and gone into the big room to see if Pa had left anything to eat. Pa was pretty good at getting stuff to eat and JD found two or three twisted roots and some crickets laid out on the box by the stove. He picked up one of the crickets, took its head between his finger and thumb, snapped it off then put the body and legs into his mouth, crunching them into small pieces. JD liked crickets; they tasted good.

When Ma had been around she'd boil all the grub together in a big pan which made everything taste the same. JD preferred the crickets raw but it was tough chewing uncooked roots. But Ma was gone and Pa had no time for cooking. He was out from dawn



'til dusk hunting over the Dry Marsh, scraping and digging for things to eat. He never got back to the shack 'til after dark except once when he'd come in before Noon with the biggest insect JD had ever seen. He said he'd found it buried in the wet green. Ma said it was called a crab. JD thought it looked like something from another time. Ma put the crab straight into the pan and boiled it up right then and there without waiting for suppertime and when it was done they had all three sat on the floor and pulled bits off it, cracking the shell with rocks and sucking out the meat. When Pa said it was like Yule in the old times, Ma had winked at him and reached down a glass jar from the top of the dresser. She and Pa swigged from that jar 'til it was all gone and they were laid out flat on the floor. Little JD had taken the empty jar out of his Ma's hand and tried to find some of the golden fluid for himself but it was quite dry. All he could do was sniff at the heady fumes. He thought it was just like the smell you got if you found one of the old petrol cars abandoned someplace.

But Ma was gone and now Pa was gone too. The Silver Men had found Pa half-buried out back a short way off. Pa always buried up when the vibrations came. He'd scrape out a spot near some sawgrass, lie in it then cover himself with dirt. He had a hollow stem to breathe through but JD could always tell where he was by the hump in the ground and the different colour dirt where he'd dug it. The Silver Men knew that too. Last time, when two or three of them had done what they came for in the shack they took Ma out to where Pa was hiding and did it a couple of times more right next to where he was buried, just so's he could hear. Then they'd put their silver suits back on, replaced their helmets and took off. When they'd gone JD made himself scarce while Ma and Pa fought in the dust.

After dark JD had crept back into the shack, crawled into bed and lay with his face in the sacks hoping everything would

be OK come morning. But next morning Ma was gone. Pa said she'd gone to the City.

When the vibrations came again a few weeks later Pa was away digging so JD ran inside, opened the dresser door and climbed in. He lifted up the loose boards and squeezed through the hole underneath, just like Pa had showed him.

He heard the Silver Men come into the shack, their heavy boots clumping on the boards. He heard them call and when they saw that Ma wasn't there he heard them cuss and throw things about. They kicked over the stove and it shook the floorboards above JD's head making him cower down.

Then they went out back to find Pa. It took them a while but with their jet-packs they could cover ground fast and what with their height and all they were sure to get him; and they did. They brought him back to the shack and hit him a lot. JD crouched low and covered his ears with his hands but he heard them cuss Pa and hit him with things that whistled and cut the air. Pa never made a sound. He didn't cry out or nothin' though what they were doing must have hurt like hell. JD guessed that the Silver Men were drinking too because he could smell that smell again just like the time of the crab. He reckoned they must have had a real big jar full because the fumes that came down through the cracks in the floorboards were so thick and heavy they made him dizzy.

At last the shouting died down and JD heard the Silver Men leave the shack. He hoped they'd start their machines quickly so's he could get out and go to Pa; see if he was OK. But JD was having trouble breathing. The sweet, sickly fumes seemed to fill the whole shack and poured like treacle into the narrow space where he lay on the dirt. It filled his lungs and made his eyes sting but he lay still and listened hard, hoping and praying that the Silver Men would go quick.

After a while it went real quiet but just when JD thought they might have gone he heard a click. One of the Silver Men shouted out and there was a big flash and a brilliant orange and blue fireball engulfed the whole shack, swirling and roaring like a dragon, seeking out the cracks in the boards.

JD fell flat to the ground and straight away felt his back begin to burn and his head grow real hot. The hairs on his arms shrivelled into tiny black spirals and his skin began to scorch. He whimpered and tried to crawl away but the smoke coiled and swirled into the shallow space under the shack, burning his eyes and filling his nose and throat.

He knew he had to get away and headed for what he thought was the back of the shack, searching for the little square of light which showed by the back step. He grazed the skin from his arms as he wriggled and elbowed his way through the hot grey fog but pretty soon he had to stop. Gasping for breath he put his mouth close to the dirt, desperately trying to find some clean air. When he looked up again he thought he saw a pale patch through the smoke and set off in a last frenzied effort to get out.

Coughing and spluttering, the hot smoke burning his lungs, JD dug his fingers into the dirt, grabbing at it, scratching and pulling himself towards the light. Just when he thought he could crawl no further, when all the strength had gone from his limbs and the fire was so intense it seemed that all he could do was lie down and let it take him, he reached out and his knuckles jarred on something solid. Looking up he saw the back wall; the square of light was right above his head. JD struggled up on his knees, pushed his head and hands through the gap and squeezed out by the back step. Bent low he half-scrambled, half-ran to the nearest hollow where he dropped panting and choking behind a hump of sawgrass. He pushed his burning face into the dirt and beat at his hair to put out the flames while

all the time the blazing shack roared and crackled and the air vibrated and buzzed from the Silver Men's machines. He could hear them laughing and shouting to each other as he pressed his thin body against the ground. He covered his ears. At any moment the Silver Men would take off and fly right overhead. Then they would surely see him, they must see him. JD pushed himself as flat as he could and stuck his head into the clump of sawgrass which cut and stung the raw flesh on his face. The engines revved up and one by one the Silver Men took off. In a matter of moments they would swoop down and carry him away.

JD started to sob.

## **CHAPTER TWO: The Old Road**

When JD dared take his hands away from his ears all he could hear was the crackling of the burning wood and the whoosh as the old shack fell into the flames. He could still feel the vibrations in the air but they were receding fast, the machines just four black dots away in the west. When he was sure they'd gone, JD sat up and watched the smoke rise over what was left of the shack.

Next day he walked west along the Old Road. All through that night he'd never once thought about the Old Road but somehow when morning came he'd just stood up, turned his back on the pile of ash and walked towards it. And when he'd reached it he hadn't paused then either, he just turned west and strode off. Just as if it was meant to be.

JD knew that in the old times the petrol cars had run on that road but now the concrete slabs were cracked and uneven, lifted to crazy angles by the heat. Sharp, yellow grass grew in the gaps and JD had to walk along the dirt path by the edge to avoid falling down or having to jump from slab to slab.

He didn't see a single shack all day. From time to time he saw square patches of concrete where brick shacks had been, their edges red and yellow like broken teeth. Wires and pipes had been cut off short and shards of white china lay around but everything else was long gone.

He walked all day, even in the hot hours, sucking at his tongue, trying to create saliva the way Pa had shown him. He was sure to stay near the road while all around the scrub stretched away, a mournful desert of red dust, undefined, undulating away to the horizon. By nightfall he was getting hungry and began to meander away from the Old Road and into the Scrubland, seeking out the crickets he could hear chirruping in the tussocks. He caught two and ate them quick while they still had some moisture, leaving their heads on. Pa said you could get a lick from the brains.

Darkness finally closed in and JD lay down where he stopped, put his head on his hands, tucked his knees up to his chest and shut his eyes. With one ear close to the ground he reckoned he'd hear any vibrations if they came.

But sleep did not come easy. JD turned over and put his face into the crook of his arm, trying to shut out the lightning flashes that crackled orange and blue across the sky. All that night he tossed and turned; the heat never let up and he could still taste smoke. Whenever he managed to shut out his thoughts long enough to drift towards slumber he would hear a cry in the distance or feel a shudder through the dirt and would start, images of Silver Men like livid flames flashing before his eyes.

Well before dawn he gave up trying to sleep, sat up and looked around. The air was still and dark, the sky a deep, angry red except for a faint semicircle of yellow light fading into the west horizon. JD had seen it before but never so clear. Before

sun up on some days back at the shack he'd seen that same dirty yellow smudge staining the sky. He'd never mentioned it to Pa and Pa and had never said anything about it to JD but when Ma went off and JD had asked Pa where she'd gone, Pa had stared at that yellow light when he said he reckoned she must have gone to the City. Pa never said no more but some mornings JD had seen him clenching and unclenching his fists, staring at the yellow glow, anger and hurt etched on his face.

But Pa was gone now and JD knew he had to get on. The Blue Star was fading and soon the sun would rise and sear the ground with another day of furnace heat.

Sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, JD sucked his swollen tongue and wiggled it behind his teeth the way Pa had showed him but no saliva came. His lips were dry and cracked and under the rim of caked red dust he could feel slivers of skin peeling away. He sucked air in through his teeth, trying to cool his mouth, but it was no good. Even before sun up it was just too hot and his arms and hands, scorched and red from the fire, seemed even hotter than the rest of him. He took off his old cap and a cloud of burned hair and skin fell into his lap.

JD looked around. Away to his left, set against the scrub and sand hills, he saw a tree silhouetted against the sky; a wizened, bent thing with broken branches. He'd seen trees before, even standing ones. Way back, Pa had taken him to see one. They'd walked north all one morning beyond the Dry Marsh to an old riverbed near to where the nuclear power station had been. They'd found the tree clinging to a high bank, one splintered branch pointing back like a warning. They sat down under that tree, father and son, and Pa had told JD a story about the old times when trees were high and straight and hung with soft green leaves which you could eat. He told JD of

a time when small critters flew among the trees and water fell out of the sky. JD loved it when Pa told him those stories even though he knew they were made up. No one could imagine any such thing in real life.

JD sighed out loud, wrapped his arms tight around his knees and studied this new tree while he remembered that time with Pa. Then he snapped out of his memory and sat up. His sharp young eyes had detected a tiny movement near the tree and his heart began to pound. Someone was there. The tree trunk looked like it was wide at the bottom and narrow high up but when JD concentrated he could see there was a figure hunched at the base of the tree, its head leaning forward. The head wore a broad round hat and from time to time that hat would nod. JD touched his own ragged little cap with a finger and wondered what it would be like to own a nice shady hat like that.

JD watched carefully. He was scared of strangers but was getting so desperate for water he set to wondering if the man by the tree might have something to drink. He watched and thought about water until at last he summoned up his courage and began to creep towards the tree. Staying low, he skirted the sand hills and kept in the hollows, his eyes fixed on the man, ready to freeze or run if he should turn around.

When he was just a few paces away, right up close behind the tree, he dropped into a shallow dip where he waited, keeping low and listening. Then he crawled forward and peered over the rim of the hollow. He was right; there was a man by the tree. He was old; older than Pa and wore a long coat made of some light stuff. It too was old and had tears all over it. The man's legs and feet were wrapped in layers of paper, tied around with strands of plaited grass, criss-crossed up to his knees. His arms were thin and bent, his elbows resting on his knees which were

drawn up close to his chest. A mane of grey hair poured out from under the man's hat and hung straight down his back. JD could see he had a grey muzzle too but the rest of his face was hidden in the shadows. JD was so close he could hear him breathing, making a kind of whistling sound as he breathed in, followed by a gurgle and a grunt when he breathed out. JD figured the old guy was sleeping.

JD lay quiet in his hole, studying the man, searching for any sign he might have something to drink. He scanned the resting figure from the top of his hat to the tips of his toes, hoping to see the bulge of a water bottle in the thin dust coat. Then he spotted something. Leaning against the man's hip was a sort of a bag, an old satchel made out of something soft. The satchel bulged and had two long vertical splits where it had dried in the sun. Through the cracks JD could make out rolls of white paper but right at one end there was something metallic, grey, dull and tubular – just the kind of thing a man might keep a drink in.

JD edged closer, crawling out of his hole, staying flat to the dirt, using his elbows to squirm towards the bag, all the time flicking his eyes between the sleeping man's face and that precious container. As he crawled a plan formed. When the time was right he would dart forward, grab the bag and run as hard as he could, away across the scrub before the old man knew what was happening. JD ran his swollen tongue across dry lips, tried to swallow and thought about water.

He crept closer. Halfway between the dip and the tree he began to raise himself. He needed to be sure nothing would give him away, a dry twig, a stone that might click against another. But it was all clear; just a fine layer of red dust covered the ground between him and that precious tube. JD licked his dry lips again; he could almost taste that cool, sweet water. One



more step and he'd be close enough. He gathered himself for the final spring, drew a quiet breath and lifted his hands clear of the dust ready to catapult himself forward, grab that bag and just keep on running. It was now or never.

'You touch that bag, son, and I'll snap you like a twig.' It sounded like a voice from the sky or the growl of distant thunder.

## SYNOPSIS:

In a world ravaged by war and pollution, little JD is lost. His Ma has run off and his Pa is dead but then a strange man tells him a great secret. In the City he meets a tough little girl named Aqua who saves him from the Silver Men but in the Pits where the terrible Ragman rules they are caught. Meet cruel Chatelaine and Fireless the Giant as the children chase their dream.

## BIOGRAPHY:

Richard is a seafarer and writer living in Cornwall. Since gaining his MA in Creative Writing, Richard has won awards for his short stories and novels. *Dodger's Lot* was runner-up in the prestigious David St. John Thomas Awards 2010, and *Perfect Day* was long-listed for Best Novel Opening 2011.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"I liked the effortless way the writer sets the scene through small but vivid details."

"Lovely, evocative writing with great descriptions."

"Compelling writing and story. You feel for JD and his Ma and Pa . . . There are lots of post-apocalyptic manuscripts about – it is voice that makes them individual. This narration is well done."

"Intriguing. Strong set-up with a good sense of focus and clarity."

# TO DANCE WITH THE WIND

by Rachel Latham

## PROLOGUE

*My name is Roake. I live in darkness deep inside the earth. Curses seep into my mind, but in my dreams I recall words of beauty.*

*My rider, Talor, says I am foul in looks and foul in nature. He reminds me of it daily. When I look upon myself all I see is filth and ugliness. But I know I am not of this place. I do not think I am doomed to serve our masters, the Craven, as Talor so often tells me.*

*I have wings. They are thin like the skin of a man. Sometimes, Talor offers grudging compliments about my strength and my agility. When he says such things I feel something close to happiness, but he always sees it and reminds me of my ugliness. He has a cruel tongue, that one! He uses it to cover that flicker of unease I have seen in his eyes when I feel those brief moments of pride.*

*My sister, Henketh, is no comfort to me. She has no echoes of beauty or kindness. She believes she was born to serve the Craven.*

*I do not.*

## PART ONE: Awakenings

### CHAPTER ONE: Stormkeeper

‘Quickly! Quickly!’ Braun screeched into Plackett’s face.

She began to jog along the shadow-infested passage. It wasn’t fast enough for the Craven. He grabbed her arm and his talons sliced through her patched tunic, leaving three long welts. Plackett sucked in air, ignored the pain and ran.

Human voices, raised in fear and anger, alerted her that they were almost at the slavehold. She shivered, uneasy about

what waited for her beyond the shattered remains of the ancient wooden doors. Elaborately decorated panels hung from the arched frame like a mouthful of broken teeth. Plckett snatched a glance at the carved face of a bearded man who always seemed to look at her with kindness in his eyes. She didn't think she deserved anyone's kindness.

'Forgive me,' she mouthed, before passing beneath the arch.

The stench of fear and decay filled her nose and mouth. She gritted her teeth and walked on. Metal cages had been built into the spaces between the fractured marble columns of the once magnificent hall. Most were empty, whilst others contained piles of rotting cloth. Plckett knew that beneath the rags were decaying corpses or those who still waited for death to claim them. She shivered again. Braun grunted his amusement and shoved her towards a line of cages at the far end of the hall.

Men, women and children were tightly packed into each cage. Some of the mothers cradled their babies, trying to soothe their terrified cries. Others were empty-eyed and pale, shocked into stillness, unable to comfort their distraught children.

A woman reached through the bars and grabbed Plckett's wrist. 'For pity's sake, help us!'

She was about to reply when Kreel, Master of the Slavehold, stepped out of the deep shadows in front of her. Braun pushed her onto her knees then folded his ragged wings and paired arms in submission.

Kreel walked along the cages, his sleek black wings raised in a display posture. 'From now on you live only to serve the Craven. You have no other purpose,' he hissed.

Plckett flinched and shrank even lower, as the prisoners' protests were choked off by Kreel's thunderous cry.

'Silence, Slaves!'

She waited, not daring to move or speak until Kreel addressed her directly.

‘Healer Plackett,’ he snapped, ‘come here!’

Plackett crossed the short distance between them and bowed, barely breathing as she stared at his taloned feet.

‘Look up!’

She straightened up very slowly, careful not to make eye contact with the seven-foot tall Craven.

‘You have two days to heal any prisoners that are sick,’ Kreel paused and ran his thin, grey tongue around his beak-like mouth. ‘If you fail, they die.’

‘Yes, Master.’ She bowed again.

‘Braun, bring food and water for our healer.’

The old Craven scowled at her before scuttling from the slavehold. Braun saw it as demeaning to run errands for her and experience told her that he’d find some unpleasant way to repay her.

‘The suckling infants will be separated from their mothers, along with those who are too young to follow orders,’ Kreel continued, running his tongue over his sharpened teeth. ‘The juveniles will see to them. You will work with the remainder.’

Plackett took a deep breath. ‘Master, may I speak?’

Kreel nodded.

‘Master, couldn’t you let the mothers keep the babies? Then you’d have future workers without the need for costly raids,’ she pleaded.

‘That would take extra rations. Slaves must work, not rear puking younglings!’ Kreel’s eyes, red as garnets, bored into her and his head-comb of iridescent, green feathers rattled. ‘It’s unwise to question my decisions.’

‘I’m sorry, Master.’ She’d known what his answer would be but that didn’t silence the guilt that clamoured inside her.

‘You will sleep over there.’ He pointed with one of his upper arms at a low arch. ‘You know what must be done.’ Then he strode from the hall.

Plackett kept her back to the cages, gnawing on her lower lip whilst she waited for Braun. It wasn’t long before the prisoners began calling to her.

‘Free us! Let us out! Take my child . . . help us!’

Their cries tore at her. Knowing there was nothing she could do or say to help them, and unable to bear their desperate pleas, she ran. Reaching her appointed room she sank to the floor and wept for them: for the memories and dreams that would wither and die, until those who survived would remember nothing other than the mastery of the Craven. They would become like Plackett herself, devoid of history and of hope.

Eventually she could shed no more tears. She looked around. A single blanket lay in the middle of the room. She wanted to laugh at the idea that she could sleep when others suffered nearby.

The distinctive click of talon on stone announced Braun’s return. Wiping her sleeve across her face she went to meet him. Three immature males, with downy crest feathers, accompanied him. Their eyes blazed with excitement.

Dumping a leather bag and water-skin at her feet, Braun snarled, ‘Come!’

She hung back as he unlocked the cages. Men pushed their women and children behind them in a futile attempt to shield them from the hungry-eyed juveniles. Braun nodded and they shouldered their way inside. Her heart started banging against her ribs when one of them saw a frail old woman crouched in a corner. The juvenile grabbed her by the hair and dragged her out.

A broad-shouldered man, wearing a leather apron shouted, ‘Mother!’ He threw himself, fists flailing, at the Craven.

A few ragged voices urged him on.

The juvenile slammed him into the bars of the cage then shrieked as it slit the woman's throat. Prisoners screamed and bile, hot and bitter, surged into Plackett's mouth.

The woman's son leapt to his feet. 'Murderer!' he bellowed. Producing a knife from beneath his apron, he charged at the juvenile.

It howled its delight.

The man lunged forwards. The Craven dodged aside, snatched him up and hurled him onto his back. Dropping to its knees, it ripped his abdomen open from ribs to pelvis. It howled again at the smell of fresh blood.

Plackett retched and turned away only to be confronted by Braun.

'Let us harden your puny heart,' he croaked, grabbing her neck and twisting her round to watch the Craven snatch the babies from the fierce grip of their screaming mothers.

He held her immobile, toes barely touching the floor, as the juveniles carried the infants into a cage in the centre of the hall. Then they herded the older children into the cages opposite them.

Someone cried out, 'Stay strong and hope!'

'There is no hope!' Braun roared. Releasing Plackett, he gave the order to separate the men and women.

When this was done they were brought to her one at a time and she examined their mouths, hands, and joints. Most of them submitted in silence to her probing fingers. That made it easier for her. Talking meant that she'd wake up screaming in the night, wondering what had happened to the woman who'd just got married, or the man who'd sold his bull. It was better to know nothing.

'Please, what will happen to my baby?'

She glanced up at a young woman with black hair twisted into a thick plait. She looked no more than sixteen or seventeen, close to Plackett's own age. Her face was streaked with dirt and her brown eyes were red-rimmed.

'I can hear my baby crying. Why can't I feed her?' The intensity of her gaze made it impossible for Plackett to look away.

Plackett swallowed. There was no point in lying. 'They won't let you nurse your baby. The Craven see them as a drain on food and water. From now on you'll have to work hard to earn your own food.' She paused, trying to gauge if the woman had understood her.

'Are they going to kill my baby?'

Plackett's mouth went dry and her tongue felt as if it had swollen up. When she spoke her voice was a whisper. 'Yes.'

The woman screamed and doubled over as though she'd been punched in the stomach. Forcing herself upright she sobbed, 'When?'

'Soon. It'll be done quickly. When it's over, remember your child will be free of this place. You must concentrate on keeping yourself alive now.'

But Plackett could see the woman was no longer listening. Her lips moved silently and her fingers caressed a scrap of red shawl. She didn't take her eyes from it as the Craven led her away.

Plackett rubbed her own eyes. Desperate to be alone she stood up and walked over to Braun. He was leaning against a pillar, sharpening his teeth with a broken file.

'Please, Braun, I need to rest.'

'Why do I care what you need?'

'I've been working for hours. Kreel will be angry with both of us if I make mistakes,' she ventured.



He made to strike her with one of his upper arms. Then he pulled his bird-like face into a cruel smile. 'Get out of my sight. Tomorrow brings new opportunities, does it not?'

\*

Strong arms pulled Plackett from uneasy dreams.

'You're wanted!' Braun hissed.

'What for?' she mumbled, reaching for her pack.

'You'll find out.' The short grey feathers of his head comb rattled as he dragged her towards the door.

Braun set a fast pace through the darkened passages and tunnels of the ruined Citadel. Several times they found themselves scrambling over piles of fallen masonry, and they had to retrace their steps twice because their path was completely blocked by roof falls.

'Braun, where are we going?

'You'll see.' She could hear the grin in his voice.

After a few more sharp turns they were suddenly beneath the moon-bright sky and she recognised the silhouette of the old watch tower. Kreel and two Craven flesh-hunters were waiting for them. Her mouth went dry and her guts twisted.

Flesh-hunters had nothing but contempt for slaves. To them a slave was only useful for hunting practice. Panic squeezed her heart, making it falter. What did they want with her? Her legs felt insubstantial and began to shake. She crept back into the shadows behind Braun.

'Here's the healer,' he said, grabbing her elbow and shoving her forwards.

She fell onto her hands and knees in front of the flesh-hunters. She didn't move; she didn't even blink.

The flesh-hunter nearest to her raised one of his lower arms and pointed. 'The creature behind that wall was captured a few hours ago. We would know if it can provide us with sport.'

‘Tend the creature until it recovers or dies,’ Kreel added. He stopped speaking and scented the air. ‘The females are rising.’ Opening his wings, he spiralled up into the night sky followed, moments later, by the flesh-hunters.

Plackett stayed where she was, breathing hard and trying to coax her heart into a more normal rhythm.

‘Get on with it!’ Braun snarled.

She climbed to her feet and moved forwards. After two or three steps Plackett felt as if the air had somehow thickened. It was like trying to wade through quicksand or mud. The pressure continued to build around her, making her head feel like it was clamped in a vice. She pressed her palms to her forehead. As she did so splashes of colour burst in front of her eyes like exploding dandelion seeds. Then she heard the slap of wings and the whine of arrows above her. She threw her arms over her head and ducked.

The next thing she knew Braun was throwing her against the wall. ‘Move or I’ll strip the skin from your back!’

Plackett looked around. There was no-one else there, nothing to explain the sounds. She must be ill – a fever caught from one of the new prisoners. She began thinking about what herbs she’d need to settle a fever and felt the tension easing from her body as the familiar litany soothed her. She started to climb.

*‘It is you! Come, child.’* The voice was inside her head!

But that wasn’t possible, was it? No-one could speak directly into her thoughts. It had to be the fever. Yet that would be a rare gift – to speak and not be overheard. Deciding to ignore such foolish thinking, she turned to Braun.

‘Did you say something?’

‘Why would I need to speak to you, slave?’ he grunted.

‘Yes, Braun.’

‘It’s Master to you,’ he snapped, but from the way he kept looking up at the sky she could tell he’d lost interest in her.

*‘Get that creature away from here! We must speak alone.’*

The voice was so loud that she squeezed her hands over her ears in a futile attempt to blot it out. An image of a dozen flesh-hunters, diving onto something large that was trying to outrun them, forced its way into her mind. Their dark wings thrashed the leaden sky and their mouths were wide open, screeching. She shook her head and the vision was gone, leaving her breathless and trembling.

*‘I don’t have much time. Hurry!’*

She glanced at Braun. He wasn’t reacting as if he was hearing the voice. So it must be focusing on her alone, and the images of a Craven hunt might be a way to tell her that the voice belonged to the creature behind the wall. So it couldn’t be that much of a threat to her, lying injured – could it?

‘That animal will give us no sport,’ Braun muttered.

She heard disappointment and something close to desire in his voice. Braun must want to watch the mating rituals! She made her decision. ‘Braun, you know I’ve never disobeyed you. You could go and watch the females rising. I’ll keep quiet about it.’

His red-eyed gaze flicked over her body for an uncomfortably long time. ‘Bring Kreel’s anger down on me and I’ll make you pay in blood and screams!’ he snarled, before flying into the night.

*‘Come, child!’*

She struggled against the powerful urging in the voice and whispered, ‘Who are you?’

*‘You’ll only know if you climb the wall.’*

She didn’t move. Now that she was alone her curiosity was fading. If the creature could invade her mind, what else could it

do? It would be stupid to go to it, but to leave it in pain, close to death, would be denying her calling as a healer. Taking a deep breath, she finished the climb and dropped to the ground on the other side.

She gasped at the extent of the animal's injuries. Long claws had raked either side of its spine and its hindquarters were a mess of torn flesh. It looked like a horse, except that it was much deeper in the chest and had a wide bony plate across its forehead, with the bloody stump of a twisted horn protruding from it. She could see that it should have been the colour of moonlight on water, but most of its coat was blackened by dried blood.

Plackett closed her eyes and let her mind drift like a feather on the tides. Slowly, she summoned her healer sense. With each breath the familiar heat started to build around her heart. Soon it was beating far too fast and her sternum felt as if it was being wrenched from her chest. Knowing she was close to passing out, she put her hand on the creature's neck. The heat surged through her arm and into its body. In exchange red-hot pain exploded in the nerves of her hand, flaming its way into her chest.

The pain slashed at her mind and tore at her body, leaving her gasping for breath. She forced air into her lungs, taking in more of the pain as she did so. She knew from past healings that it was only a faint echo of the agony the horse-creature was suffering. Gritting her teeth, she tried to subdue it. But it was hopeless. It was as if she'd collided with a wall and her healer senses were turned aside.

*'If you attempt to heal me you'll die. I've only lingered in this foul place to meet with you. There are things you must know. You . . .'* It lapsed into exhausted silence, unable to complete the thought.

Plackett began stroking its neck. 'Peace, friend. Be at peace.'

The creature was barely clinging to life. It was hardly surprising that it was confusing her with someone else. When the spirit was close to death people and places became less fixed in the mind.

The creature struggled to lift its head and its voice caressed her thoughts again. *'My words are for you and no other. I know where and when I am. I journeyed far to find you.'*

'What do you mean?' she asked, drawn into the conversation despite her doubts about its state of mind.

It didn't reply.

'Answer me!' she cried, pinching its nostrils in an effort to rouse it. 'What do you want with me?'

Eventually the voice came again. There was a deep sadness in it. *'Child, you are far from your people.'*

'You know of my people? Who are they?' She was almost shouting.

*'The Freya live in a place of light and sorrow. Few of us have seen it. I cannot tell how you came to be here. Your gift for healing is why you still live, I think.'*

'I suppose so,' she replied. 'The Craven discovered I could sense what ails people and put me to work in the infirmary. The Craven keep me well fed because I'm valuable.'

*'Child, I am Stormkeeper. I am a Unicorn. We can see the outlines of the future and yours is not here. It can only be found with a creature imprisoned in darkness by your masters. She is a being of endless possibilities and she needs you. New magic is to be born in her.'*

'The only creatures kept in darkness are the grak. There are two of them. Men fly them into the Shaft to find the senket for the Craven. I see to them when they're injured. But they're ugly and foul-tempered. They can't be the ones you speak of.'

*'They fly, you say? The creatures I speak of are magnificent in the skies.'* Stormkeeper's voice was becoming less distinct.

‘Yes they fly, but only in the Shaft. They never see the sunlight. The Craven tell us they’re soulless. They say they’re stupid, dangerous brutes, fit only to seek out the senket.’

*Now I know what your masters believe, but what do you think of them?’*

‘I don’t think about them. I’ve tended wounds on their hides, but they’ve always been chained down and muzzled.’ She stopped, shocked by her own ignorance.

*‘Then you know almost nothing about them, except that the Craven appear to fear them.’*

‘But what have the grak to do with me?’ Plackett found it hard to keep the frustration from her voice.

There was another long pause, then, *‘One of these grak is already enslaved body and soul to the Craven. It has no echoes of beauty or goodness remaining. But the other is older. She clings to dreams and fraying memories. Her name is Roake. She is the one you must seek out.’*

‘But why should I?’

*‘For in helping her you will help yourself and your people; I see the path ahead clearly.’* Stormkeeper stopped speaking and his whole body shuddered beneath Plackett’s hand. *‘You must cut off the remains of my horn and grind it into powder. When you go to Roake, scatter the powder over her body. But do not use all of it. Do you understand?’*

‘Yes, but I’m not sure I should do it. If they caught me I’d be punished.’

*‘I did not give up my life to have my words dismissed!’* Stormkeeper hissed. *‘Child, I’m dying, and I am dying for your sake. Do as I ask. Make the powder and scatter it over the grak.’*

Plackett felt her cheeks burn as if she’d been slapped and she had to look away from Stormkeeper’s fierce blue eyes. ‘All right, I’ll take the horn.’

*‘Do I have your word?’*

‘Yes.’

*‘Thank you, child. You will soon face a time of great change. When this happens you must find the place where the moon weeps and pour the powder over your body. You must do this or you cannot end your peoples’ sorrow. Child, my pain is great. Let me pass into the bright lands.’*

Her fingers had grown very cold and she felt his spirit stretch and thin until it was nothing more than a gossamer thread, then it snapped, releasing his hold on life.

She stared at Stormkeeper for a long time after he died. If she was to take him at his word, there were secrets woven around the grak, but what had they to do with her? And how could she help her people if she didn’t know where they were? It was ridiculous to even think about such things when there was no way to escape the Craven. None of it made sense!

Plackett looked at the horn. She was tempted to leave it, but she’d given her word. There were very few things in Plackett’s life over which she had control, but that was one of them. She rummaged in her pack for a bone saw. On the fifth attempt the saw found its rhythm and she quickly removed the stump. Wrapping it in a strip of cloth, she shoved it into the bottom of her pack. Unable to look at the ruined unicorn any longer, she scrambled back over the wall and settled herself to wait for Braun.

It wasn’t long before the old Craven hurtled into the courtyard.

‘The creature’s dead,’ she announced.

Braun lifted his head, seeming to drink in the air. ‘The meat’s still fresh. It’ll make good eating.’ He stopped and listened. ‘Stand!’ he bellowed.

Kreel made a precise landing just in front of them. Plackett could see from the rich purple tone of his face that he must have been successful in the mating fights.

She bowed. ‘Master, the creature was beyond my help.’

‘No matter, the females will feed on the carcass. Braun, take her back to the infirmary,’ he said, dismissing them.

‘Yes, Master,’ she replied, stooping to pick up her bag.

She bit back sudden tears. Stormkeeper had sacrificed himself to speak with her and for what? He was nothing more than Craven meat! And yet, though the things he’d said were fantastical, there was a thread running through them all, something that was so rare in her life that she’d all but forgotten its name. Hope. He’d given her the idea that hope might be something worth living for and for that she was grateful.



## SYNOPSIS:

Fifteen year old Plackett, a Craven slave, isn't human. She's one of the Freya, a lost race created by a long-dead enchanter. When she comes of age she will grow white wings. But her people are cursed and soon she'll be denied the earth itself. Together with her friend, Talor, and the dragon, Rokeanor, she must find her creator's castle and undo the terrible curse.

## BIOGRAPHY:

As a child Rachel wanted to be a wolf, but as this was unlikely she had to make do with being herself. She currently lives and works in Cumbria, surrounded by sheep and green stuff. Rachel loves puffins, dragons and fantasy. Her house has far too many books in it.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"The detailed and richly visualized fantasy world is impressive."

"I'm not a huge fantasy person but this feels so intelligent I didn't want to put it down."

"There is a powerful sense of horror and despair in the scene with the slaves, fluently written with layers to it – clearly this is a fully realised world."



## BY THE LIGHT OF THE MOON by Rachel Quarry



### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY:

Rachel is a mature student working towards a diploma in children's book illustration at the London Art College. She has exhibited in student exhibitions and at Oxford Art Week.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"The character has lots of life, movement and personality. The use of tone makes this piece different and, although it feels somewhat familiar, this style is accessible and fun."

# FELIX MUNROE: HELL'S ANGEL

by Deborah Hewitt

(The totally true story of how I kidnapped the antichrist, got framed for assassination, murdered a seagull and nearly became a hero)

## **CHAPTER ONE: The Seagull's Revenge**

I'd like to say it all started with that stupid seagull but, to be honest, I'd say things really started to go wrong after Mr Fenner's funeral. Mr Fenner was my English teacher in my first two years at Sacred Heart. He died right in front of my class, giving a speech from Hamlet. Whatever you might have heard, I swear I had nothing to do with it.

Everyone from class 8A was invited to the funeral, and a few of us even went to the Wake the night before. That was when I first messed up. If you don't already know, a Wake is basically one last chance to party with whoever has snuffed it.

Mr Fenner was lying in his open coffin, right there in the living room of his house. There was a buffet with drinks and stuff alongside him, and a couple of kids from my class were trying to stuff chips into Mr Fenner's mouth when his relatives weren't looking. His mouth was stiff with Rigor Mortis so the chips were basically just getting mashed all round his lips. I didn't bother joining in because Fenner had always been pretty decent to me. He was the only teacher not to give me a single detention in two years.

The kids that weren't joining in with the chip attack were either freaking out about the dead body right in front of them or about the fact that they were standing in a teacher's living room.

None of that bothered me in the slightest. Besides, I was too busy looking at the coins.

“To pay the ferryman.”

“What?” I asked, turning round. There was an old guy right behind me. He was leaning over so close to me that his chin was practically resting on my shoulder. I jerked away from him but he stepped up close to me like we were about to start tangoing round the room.

“The coins,” he said. “They’re to pay the ferryman to sail the dead safely across the river Styx.”

“Oh. Right. That one looks pretty old,” I said, side-stepping him and nodding at Mr Fenner’s left eye.

The man nodded eagerly and approached the coffin. His hands were clasped together but I could see he had long nails, and he walked with a stoop so that his shoulders were up near his ears.

“It’s Roman,” he said, pulling me closer. His voice was hoarse and his breath reeked of garlic. I tried to look at his face when he spoke, but the more I tried the more my eyes stung, like I’d been chopping onions. Instead, I concentrated on the coins. There were two of them, one placed on each of Mr Fenner’s eyes. Fenner’s face was so sunken and gaunt that the coins were nestled right in his eye sockets like they were bronze eyeballs.

“The other one is a 1933 penny. One of the rarest and most valuable coins on the market.”

My ears pricked up when he said that. I had this habit, you see, of taking things. Not stealing. More like long-term borrowing.

“And he’ll be buried with them?” I asked.

“Of course!”

“Seems a bit of a waste to me.”

“They were his father’s. Big collection; lots of old coins, notes . . . stamps too.”

I nodded. I wasn't that interested in their history; I was more concerned with their future.

"I offered to buy them from him several times over the years, but Jim said he'd never sell at any price. Always wondered why," said the man, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "I suppose now I know."

"To pay the ferryman," I said. "Yeah, right." I wasn't really listening, and my fingers were starting to twitch.

"Like you say, though," said the man. "It's almost a waste."

He was looking at me like he was daring me to do something about it. Obviously I realise now he was a Greaser; I'd recognise the signs anywhere, but back then I didn't even know what a Greaser was, never mind how to spot one.

He left soon after that. So did the coins.

I told the kids from my class that they could get their hands on some vodka in the kitchen, and there was a mad scramble to get to it first. Fenner's relatives were busy talking amongst themselves. There weren't many of them; I'm guessing that's why his sister invited half my class along, to make up the numbers.

I reached into my jeans pocket and pulled out a handful of coins, discreetly picking two pennies out of the pile. I knelt over the coffin, pretending I was saying my final farewell to Mr Fenner, and carefully swiped the coins from his eyesockets. Within a matter of seconds, I'd made the switch and Fenner's coins were in my pocket, and my worthless coins were resting on his eyes.

I'd had to touch his face, and it was cold, and dry like paper. Aside from looking like he'd sucked his cheeks in, he looked much the same as he always had; long, thin face, pursed lips, sticky-out ears and a bald head where you could see every single bump and ridge on his skull.

I didn't even say sorry to him as I did it. I only felt guilty when I stood back and looked at him lying there in a box.

He looked small and shrunken. He was wearing a black suit that was about two sizes too big for him.

Anyway, so that was the start of it, but like I said, things really kicked off with the bird. I don't see how I could've known the seagull was going to explode; I was only following instructions from this video I'd seen on [www.nothingbettertodo.com](http://www.nothingbettertodo.com). I don't even think what happened was my fault, but it was that stupid bird that got me into all the other trouble.

If not for that bird, my life would probably have ended up nice and boring and at least sixty years longer; I wouldn't have found out any of that stuff about my mum, and I certainly wouldn't have ended up on the run from Harry Jones. He's the Devil, in case you didn't know. Let me tell you my story; then you can see if you think I stand a chance with the Wigs.

\*

A shiver of disgust rippled down my back. What a mess. Shaking my head, I clambered through my open bedroom window and landed gently on the roof of the conservatory.

A quick glance at the room below told me I wasn't in any trouble. Yet. The wicker chairs were empty, so mum was probably still slumped in front of the TV. She went crazy every autumn when dead leaves fell on the roof, so she'd probably chew my ears off if she saw this.

I inspected my handiwork with a low whistle. Well that was the last time I'd follow instructions off the internet when I was bored. In my defence, there had definitely been no mention of the seagull turning inside out. How was I supposed to know that the homemade bird-feed would make its stomach acids erupt like a volcano? Watching it burst open and splatter everywhere was like something out of a horror movie, only without the popcorn.

Pinkish slime was draped across the brickwork by my window. Spatters of blood had sprayed across the glass like

rubies, and there were feathers scattered everywhere. The lump of left-over seagull was slumped over near the edge of the conservatory like a set of discarded bagpipes. I'd need to bag all the body parts up before mum saw them.

I winced. Where was its head? I spun around, my eyes narrowed.

There! My shoulders sagged. It looked like a yellowy piece of plastic in the guttering; the beak, attached to a blank, staring eye and a feathered head. I reached out to pluck it from the gutter, but missed. With a grimace, I got to my knees and edged forwards, my fingers outstretched and grasping. I almost had it. I suddenly caught sight of the ground below and swung backwards to safety.

"Aha!" I hissed triumphantly, cradling the bird's head in my lap as though it was a baby. Then— "Uh oh . . ." as I started to slide down the slippery glass roof.

My legs kicked wildly as I tried to grab on to something to stop my descent. The grass loomed large in front of me. I could see the flowers my mum had carefully planted in the spring, and weirdly it crossed my mind that they were quite nice from a distance.

But as I fell headfirst to the ground, and my skull was only inches from cracking on the concrete paving stones, it wasn't the flowers or the grass that was the last thing I saw; it was the eye of the seagull still clutched in my fist. It was smirking at me as if to say, "An eye for an eye . . ."

I opened my mouth to scream, but the sound was lost in the almighty, brain-crunching SMACK that followed.

\*

I landed with a THWUMP in something like the Sahara Desert. Sand was in my hair, and my fingers dug into red clay.

"Is this . . . What's . . ." Hazy images flashed through my



mind as I lay there . . . Something to do with a yellow eye . . . and a glass floor . . . or ceiling, depending on which way you looked at it . . . and the whisper of lush grass rising up to meet me. With a yelp, I struck a hand to my head. Normal: no gash, no stitches, no bloody, caved-in skull, revealing bits of spongy white brain.

I didn't know where I was but the temperature had shot off the scale. If I was in a hospital, it must've been smack bang in the centre of Mount Vesuvius because the ground was blistering and steam was rising from it. I hid my mouth and nose behind my hands to shield them from the black smog that draped over me. I squinted through the haze and struggled to my feet.

There was a curtain of fire blocking off my path to the right. I wondered, in a vague way, if the hospital was on fire. And if it was also outdoors. And made entirely of sand. My skin felt like it was bubbling and melting off my face, and I stumbled forwards.

"Hello?" I croaked. "Is anybody . . .?"

My toes edged a crack in the dry earth and I stopped, balancing on the edge of a trench like something out of World War One. I peered down into the ditch and saw skulls lining the walls. Someone had drawn smiley faces on them with a black marker. Tasteful.

I stepped backwards. My only option, it seemed, was to go left. Also, there was a big neon sign saying 'Turn left for half-price bison burgers! Right this way!'

My trainers scuffed the ground as I walked, sending red dust spiralling into my eyes. I tried to wipe them, but only ended up rubbing more grit into my eyeballs. I walked on blindly, with one hand out in front of me, scrabbling against the wall and feeling the way.

"What can I get you?" came a woman's voice.

I blinked and rubbed my eyes again. I was in a 50s style fast-food joint. There was a waitress in front of me, wearing pigtails and roller skates. Everywhere was neon and chrome and red leather seats.

The best Elvis Presley impersonator I'd ever seen was sitting on top of the jukebox, wearily singing 'You ain't nothin' but a hound dog.' There was an actual hound dog – one the size of a small hippo – on the counter, swaying to the music and barking along.

"I said what can I get you?"

"Huh?" I said, trying to tear my eyes away from fake Elvis.

She shook her head and skated off. I didn't know what else to do so I took a seat at a counter that ran the length of the room. There was a girl on the stool next to mine. She was about my age and she had some kind of pink bedsheet wrapped round her. Maybe it was a nightdress, I dunno.

"Er . . . S'cuse me?" I said to the pot-bellied guy behind the counter. His burned, crooked chef's hat had slipped down over one of his eyes.

"Sorry, but . . . I'm pretty sure I should be in a hospital right about now. I fell. Off a roof."

The chef ignored me. He was frying up burgers and whistling.

"S'cuse me?!" I yelled. "Where am I?"

He stopped and turned to look at me. Grease was sliding down his forehead. I watched a drip on the end of his nose fall onto his top lip. He licked it and eyeballed me.

"You got a problem with your order, kid?"

I shook my head. My legs felt tingly. "I've not . . . I've not ordered anyth—"

"You got a problem, you take it up with Celia. I'm busy. You don't like your meat? Tough. We got three kinds of meat here, kid. Burned, rare, or *you*."

I nodded rapidly, and pushed my stool away from the counter. None of this was real. I was either in a parallel universe or a coma. Before I could get far enough away, he leaned over and grabbed my wrist. He yanked me forward, inspecting my hands.

“You know, I got this new recipe for a finger dip, but no ingredients,” he said, pinching my thumb. “With ten fingers, you’ve got plenty to spare.”

I tried to wrench my hand back but it might as well have been stuck in cement. He forced my knuckles into his mouth and looked ready to gnaw my fingers off.

“Let him go, Maurice, or I’ll bite *your* hands off. And your tail,” said a small voice.

The girl beside me had slid from her stool. Her arms were folded across her chest and she tapped her foot.

The chef released me with a wrench.

“You ain’t no fun no more, Miss Lucy,” he muttered.

“Yes well,” she said airily, “I *am* nearly thirteen now.”

“Where on earth am I?” I asked.

“Oh, nowhere on earth. Tec’nically speaking,” said the girl.

“Yeah, kid. Welcome to Hell.” Maurice snorted and slouched into the back of the kitchen.

The girl rolled her eyes. “This is Hell’s Kitchen.”

I looked at her. “Funny name for a burger bar.”

She ignored me. “And *that* – Maurice – was Hell’s Chef. He’s all right once you get to know him.”

“*He tried to . . . !*” I stopped. “Oh right. Funny. He wasn’t really going to, was he?”

The girl smiled at me. “Of course he probably wasn’t.”

“Probably?”

“Of course. That’s what I said, didn’t I?”

“But—”

“Just, you know, don’t go looking in the barrels he keeps in the pantry, that’s all. Who’re you?”

“I’m . . . er . . . Felix Munroe. So what’s this place then? Some kind of new 50s themed café or what? The last time I was in the hospital you were lucky to get a packet of own-brand crisps.”

“You don’t look like the others,” she said.

“Other what?”

“Damned.” She nodded at Celia, the stick-thin waitress, as she skated past. “For gluttony. She’s forced to work here for eternity.”

I screwed my face up. All right, so the chef was a psycho but the place didn’t seem so bad.

“I’m pretty sure she could get another job,” I said. “There’s a café round my way that’s always looking for staff. I could put a good word in for—”

The girl threw her head back and laughed.

“What’s so funny?”

She studied me and I felt like my face was melting again. “You’re one of the new EROs?”

“I dunno. Am I?”

“Yes,” she said. “You are. I’ll take you to where you’re supposed to go, if you like. It’s just next door.”

I nodded dumbly. I didn’t really see what this ERO-thing had to do with getting me to the hospital, but I was starting to go cross-eyed trying to figure out what was going on.

“I’ve got concussion,” I told her. “I fell right on my head, you know. What’s ERO stand for anyway? Emergency Repair . . . something-or-other? Are you taking me to casualty?”

“Stop babbling,” she snapped. She grabbed me by the arm and pulled me after her, out onto the street. If I didn’t look too closely – if I ignored the orange, smoggy sky, and the swooping bats – I could have been on any street in any city.

It's hard to explain the sense of certainty, but I knew, right then, that I was dead. My legs turned to jelly and I stared around me with my eyes on stalks. The signs weren't good. I didn't see any pearly white gates or people floating past strumming harps.

"Oh Felix," Lucy hissed, "we're going to have so much fun! I've always *wanted* a pet!"

## **CHAPTER TWO: How a Twelve-Year-Old Became My Hellish Overlord**

Skyscrapers rose either side of me like crooked teeth. Roads threaded between them, spewing a river of flowing metal and black exhaust fumes. Beeping cars skidded across the roads, weaving around uncovered manholes and trying to avoid the toxic gas; it was erupting from the holes like volcanic geysers, taking out cars at random. It had to be the world's most twisted whack-a-mole game.

A souped-up Merc, with the windows wound down and a rhythm guitar wailing from its speakers, swerved over a manhole and got blasted by the gas. It disintegrated on impact. A black cloud mushroomed up from the manhole and smoking metal and rubber rained down, bouncing off the tarmac and pot holes.

Without even a glance at the Merc's remains, a man in a bowler hat stopped at the kerb in front of us and whistled for a cab. A New York taxi, painted red, sliced up the pavement and slammed into him. His legs got swept from under him and he somersaulted onto the roof. Still clinging to his briefcase, he bent over to the driver's window and roared, "Bezaliel Boulevard!"

I shook my head and stepped away from the roadside. Beside Hell's Kitchen was the tallest building I'd ever seen. All steel and reflective, silvery windows, it stabbed the skyline like a giant needle. The plaque beside the front door read 'Office of Infernal Affairs.'

It had a revolving door that led into its foyer. The doors were made of thin, sharp-edged metal, and they spun so fast it looked more like a blender than an entrance. I watched as a man in front of me mistimed his entry and got spliced in two. His torso thumped to the floor, about a metre away from his legs.

I nearly swooned right there and then, like some lovesick housewife in a black and white movie, but I caught Lucy grinning at me and swallowed the bile that was racing up my throat. This was one sick place. The abandoned legs jumped through the doorway on their own and waited patiently in the foyer. The spliced man tutted as if he was just inconvenienced and checked his watch. Then he pushed up onto his elbows and dragged himself inside.

If it wasn't for the fact that I was sure I was dead, and probably didn't have any, I'd say the blood drained from my face. Lucy giggled and said, "Oh come on, you're not chicken, are you?"

I cleared my throat and backed away. "Well actually—"

She rolled her eyes and yanked me forwards. The doors whipped round and round like a cyclone, and I looked for a gap. I couldn't find one.

Lucy scooted out of sight, and the next thing I knew, she'd shoved me in the back and I was hurtling towards the blur of grinding metal. I clamped my eyes shut and tucked my arms and legs in. I sailed into a pocket of safety and the doors spun me into the foyer, hurling me out like a shot-putt. I thudded onto marble tiles, landing on my side. My cheek was squashed flat to the floor and I watched as Lucy skipped gaily out of the doors and pranced over to me.

"There," she said. "That wasn't so bad, was it? Come on, we'll get the lift."

I got to my feet and staggered after her, through a huge, mirrored foyer. She led the way into a passageway behind the reception desk, and pressed the lift button.

"You *are* Lucy, right?" I asked. "That's what Maurice . . . the chef . . . called you."

She nodded and I sank back onto the green stripy wallpaper.

"Why'd he call you *Miss* Lucy?"

"Because I'm a girl, I suppose. If he went round calling me *Mister* Lucy then both of us would look pretty stupid."

I opened my mouth to speak but was distracted. The stripes on the walls were wriggling. I spun around to inspect them, trying to work out what the pattern was, when a green stripe slithered across the wallpaper and—

"It *bit* me!"

Lucy glanced over her shoulder. "S'what snakes do, isn't it? How'd *you* like it if someone came nosing up at you like you were something in a zoo?"

I lurched backwards, sucking furiously on my pricked index finger.

"I want to go home. I want—"

The lift plummeted down in front of us as though it had been thrown from the sky. Clouds of dust billowed up from the concrete. Lucy cranked open the concertina grille and we walked in; me, reluctantly, Lucy with the enthusiasm of an excited puppy.

The lift was basically a cage made of metal beams. As it jerked upwards, I was able to peer through them and watch the ground fall away from me. I grabbed a vertical beam and held on.

Loud puffing noises echoed along the lift shaft and I looked up.

"Lucy," I murmured, "did you know . . . did you, in fact, *know*, that this lift is not . . . mechanical?"

She grinned. "Oh them? It's part of their damnation."

I managed to nod. The two tonne metal cage I was standing in was being pulled up by a series of ropes . . . and pulling those ropes were the damned. Some of them looked pretty poorly equipped, muscles-wise, to lift a plastic spoon never mind a huge steel lift. I closed my eyes. You couldn't die twice, right?

"Don't worry," said Lucy as the lift jerked and one of the sinners lost his footing and nose-dived off the edge. "People hardly ever get hurt by this lift." The damned guy dropped down the shaft, ricocheting off the walls as he fell. Lucy's smile didn't falter.

Each floor we passed had small ledges and doorways where we could have jumped out, and plaques announcing what lay beyond each door. Inhumane Resources, The Department of Felony, The Bureau of Beguile . . . Finally, we were dragged up to a narrow, cracked ledge, and stopped.

"This is us," said Lucy. "The Department of Misdemeanours." She slid the door across and we jumped onto the ledge.

She swung the door to the department open and it clanged loudly. Grey smoke poured into the lift shaft and flames licked at the sides of the doorframe. I ducked.

"Welcome to your new life!" she said.

With that, she stepped through the doorway. It would have been quite impressive if she hadn't tripped up on the bottom of her dress and bellyflopped onto the floor.

"I don't need any help," she snapped, batting away my outstretched hand and jumping to her feet. She stood by the doorframe, her forehead covered in soot. There was a faint smell of burnt hair.

"You might as well come in then," she scowled, and flounced into the room.

I steeled myself and stepped in after her.



## SYNOPSIS:

When Felix Munroe bites the dust and finds himself damned to Hell for all eternity, he does what any teenager would do. He kidnaps the antichrist, Lucy Jones, and holds her to ransom. But unluckily for him, he's inadvertently saved the twelve-year-old brat from an assassination attempt. Now Felix and Lucy must thwart a plot to take over Hell and save Felix's skin. Cliché or not, all Hell is about to break loose . . .

## BIOGRAPHY:

Deborah has just finished training to be a teacher and has discovered that whoever promised her lots of holidays and 3:30pm finishes was an absolute liar. Her free time is spent writing, taking photographs, sleepwalking and attempting to learn the guitar. She has two noisy dogs and two noisier children.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"The opening is very interesting – it's an odd and very intriguing choice to open at a funeral, which quickly catches your attention and makes you read on."

"The fact that the hero dies in the first chapter, subverting reader expectations and immediately creating interest, is a great way to start the book."

"Great voice, right from the start, makes you want to read on. I love the idea of a novel set in Hell, and Felix is the boy to tell it."

# TO DESTINY OR DEATH!

by Maureen Lynas

## CHAPTER ONE

Prince Bob was a baby for exactly six months, five weeks, four days, three hours, two minutes and one second.

On the morning of his Wishing Day, as Queen Evangeline fed him, washed him, and brushed his baby-fine hair, she had no idea that soon, her son's head would be as bald as his bottom.

'Look at his little curls, my love,' she said to King Fred. 'Surely they are the curliest curls in the land.'

'Of course they are, my little dumpling,' said the king, as he sprinkled his son's bottom with baby powder. 'But what about these dimples. Are they not the finest bottom dimples in the world?'

Prince Bob's parents inspected Prince Bob's bottom and agreed that he did indeed have the finest and best bottom dimples in the world. Then, they declared that they were the luckiest parents in the universe.

King Fred pinned the baby into a nappy and added a pair of frilly green pants, completely unaware that he was seeing his son's dimples for the very last time. He was also completely unaware that the terrible thing about to happen to the tiny baby prince would be – all his fault.

Half an hour before the fairy godmothers were expected, the king placed the baby in his cradle, under the large golden clock at one end of the ballroom. Prince Bob's eyes followed the swing of the shiny pendulum as it ticked away his last minutes. Tick, tock, tick, tock.

By the time the courtiers arrived, looking posher than posh, and sparklier than fireworks, Prince Bob had twenty minutes left.

A long table, stretching down the middle of the ballroom, creaked under the weight of food and dishes. There were quail eggs, stuffed geese, rabbit pie, pumpkin soup, and the king's favourite, roasted frog legs with a spicy garlic dip.

The queen was busy ticking a list of *things to check before the fairy godmothers arrive*.

'Wishing cake – three layers – chocolate, carrot and fudge,' she said. Tick.

King Fred picked off a tiny rosebud and nibbled it. 'Tasty, my sweet.'

'Extra large punchbowl – full to the brim – orange, lemon and pineapple juice.' Tick, went the queen again. She dipped the ladle in and offered King Fred a sip.

He took it and sipped. 'So refreshing, my little jam doughnut.'

'Chairs for the fairy godmothers – one, two, three, f—' Queen Evangeline took the ladle from the king, who was still sipping, and dropped it back into the punchbowl with a splash. 'Three! My goodness, my love. You've only arranged *three* chairs for the fairy godmothers. We need another. At once.'

The king picked up a frog leg and took a nibble. 'But, there *are* only three fairy godmothers, my little lemon tart. Tabitha, Tilly and Fay.'

'No,' said Queen Evangeline, taking the leg away. 'Remember, my love. There are *four* fairy godmothers. Hagatha, Tabitha, Tilly and Fay.'

'But, jumping jelly beans,' said King Fred. 'I thought The Horrible Hagatha was dead! I thought a troll had snapped her wand and chewed her up or something.'

The queen shook her head.

'But galloping calamities! I didn't invite her!' Before the queen could finish her gasp, he added, 'She's going to be very cross, isn't she?'

The baby jumped and let out a cry as the chamberlain banged his staff on the floor and announced, ‘Your royal highnesses, dukes and duchesses, ladies and gentlemen, please welcome – the fairy godmothers.’

Tabitha and Tilly swept into the ballroom, crying, ‘Happy Wishing Day!’

With a flick of their wands, they filled the air with hundreds of magic kisses. Lips as bright as berries flew around the room on tiny wings, kissing the lords and ladies, dukes and duchesses and even the chamberlain, before dissolving into fairy dust.

The baby prince laughed as a kiss burst on his lips with a pop and a fizz. He licked it off as if it was honey. Tick, tock, went the clock.

Fay’s dress floated around her like wispy clouds on a summer breeze and the sweetest of perfumes followed her into the room. White rose petals fell from nowhere, gliding down like snowflakes, melting as they touched the delighted courtiers.

Everyone, except the king and queen, who were still staring at each other in shock, echoed Fay’s sigh as she settled into the last chair on the left of the baby’s cradle. She had a faraway look about her. As if the ballroom was just a part of here and now and she could see beyond it.

Tabitha was first to give her wish. Everyone leaned forward, keen to hear what the fairy godmother would bestow on the baby.

‘I wish, Prince Robert Albert Hubert Schubert, Prince of Palaver—’

Suddenly, the chamberlain’s staff banged again, interrupting Tabitha. He cleared his throat before announcing, ‘The fairy godmother, Hagatha.’

The queen gripped the king’s arm with both hands, almost pulling it off. Everyone looked to the open door. They waited.

But no one came through. No fairy godmother, no kisses, no petals, nothing.

The baby yelled and they all turned back to the cradle.

But the cradle was empty.

With four minutes and thirty seconds left on the golden clock, Prince Robert Albert Hubert Schubert, Prince of Palaver, had gone.

## CHAPTER TWO

But he hadn't gone far.

'My baby!' cried the queen, pointing upwards. 'He's dangling! He's dangling from the chandelier!'

Everyone gasped.

Prince Bob was indeed dangling upside down between the twinkling crystals. At least twenty feet above the floor. He reached his chubby arms with their dimply elbows towards his mother and said his very first word. 'Mama!'

But the queen couldn't reach him. Not even when she jumped.

A voice filled the ballroom, the sort of voice that makes eardrums wince and faces frown.

'What a beautiful baby,' it said. 'Don't invite *Hagatha* to the beautiful baby's Wishing Day. Don't let Hagatha join the feast. Let's see, what do we have? Tasty little quails eggs. Mmm.'

The eggs exploded, covering the courtiers in eggshell and slightly runny yolks.

'Pumpkin soup. How lovely.'

The soup bubbled and splashed like a spitting volcano.

'Roasted frog legs. Tasty.'

Suddenly, the legs started jumping around the plate as if they were still alive.

'How delicious. All my favourites. But you didn't want *Hagatha's* wish spoiling things. Did you?'

The king tried to speak but Prince Bob suddenly left the chandelier and bounced in the air, his arms and legs flapping.

‘Let’s not tell *Hagatha* about the beautiful bouncing baby’s party.’

Prince Bob looked confused, he loved bouncing, so he wanted to laugh, but he hated the voice, so he wanted to cry. Suddenly, with two minutes left to tick and tock, he dropped towards the floor.

The queen shrieked.

The king leapt.

The crowd gasped as the baby fell towards a pile of cushions conjured up by Tilly.

An invisible hand grabbed Prince Bob, catching him, keeping him just out of reach.

‘Look!’ cried King Fred.

The air around the baby was changing, darkening, thickening. Something appeared out of the blur, just above the prince.

Black eyes. Tufty eyebrows drawn together in an angry frown. A rotten grey strawberry of a nose, wizened and pitted. Then flesh, pale and squashy like uncooked pastry. Thin lips tinged with grey. Last of all, Hagatha’s black, straight hair dragged itself into a bun at the top of her head, pulling her skin tight.

‘Babies stink.’

Her wand appeared out of nowhere, gripped in bony fingers. It poked the baby prince. He winced, his chin wobbling as her scary head came nearer.

‘I hate stinky babies. Always gurgling, always grinning.’

The baby looked down at the crowd and his face crumpled. He spoke his second, and last, word. ‘Dada.’

‘Ha!’ said Hagatha. ‘Not smiling now, are you? Look at you! You look like a . . . frog!’ The wand pointed straight at the baby’s bare chest.

Tabitha cried, ‘Stop!’ Her own wand aimed directly at the floating head. ‘Put the baby down, Hagatha. The king and queen have made a serious error in not inviting you but I *am* sure it was just a mistake. Isn’t that true, your majesties.’

The queen nodded, not daring to speak in case she said the wrong thing and angered the fairy godmother more.

‘Oh, definitely,’ said the king. ‘All my fault. Definitely my fault. It’s a funny thing. I thought you were dead. Killed by a troll or something. So I just forgot all about you.’

Hagatha’s face froze. The crowd gasped as an icy chill passed over the room, touching each and every one of them. The air around the fairy godmother turned dark and stormy. Her wand crackled with energy as she pointed it directly at King Fred.

‘No!’ cried Tilly, her wand sparkling. ‘No harm shall come to King Fred.’

Hagatha paused. Fingers twitching. Her voice slow and steady. ‘Fear not. I shall not harm King Fred.’

She lowered her wand slightly.

‘I shall merely give him a reason never to forget me again. In fact, I can guarantee he will remember the name of Hagatha for the rest of his life!’

Her head vanished. Leaving her bony fingers clutching the wand.

Prince Bob looked confused. Where had the scary head gone?

The wand flashed. But not at King Fred.

‘My baby!’ cried Queen Evangeline. ‘What has she done to my baby?’

Imprisoned in a swirling ball of light, Prince Bob floated above their heads. The light grew, dazzling the courtiers. The ball spun, faster and faster, until the baby was a blur.

Then, exactly six months, five weeks, four days, three hours, two minutes and one second after he was born, Prince Bob screamed.

The ball exploded.

Smoke filled the ballroom

Everyone yelled, shouted, panicked.

Over the chaos, the queen heard a splash and the king cry, 'He's fallen in the punch! He's fallen in the punch!'

Another flash, from Tabitha's wand this time, and the smoke cleared, revealing King Fred fishing about in the large punch-bowl, while everyone else ran around not knowing what to do.

'I can't find him. I can't find him. There's just his pants!'

He lifted up Prince Bob's soggy, frilly green pants, dripping with fruit juices.

'He's gone!'

'No!' cried the queen.

'Jumping jellybeans,' yelled the king, dropping the pants back into the punchbowl. 'Look! There's something at the bottom of the fruit juice.'

He dipped the ladle in and lifted up a coughing, spluttering, half-drowned creature.

'It's a frog!'

### **CHAPTER THREE**

'Prince Bob is a frog! Prince Bob is a frog! What'll we do? Prince Bob is a frog!' cried the king. He dashed around the ballroom holding out his son towards anyone and everyone. 'Somebody turn him back! At once! Guards! Find Hagatha! Everyone out! Man the barricades! Pull up the drawbridge! Sound the alarm! Polish the swords!'

The chamberlain ushered the terrified posh folk in their posher than posh outfits out of the ballroom, while the palace



guards stabbed their pointy lances and sharp swords into the air at random.

‘Take that! And that!’ they cried.

‘Goodness me,’ said Tilly to Tabitha, watching the chaos. ‘Perhaps we should’ – she waved her wand – ‘stop this.’

The king froze, leaping over a chair. The queen froze, fainting over the cushions. The chamberlain, the soldiers, and the last few courtiers froze in a whole host of odd poses.

Silence.

Tabitha took the frogprince from his father’s hands and placed him back in his cradle. Her sisters gathered round.

‘Heavens!’ said Tilly. ‘That is a very bizarre frog.’

‘Colourful,’ agreed Tabitha.

Fay just looked.

Prince Bob lay on his back, no bigger than the palm of Tabitha’s hand, with shiny green skin, blue legs and orange feet.

‘Sticky little creature, isn’t he,’ said Tilly, as she touched his feet. Instead of toes, Prince Bob had little pads that clung to Tilly’s fingers like tacky glue.

Tabitha tapped him with her wand and he woke, blinking at them through red and black eyes.

‘Do you think he knows he’s a frog?’ asked Tilly.

The frogprince flicked out his tongue and wrapped it round Tabitha’s wand, pulling it out of her fingers. He tried to chew the end.

‘Probably not,’ said Tabitha, pulling her wand back. ‘Not yet, anyway. No, no, little frogprince, you must not break my wand. So now, the question is, what do we do about it?’ They both looked at Fay.

Fay stared into the distance then touched her wand to Prince Bob’s bare chest. A golden mark spread across his soft green skin. She spoke.

‘Robert Albert Hubert Schubert, Prince of Palaver, you must remain a frog. I cannot undo this spell, only alter it.’

Tabitha and Tilly glanced at each other and then back at Fay as she continued.

‘You must remain a frog until the night of your eighteenth birthday when, at the last stroke of midnight, you must kiss your True Love on her berry-red lips. Then, and only then, will you return to human shape.’

Hagatha’s voice screeched across the ballroom. ‘How touching! Fay, to the rescue!’

The fairy godmothers shielded the baby with their bodies. They aimed their wands at nothing.

‘True Love. Ha! He’ll never find True Love. And if he kisses anyone *but* his True Love, then . . . he . . . will . . . DIE!’

‘But if he succeeds,’ cried Fay, her face darkening, her hair swirling, ‘then you, Hagatha, will be punished for this horrendous deed! And the punishment shall fit the crime.’ Blue streaks exploded from her wand, hitting the chandelier.

The crystals tinkled as sparks drifted down on the fairy godmothers; it seemed as if the very palace was holding its breath, waiting for a reply.

None came.

Eventually, they looked back at Prince Bob.

‘But where will he find his True Love?’ whispered Tilly, stroking the little frogprince’s head.

Fay swayed and closed her eyes, putting her wand back to the baby’s chest.

‘You will find your True Love . . . at the Castle of the Rowan Tree. You must kiss her . . . or remain a frog forever.’

‘But how will he know who she is?’ asked Tabitha.

Fay sighed and considered for a moment.

‘When True Love is near, you shall speak as a man. Until then, you shall speak as a frog,’ She took her wand away.

‘He’s going to need our help,’ said Tilly, looking down at the tiny frogprince. She touched her wand to his chest. A silver mark appeared next to Fay’s. ‘I wish you, Prince Robert Albert Hubert Schubert . . . determination. May you never give up. Not even in moments of deepest, darkest despair.’

‘He’s sure to have them,’ said Tabitha, a bronze mark spreading from her wand. ‘So, Prince Robert Albert Hubert Schubert, I wish you bravery. May you face the direst danger with a strong heart and be the bravest of the brave.’

‘That’s all we can do,’ said Tilly. ‘The rest is up to him.’

## CHAPTER FOUR

The frogprince grew, in age, but not in size. And his parents loved him.

‘Look how he climbs with his sticky little feet, my sweet,’ said King Fred, as his son climbed to the top of the tallest tower in the castle. ‘Surely he is the best frogprince in the *world*.’

‘And look how he swings through the trees, by only his tongue, my love,’ said Queen Evangeline. ‘Surely, he is the best frogprince in the *universe*!’

‘And look at that leap, my little dumpling,’ said King Fred, as Prince Bob leapt onto the top of the chamberlain’s head. ‘Surely that is the greatest leap made by any frogprince in the entire *history* of the universe!’

‘And, er, look at him swim, my sweetness.’ Queen Evangeline crossed her fingers as the frogprince dived bravely into the pond. Everyone waited. And waited. And waited. Until the queen couldn’t bear it any longer and shouted, ‘Save him!’

King Fred dashed to the rescue, fishing his coughing and spluttering son out of the pond with a net.

‘Maybe next time,’ he said.

The frogprince nodded, and spat out a lump of pondweed. Definitely will, he thought. Definitely do it next time.

One day, to his parents’ amazement and delight, Prince Bob picked up a pencil in his sticky fingers and began to write.

*Bob want slugs,* said the first note.

*Bob want more slugs,* said the second.

*Bob loves slugs,* said the third.

But then one day he wrote.

*Wy Bob frog?* And Queen Evangeline made King Fred tell him all about the Wishing Day. From that moment, all of his notes were about finding his True Love.

*Where girl?*

*Shal Bob go look?*

*Bob brave. Bob never giv up. Ever.*

King Fred and Queen Evangeline sent out messengers, they sent out heralds, they sent out search parties but no one could find the Castle of the Rowan Tree or Prince Bob’s True Love.

They offered silver, they offered gold, they offered titles and land, but no one could bring them any information at all.

Meanwhile, to keep busy, and to show that he was more than just a frog, Prince Bob wrote poetry for his True Love.

*My name is Bob.*

*I am no slob,*

*A man I am, no frog.*

He improved as the years passed.

*To kiss your lips would be so great*

*You’d save me from an evil fate.*

*So don’t be shy, no need to cry*

*I am no frog, I am a guy!*

Birthdays came and went and eventually Prince Bob’s seventeenth birthday arrived. He was given a crimson waistcoat,

the colour of rowanberries, and a sword, sharper than any needle ever made. But of his True Love, there was still no sign.

So, on the very next morning, he buckled his sword over his waistcoat and wrote, *Croaky, moaky, Father! Time's running out! I must leave to find the princess myself. Please can I borrow the carriage?*

'By yourself?' squeaked Queen Evangeline as she read the note, after King Fred. 'You can't possibly go by yourself.' She turned to the king. 'He can't possibly go by himself. He'll get lost down a gully, or swept away by a river, or eaten by a cat. *You* won't allow it.'

Prince Bob had another note already written, especially for his father.

*Leaping leapfrogs, Father! How can I find my True Love at the Castle of the Rowan Tree if I don't go myself! Don't you see? That's why you're still searching after seventeen years! I'm the only one who can find her. Me. Her True Love. I must face the direst danger! I must face the deepest despair! It is my destiny! To destiny or death!*

The king looked at his brave and determined son, this tiny frogprince who he loved more than himself, and came to a decision.

'My darling dumpling,' said the king, holding Queen Evangeline's hand. 'If our son is ready to face his destiny, then he must face it. And there's only one thing we can do.' The king paused. 'We must face it with him. We must pack.'

They filled fifteen coaches and six carts. Presents for True Love, maps, guidebooks, food, tents. Finally, they said their goodbyes and set off with one hundred soldiers, twenty-three servants, and six cooks.

Together, they travelled the world in search of the Castle of the Rowan Tree. Up into the mountains, down into the valleys, wearing away their carriage wheels and the horses' shoes.

And all the time asking the same question, over and over again.

‘Have you heard of the Castle of the Rowan Tree? Have you heard of the Castle of the Rowan Tree? Have you heard of the Castle of the Rowan Tree?’

Bob’s notes were very cheerful at first.

*Hurrah! By croaky, we’re on our way. We’re bound to find her in the next valley!*

*Never mind. Let’s leap on! We’re bound to find her in the next city.*

*She’ll be over the next mountain. I just know it. Keep going, Mother. We’re bound to find her soon.*

*Flipping frog’s legs! Does this valley look familiar?*

*Is that a Rowan tree I see before me? No?*

*Let’s try here.*

*What about here?*

*Where are we now?*

The night before Prince Bob’s eighteenth birthday, they were high in the mountains. The wind was howling, rain lashed at their tents and the food was almost gone. Everyone was sneezing and coughing and the queen lay shivering in a bundle of blankets.

‘We’ve failed,’ she whispered.

The king was desperately inspecting a map with a magnifying glass and didn’t answer.

Queen Evangeline glanced over at her son. He was fast asleep.

The king put the magnifier down and whispered back. ‘There is no Castle of the Rowan Tree. Not on this map. Not on this mountain. We’ve failed. Our son will have to live the rest of his life, a frog.’

‘At least he’ll be alive. At least he won’t kiss the wrong princess. And DIE,’ whispered the queen.

‘Well, that’s something to be thankful for.’ The king folded his map, wrapped himself in blankets and tried to sleep.

Prince Bob had been pretending to sleep and had heard

the whispers. In his head, he knew they were right. It was safer to accept being a frog. But in his heart, he just knew he had to go on. So, when his parents finally fell asleep, he wrote one last note on his one last scrap of paper:

*Dear Mother and Father,  
Thank you for trying,  
Your loving son, Bob.*

And he went out alone, into the darkness, the wind, and the rain.

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

Prince Bob climbed to the top of the tent, struggling against the flapping canvas. He wrapped his tongue around the tip of the tent pole to stop blowing away and braced himself against the wind that battered his back.

A flash of lightning lit up the ancient forest of oak and chestnut trees that lay below.

The Castle of the Rowan Tree is in that forest, thought the little frogprince, as the world went dark again. I just know it is. And by croaky, I'm going to find it. Then I'm going to kiss my True Love and become—

The wind snatched at Prince Bob's waistcoat. Filling the pockets like a kite.

Then, it snatched Prince Bob.

For a second, he hung on to the tent pole, his tongue stretching, his body flapping like a flag. But, with a great whoosh, the wind dragged him away. Away from the ancient forest, spinning him through the air until he had no idea what was up and what was down.

Then, something hit his head. And everything went black.

He came to, stuck in the branches of a tree, sunlight shining through the leaves. There was a big bump on the top of his head, scratches on his arms, and his waistcoat hung on his shoulders like a damp rag.

He rubbed his eyes and looked around. At first, he thought he had spots before his eyes. That the knock had made him see oddly. But then as he focussed properly, he realised they weren't spots. They were berries! They were the biggest, brightest berries he'd ever seen. Berries that matched his rowanberry waistcoat exactly.

By croaky, thought the frogprince. I rather think I've landed in a rowan tree!

He crawled to the end of the branch and looked out onto a valley. He gasped. Dawn was breaking but Prince Bob hardly noticed it, or the thunderclouds in the distance.

Hundreds, no, thousands of rowan trees lay before him. And right in the middle of the valley, poking up from the trees, stood a castle. A fairy-tale castle of turrets and towers, with flags waving as if they were greeting him and saying come on, Prince Bob. We're waiting for you.

He couldn't move.

For a second.

Then . . . he shouted.

‘MOAKY, CROAKY. ROWAN CASTLE TREE IS IT!’



## SYNOPSIS:

Prince Bob is born a baby – which is good. Then he's turned into a frog – which is bad. But! If he kisses his True Love, he'll be a man – which is excellent. But! If he kisses the wrong princess, he'll die – which is terrible.

Will this end with the evil Hagatha's Kiss of Death, or will the prince find the right lips at the right moment for the right kiss?

Yes, by croaky, he will!

## BIOGRAPHY:

Maureen Lynas is a full-time author and slave to her characters, who bully her into writing picture books and novels for 7–9 yrs. One day they may allow her to write serious dystopian stuff, but for now she's stuck with books about bottoms, burps and magic kisses.

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## JUDGES' COMMENTS:

"You gave us super characters – the King and Queen especially . . ."

"The author has a lovely humorous style which gives the narrative a lovely flow."

"Hagatha is wonderfully scary and evil (great name, too!). I love the notes and poems frog-Bob writes."

"Really child-friendly voice and sense of fun about this."