

UNDISCOVERED VOICES

from SCBWI British Isles and Europe

SPONSORED BY WORKING PARTNERS



2014
EDITION

A PROJECT OF SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

UNDISCOVERED VOICES

The fourth anthology of unpublished
children's fiction and illustration
by SCBWI British Isles and
Europe members

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



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FROM CHRIS RIDDELL

WHO WOULD BE A WRITER? THE LONG HOURS HUNCHED OVER YOUR DESK, BATTLING THE DEMONS OF DOUBT, INDECISION AND CATASTROPHIC MISJUDGEMENT. FINALLY, BATTLE WON, YOU SEND YOUR WORK OUT INTO A HOSTILE INDIFFERENT WORLD ONLY FOR IT TO BE TRAMPLED BY A HERD OF CELEBRITY MEMOIRS AND T.V. COOK BOOKS.

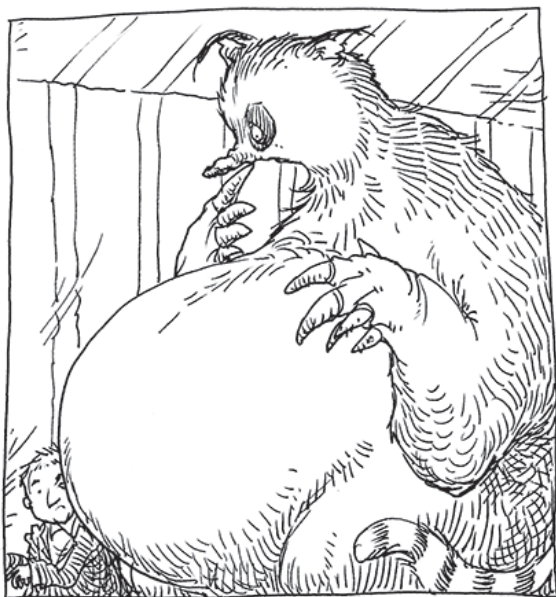
SO THANK GOODNESS FOR SCWBI AND THIS ANTHOLOGY! A WARM IGLOO IN THE ARCTIC TUNDRA OF PUBLISHING. HERE WE CAN GATHER ROUND THE GLOWING FIRE AND LISTEN TO THESE NEWLY DISCOVERED VOICES WHILE THE ICY WINDS OF COMMERCIALISM HOWL OUTSIDE. AS WITH ALL THE BEST BOOKS, THERE ARE ALSO PICTURES, BEAUTIFUL PICTURES FROM THOSE SUPERHERO SIDEKICKS, THE ILLUSTRATORS, NEWLY DISCOVERED TOO.

JUST AS BATMAN NEEDS ROBIN AND SUPERMAN NEEDS LOIS LANE, SO A WRITER NEEDS AN ILLUSTRATOR. TOGETHER THEY CAN FIGHT THE METAPHORICAL FIGHT IN THE SWEATY FESTIVAL TENTS, FRAGRANT SCHOOL HALLS AND FORLORN BOOKSHOP SIGNING TABLES, OFTEN IN SPECIALLY DESIGNED COSTUMES.

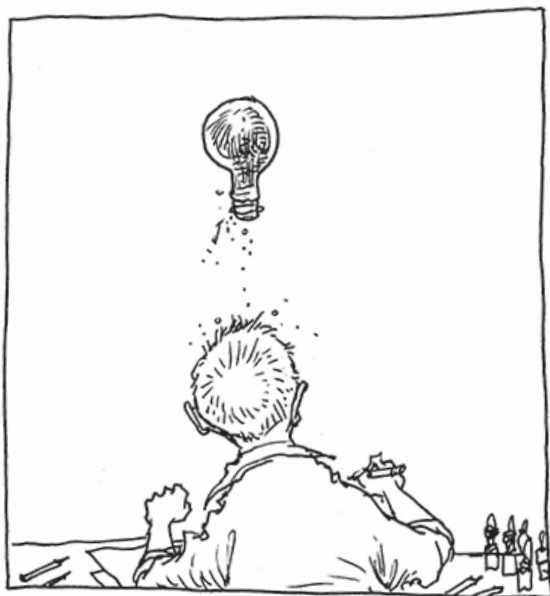
WHO WOULD BE A WRITER? EVERYONE IN THIS WONDERFUL ANTHOLOGY. CONGRATULATIONS AND GOOD LUCK!

HERE TO ENCOURAGE YOU ARE A FEW SCRIBBLED SCENES FROM THE LIFE AWAITING YOU...

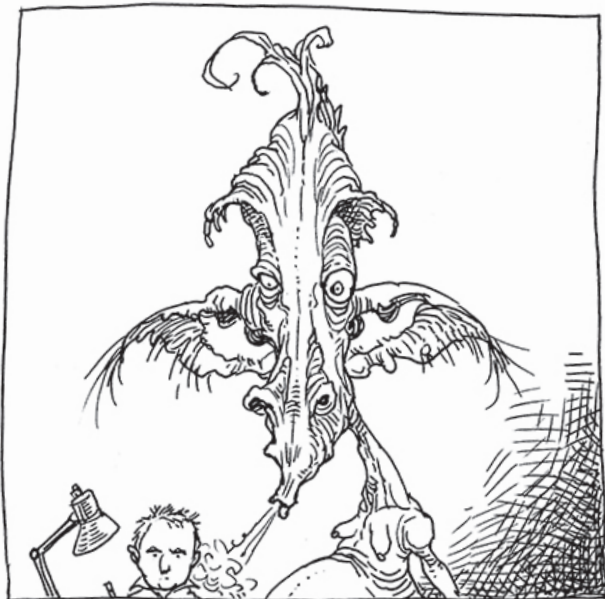
CHRIS RIDDELL.



THE AUTHOR IN A TENT WITH A PREGNANT PAUSE.



THE AUTHOR ATTEMPTING TO CHANGE AN
IMAGINARY LIGHTBULB.



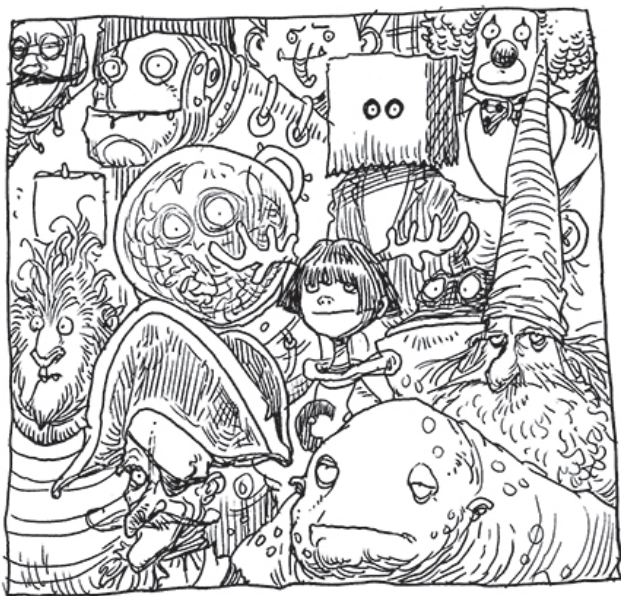
THE AUTHOR FEELING THE FETID BREATH OF THE
LACK-OF-INSPIRATION DEMON ON THE BACK OF HIS NECK.



THE AUTHOR SURFING THE ZEITGEIST.



THE AUTHOR BEING FOLLOWED HOME BY AN
UNEXPLAINED DOODLE.



THE AUTHOR STANDING OUT IN A CROWD...

FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

Welcome to *Undiscovered Voices 2014*, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' (SCBWI) fourth anthology of undiscovered writers and illustrators.

The SCBWI is a professional network for the exchange of knowledge and ideas amongst writers, illustrators, editors, publishers, agents, librarians, educators, booksellers and others involved with literature for children and young people. There are currently 22,000 members worldwide, in over seventy regions, making it the largest children's writing organization in the world. Membership benefits include professional development and networking opportunities, marketing information, events, publications, online profiles, awards and grants. 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 career.

This anthology highlights a new group of talented undiscovered voices. In the changing marketplace, where many are turning to self-publishing, we understand the importance of good quality editing, design and promotion in making the best books for young readers. We aim to match new talent with editors, art directors and agents looking to publish exciting new voices for young readers.

The first three *Undiscovered Voices* anthologies have an amazing track record: twenty-four of the thirty-six selected authors have received publishing contracts for more than seventy books. These have been honoured with nominations and included on prestigious literary lists, including the Blue Peter book award, the Barnes and Noble top teen book for 2009, the American Library Association Best Book for Young Readers, Borders Book of the Month, the 2010 Waterstone's Children's Book Prize, the Crystal Kite Award and the Branford Boase First Novel award. We are excited to see what the 2014 undiscovered voices will also achieve.

The SCBWI would like to thank the anthology's hardworking and enthusiastic team of editors and judges. We are also extremely 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

FROM WORKING PARTNERS

Working Partners is honoured and delighted to continue to sponsor the fourth *Undiscovered Voices*, six years after the launch of the first volume. *Undiscovered Voices* is now an established vehicle for launching new writing careers, and much anticipated by publishing professionals as a now proven means of finding exciting new writing talent.

Discoverability has become extremely important in an age where much has been made of self-publishing. However, there is no doubt in our minds, despite the very occasional exception that proves the rule, that conventional publishing with its quality filters – agents and publishers – and its promotional nous and clout is the only real route to market.

Undiscovered Voices has proven an extremely successful way for unagented and unpublished writers to be discovered by agents and publishers in the UK, and beyond.

We would like to thank SCBWI for asking us to become involved at the start of this wonderful venture.

Congratulations to the winning authors and illustrators, and good luck with your careers!

Chris Snowdon

Managing Director

Working Partners

www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk

SPECIAL THANKS FROM THE CO-CREATORS

More than seven years ago, we came up with idea of an anthology to help unpublished writers achieve their dreams of publication. We agreed that if one of the writers from the first anthology received a book deal then we would be pleased. *Undiscovered Voices* has succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. From the three previous anthologies, twenty-four of the thirty-six selected authors have received publishing contracts for more than seventy books published around the world, winning and receiving nominations for many awards.

Undiscovered Voices continues to evolve. The last anthology expanded to include illustrators. And this year we welcomed submissions from the EU.

The success of *Undiscovered Voices* is thanks to not only the abundance of talented writers and illustrators in SCBWI, but also many sponsors and volunteers:

- Without hesitation, **Working Partners** came on board as the sole sponsor, and have fully funded and supported the project since 2008. *Undiscovered Voices* would never have happened if not for its generosity. Continued thanks to Chris Snowdon, Charles Nettleton and Working Partners for their support for writers – both published and soon-to-be-discovered.
- We are also thrilled to have **Chris Riddell** as our honorary author and illustrator chair. He has been incredibly generous with this time, talent and wisdom.
- A huge thanks to the planning committee, which has spent thousands of hours planning and plotting with no compensation – except the satisfaction of helping fellow writers and illustrators: **Catherine Coe, Sarah Levison, Anne-Marie Perks, Loretta Schauer, Benjamin Scott** and **Tioka Tokedira**. Thanks also to **Becky Chilcott** for designing the anthology.

- Unending appreciation to **Natascha Biebow**, SCBWI Regional Advisor for British Isles, for leading the region, supporting innovative projects and championing writers and illustrators.
- The esteemed judging panels so graciously shared their experience and expertise – as well as an incredible passion for children's/teen fiction and illustration:

WRITING JUDGING PANEL

Gemma Cooper, Literary Agent, The Bent Agency

Ben Horslen, Editorial Director, Puffin

Sarah Lambert, Editorial Director, Quercus Children's Books

Polly Nolan, Literary Agent, The Greenhouse Literary Agency

Sara O'Connor, Editorial Director for Print & Digital, Hot Key Books

Samantha Smith, Fiction Publisher, Scholastic

Sallyanne Sweeney, Literary Agent, Mulcahy Associates

ILLUSTRATION JUDGING PANEL

Helen Graham-Cameron, Graham-Cameron Illustration Agency

Frances McKay, Frances McKay Illustration Agency

Martin Salisbury, Course Leader, MA Children's Book Illustration,
Director, The Centre for Children's Book Studies

Nghiem Ta, Senior Designer, Digital Content Coordinator, Templar Publishing

EUROPE JUDGING PANEL

Sandra Nickel, Middle Grade and YA writer

Catherine Pellegrino, Literary Agent, Catherine Pellegrino and Associates

Jenny Savill, Senior Literary Agent, Andrew Numberg Associates International Ltd.

Mina Witteman, author, editor, and SCBWI Netherlands Regional Advisor

The entire *Undiscovered Voices* team couldn't be more proud of what we've accomplished together. We look forward to seeing what talented writers and illustrators we will discover next.

Sara Grant and Sara O'Connor

Co-creators of *Undiscovered Voices*

UNDISCOVERED VOICES: THE ILLUSTRATORS

This year artists were asked to illustrate one of five story starters written by past Undiscovered Voices writers. Thanks to Maureen Lynas, Paula Rawsthorne, Steve Hartley, Sarwat Chadda and Sara Grant for providing original work to inspire the illustrator entrants. All submissions were black and white illustrations, interpreting one story starter with content appropriate to a children's book format for readers from five years to young adult.

Each illustrator's work was chosen on the basis of storytelling or narrative potential, good composition, drawing and concept skills, and the ability to grab the attention of the viewer. Following each illustration are comments from the judges noting why the illustration was selected.

See how this talented group of artist brought these scenes to life.

SOPHIE IN GARGANTUA by Maureen Lynas

"Please, please don't leave me with Aunt Annabelle," begged Sophie. "She wears frills! And bows! And curling papers in bed!"

"We must," said Papa. "It's far too risky. What if you were chomped on by a chewderoo?"

"Or snapped up by a snapadoodle!" agreed Mama, lacing up her boots. "An expedition to Gargantua is not a suitable outing for a little girl. It's far too dangerous."

"But I like danger! I love danger! I live for danger. Look!" Sophie hitched her petticoats up and jumped onto Papa's desk before he could stop her. She leapt across to Mama's, wobbled on the edge then regained her balance and headed for the bookshelves. "I can climb to the tops of the trees and collect the specimens of...oops."

She slipped but Papa was fast and caught her. She looked up at him, pleading. "You need me! I can carry your butterfly nets."

"No," said Papa.

"No," said Mama. "You must stay here where it's safe."

"But you're going," said Sophie. "What if you get chomped on or snapped up?"
A thought suddenly popped into her head. It scared her more than the mythical creatures of Gargantua. She gasped. "What if you DIE . . . because I'm not there to save you?"

THE REUNION by Paula Rawsthorne

Ruby pushed on the doors and they swung open with a whoosh. A wave of warm air hit her; it smelt of polish and perfume. She stepped inside. Everything was shrouded in a soporific light coming from the stage.

"Wow!" She hadn't expected this from the shabby exterior and dodgy location. Rows of plump, velvety seats sloped down to the curtain-framed stage. Gleaming pipes rose up behind an ornate organ. Gilt-edged boxes clung to the walls and, high above, a huge chandelier sparkled from the sculptured ceiling.

She walked down the aisle, trying to suppress her nerves and guilt: what would her mum say if she knew she was here, meeting the man who didn't have a right to call himself her dad? Why now after fifteen silent years? The letter, this address, a plea to come and see him.

"Is anyone there?" she called towards the stage. "It's Ruby. I'm here to see Pete Lawton."

"Ruby!" The baritone voice from the wings sounded full of pained longing. A figure clattered across the boards and took centre stage.

Ruby stared, open mouthed, at the towering wig, the make-up caked face, the sequined dress and the killer heels.

"Dad!?"

AMY WarBURTON'S MOST UNUSUAL PET by Steve Hartley

Amy Warburton soooooo wanted to win the school's Most Unusual Pet competition. The trouble was, she didn't have a pet – usual or unusual.

There were also some good contenders.

Vicky Jones had a dog with no hair called Shiver.

Millie Walker had a cat with no tail called Oops.

Anthony Dingle had a butterfly cocoon hanging from a twig in a jam jar. It wasn't called anything.

Daniel Black said he had a bat called Drac, although no one had ever seen it. He said that was because it only ever came out at night, but Amy knew a fib when she heard one.

Bethany Baldwin had a stick insect called Harry. Amy had seen that.

"I bet my stick insect wins the prize," boasted Bethany.

"No it won't," replied Amy, before she could stop herself. "Because my bnubgrubber will."

"What's a bnubgrubber?"

'It's a bit like a rabbit, and a bit like a frog. They live in trees, bite bottoms and grub for bnubs.'

Amy could see that Bethany Baldwin also knew a fib when she heard one.

"I can't wait to see that," she said.

Me too, thought Amy. Now what am I going to do?

MONSTERS ANONYMOUS by Sarwat Chadda

"Hi, I'm Alan and I'm a monster."

"Hi, Alan," reply the crowd somewhere out there, in the darkness beyond the light.

I lick my lips, trying to get some moisture to them but it's an old habit and, well, having been dead for the last two years I'm pretty dried up all over.

"And it's been three weeks since I ate my last brain."

There's a smattering of applause. A couple of the other guys give me the thumbs up.

I blink, trying to see if I recognise anyone. No good. Really wish I'd found my right eyeball before I'd come out. Must have rolled off back under the drawers again. Or Eddie's swallowed it again. Damn bird.

"I'm getting out more. Last Friday they had a Zombie-thon at the Ritz. Whole audience came dressed up. There was a competition. I came third."

A few more claps of applause.

"I'm doing Pilates twice a week. Flexibility's becoming a real issue; if I'm not careful I'll be shambling by the end of the year."

Paul, who's up front, nods. Or creaks his head forward. He knows what I'm talking about. Poor guy's a stiff. Lorraine has to bring him by wheelbarrow. I smile at him, or at least stretch my lips. Black bile seeps out over my chin and down my shirt. I sigh. I'll never get the stain out.

"But the big news this week is I've met someone. She's here tonight. It's her first time." I spot her nearby, just by the door. I wave. "Her name's Mary."

Mary shakes her head. She's shy.

"Come on up, Mary," says George, the facilitator.

Reluctantly, Mary joins me on the podium. We hold hands and I'm grinning and spilling bile like an oil slick. "Mary's a banshee."

George gestures to the mike. "Say a few words for us, Mary."

Mary blushes, then takes the mike in her slim, delicate fingers. She looks at me, unsure. I nod. She takes a deep breath.

"EE . . ."

BRAINLESS by Sara Grant

Congeaed globs of macaroni in tomato sauce. That's what I think they look like. As far as the eye can see, rows and rows of glowing pink jars twitch and pulse. It looks like an old-fashioned candy store with only one sweet on offer: brains!

Transplanting brains is messy work. My once white coveralls are stained pink with dots, drips and ragged splatters of blood. I'm a walking abstract painting – but they think I'm a blank canvas. They think I'm one of the brainless. That's why they gave me this job. Anyone with half a brain couldn't stand it here. The cold. The sour smell. The isolation. At thirteen, you are given a new brain or a menial job. I pretended to be an idiot to keep my own macaroni in my head.

I slide number 4519802 from its hiding place. Dack Jenkins Foulmore. He was the most notorious serial killer of all time. I was supposed to shred his brain, but I couldn't. I didn't want his remains fed to the cows on Piphor 5 or the emperor's cats. He was an artist in death. He never killed the same way twice and took great care to preserve the brains so they could be salvaged. A genius like that deserves to live again – like all the other top-notch brains we save. Now I will give him a second chance, not only because I promised, but also because he was my dad.

A brief biography and contact details for each illustrator are included after each illustration.

We are proud to present this year's class of soon-to-be-discovered illustrators!

JULIA WALTHER

Illustrating *The Reunion*

ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

In a life surrounded by words and books, Julia likes to wander off to secret gardens where she and her pencil dream up all sorts of creatures, scenes and stories. Her passion for nature studies, myths and the fantastical places in between influence both her art and illustration work.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'The strong, sweeping composition of this illustration emphasises the dramatic moment in the story. The image demonstrates good tonal contrast and we liked the use of pattern, giving the work a unique feel. It can be tricky to show faces and interaction from an over-the-shoulder viewing angle, but the illustrator has been ambitious and has pulled it off!'

Contact: julia@juliawaltherstudio.com

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SARAH PALMER

Illustrating *Amy Warburton's Favourite Pet*

ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sarah has studied Graphic Design and, more recently, Children's Book Illustration at the Cambridge School of Art. She would love to write and illustrate books for children. She also loves cats, drinking tea and creating imaginary creatures.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'The idea of creating the illustration as if it were a speech bubble is effective in conveying the conversational "telling-tall-tales" tone of the story extract. A clever way to frame the chunky textural imagery of the animals for a younger audience. The characters are appealing and the handmade textures work well.'

Contact: sarahloupalmer@gmail.com

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SARAH PALMER



DAVE GRAY

Illustrating *Brainless*

ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Dave studied graphic design at Coventry University and spent the first part of his career working in arts & media with hard to reach young people. He then completed design projects for the BBC, CITV and Channel 4 before finding something he really loved doing — writing and illustrating for children.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'This is a bold and eye-catching illustration that would reproduce very well in print. The washy textured background framing the character is a nice touch, and the illustrator works in a graphic style that would appeal to the young adult audience.'

Contact: info@iamdavegray.com

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DAVE GRAY



OLIVIA PALMER

Illustrating *Sophie in Gargantua*

ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Olivia has been drawing and painting for most of her life, using mainly watercolour, gouache and pen, and became inspired to try to be an illustrator in 2011. She especially enjoys researching for her pictures through sketching, and has been working on her own ideas for picture books.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'The illustrator has picked out the different tonal values well in this piece, revealing all the details without overwhelming our focus on the characters. The background details are great fun to explore. The confident and lively pose of the little girl illustrates the heroine's character very well.'

Contact: olivia.illustration@gmail.com

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JAMES BROWN

Illustrating *Sophie in Gargantua*

ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

James is obsessed with illustration and would love to see his picture books, *Marlon's Amazing Moustache* and *Mum's Having a Monster*, on bookshelves. James illustrates for Baby London's 'Diary of a Mum'. He has also designed promotional material for the Games Makers Choir 2012 as well as educational illustrations for Nottinghamshire Fire Service. Recently James came third in the Illustrate It 2013 picture book competition.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'This illustration captures the playful humour and energy of the story – perfect for the seven-to-nine age range! The mixture of media, patterns and textures combine seamlessly and the image holds together well. It would be great to see this illustrator tackle a series of images throughout a book.'

Contact: jamesbrownillustration@gmail.com

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UNDISCOVERED VOICES: THE AUTHORS

This anthology features 4,000-word extracts from completed novels written for children and teens. These twelve extracts were selected from nearly 200 submissions. The judges aimed to create a collection that showcases a variety of genres and voices with stories for several age ranges – from new readers to young adults.

A brief synopsis is included along with a biography and contact details for each writer. Because the anthology is also designed to be a learning tool for up-and-coming children's writers, quotes from the judges – discussing the merits of each piece and why each piece was selected – are featured at the end of each extract.

Congratulations to these twelve talented writers, who created opening chapters that hooked the judges and will have you begging to know what happens next!

PHOENIX

By Katrina Charman

CHAPTER ONE

I stand on a narrow ledge, barely able to keep my balance. The wind nudges at my back as though encouraging me: *Jump. Jump. Jump.* Forty storeys below, the pavement beckons. But I'm not afraid. Death is nothing new to me.

I press two fingers to my neck and check my pulse. Blood pumps through my arteries at a regular sixty beats per minute which, for me, is fast. The sun catches my eyes as it peeps over the horizon, leaving a black imprint at the centre of my vision. I blink hard to make it fade, then check my watch – 4:06 a.m.

It's time.

I scan the ground once more to ensure the street is deserted; that there are no witnesses to observe my little performance. No one to urge me to stop, or to consider what I'm about to do. No one to tell me that life *is* worth living, to hold out a hand and pull me to safety.

No one.

So, I close my eyes, take my last breath, and let myself fall.

"How many times does that make it this week?" Barron calls out from behind me.

I groan, trying to ignore the high-pitched ringing in my ears, and the exquisite pain that ebbs from every part of my body. I guess I wasn't alone after all. I try to look at him, but my spine hasn't re-set itself yet and I'm momentarily paralysed.

"Five," I mumble face down into the concrete. "I thought you weren't coming?" I spit a mouthful of blood. It drools down my chin. I test my fingers and toes to see if I can move any of them.

"Someone's got to scrape you off the pavement," he says.

My hand jerks. Tingling radiates along my arms as the sensation returns. I push myself away from the ground, which is difficult because there's so much blood and gore cementing me to it. Something sharp protrudes from the palm of my left hand – one of my front teeth. I pick it out, putting it into the back pocket of my jeans. As I do so, a new one grows in its place inside my mouth.

Barron helps me to stand, stepping into a pile of grey sludge, which I think is a chunk of my brain. He gags, recoiling. "Ew, Tam! Are you sure you don't want to scoop that up and bring it home as well? Don't want to lose any of those precious, *über-intelligent* brain cells."

I pat my skull, feeling for any holes or fractures. Despite the fact that a minute ago my head resembled a massacred cantaloupe, it's now as good as new. "Nah, I'm fine. Besides, even if I did lose some, I'd still be ten times smarter than you."

I punch my brother in the shoulder, cringing as I notice one of my fingers bending in the wrong direction. I click it into place, wiggling it back and forth to test for any lingering weaknesses, then do the same with the rest of my body: arms, elbows, shoulders, knees, neck. Every bone that had been shattered, every internal organ that exploded on impact when I hit the concrete, is now as it was before I jumped.

"Are you in pain?" Barron frowns.

I shake my head. Compared to some of the other stunts I've pulled, this one was surprisingly the least painful. Something to do with the speed of death, I suppose. I make a mental note to add that to my research notes when I return to the lab.

"Did you manage to get any readings?" I ask.

Barron nods, pulling out a filched radar gun from his backpack. "One hundred and twenty six miles per hour. I'm gonna have to write you a ticket, ma'am," he says in a weird Indian-Australian hybrid of an accent.

I roll my eyes and check my watch – 4:11 a.m. It only took five minutes to fall, splat, and come back. Not bad. I take my pulse again, it's a little

high, but that's to be expected after the shock I just put my body through. I pull out my note pad, jotting my vital statistics and any other factors worth observing.

"Uh, Tam . . . doesn't that belong to Mum?" Barron points at my top.

I look at my blood-drenched sweater which now has a gaping hole torn through its centre by one of my ribs. "Damn it! I forgot I was wearing this. She's going to kill me." I chuckle at the irony. Barron doesn't return my glee. His eyes are wide as he stares behind me.

I don't need to turn to see what he has; I can already hear the sirens.

He starts to run. "Come on, Tam!"

I follow, then pause. Something feels wrong. I look down – one of my shoes is missing. I scan the street until I spot it teetering on the edge of a blue Dumpster.

"Leave it!" Barron yells, grabbing my arm.

We race along Stark Street and swerve onto Dell, weaving through the maze of Nidus City's back streets to emerge onto Central Square, where market traders have already started to set up for the day. The heady scents of fresh shellfish, sweet dumplings and stargazer lilies hit me all at once. Barron slows to a brisk walk. I follow his lead, trying not to squeal as I submerge my foot in a puddle of brown slop. I kick off my remaining shoe, figuring it looks less suspicious to be barefoot than wearing only one. "That was my favourite pair of shoes," I mutter.

Barron tuts. "There are worse things than losing a shoe, Tam." He hands me his jacket. I put it on, pulling up the hood to cover the tacky blood in my shoulder length, blond hair. The familiar smell of worn leather and Barron's cologne is comforting.

We wander among the stalls, keeping our heads low. Ignoring traders as they try to sell us whatever they have to hawk this week. The far end of the market borders Summerstown – otherwise known as Scummerstown – where the traders and their wares become more unsavoury; selling stolen med-tabs, refurbished tech, and illegal genetic splices. A crate of a dozen *ferrats* – part-ferret, part-rat, part . . . god knows whatever else it was that gave them their freaky, stumpy wings – squawk at us as we hurry past. I shudder. As if there wasn't enough vermin in this city already.

Barron pulls me into a twenty-four-hour café on the corner, taking the

far table opposite the grimy, metal-barred window, so that we can spot potential trouble before it spots us. He stares out for a few moments, tense, then leans back into his chair grabbing a sticky ketchup-covered menu, apparently satisfied that any threat has passed.

"Two black coffees," he calls to the middle-aged woman slouching over the counter. She glares at us through grey-ringed eyes, as though it isn't actually her job to serve customers. She moves as slowly as she can, pouring two cups of coffee from the scuzzy pot next to her.

"That was close," Barron whispers. "What the hell were you thinking? Someone must have seen you fall."

"I don't remember inviting you along, Barron. I can take care of myself. I *can't* watch out for both of us."

He flinches as though I've hit him.

I sigh. "Relax, little brother," I say, knowing how much he hates it when I call him that, even though he's only younger than me by three minutes. "I'm too smart to get caught. I'll do it somewhere less public next time, but you have to stop following me."

He shakes his head, studying the menu again, "What if you actually *succeed* next time? What if you don't come back?"

He shuts his mouth as the woman dawdles over, slamming two mugs filled to the brim in front of us. "Thank you," I smile at her. She grunts, shuffling to her stool behind the counter to read yesterday's newspaper.

I grab Barron's hand, forcing him to look at me, "Barron, listen. That's *not* going to happen. I'm invincible. I've died nearly twenty-five times, in different ways, and I come back *every time*." I squeeze his hand in mine, then let it go to take a swig of the bitter, lukewarm coffee. "Besides, if you'd let me use *you* as a test subject once in a while, maybe you wouldn't have to worry about *me* so much."

Barron gives me a half-grin. "What, and risk ruining this perfect specimen of a body? I don't think so." He pauses. "Why do you have to do this at all though, Tam? Why can't you just let it be?"

"Let it be? Don't you want to know why I'm like this? Why *you're* like this? Why we come back? What happens when we get to two hundred years old, and we're still alive? Shrivelled piles of skin and bones and brains gone to crap. What then? What happens when everyone we know

starts dying around us and we're left behind? I can't . . . I don't *want* to live forever, Barron. It's not . . . natural."

Barron mumbles into his coffee cup, "Mum says it's a gift."

"It is *not* a gift, Barron. She only tells you that because she wishes she had it, so she didn't have to be afraid of *him* anymore."

Barron jerks back. "You actually *want* to succeed? You want to kill yourself?"

"Of course not! Don't be so dramatic. I just want to know if there's a way to at least slow it down, or reverse the process . . . if I could maybe find a cure or a way to *use* it – think of the possibilities – we could cure every illness, every disease. I just . . ." I sigh again, resting my chin on the table. "Don't you want to be normal?"

Barron smiles, "I don't think that's possible, in your case."

"Okay," I say, sitting up. "How about we compromise – no more suicide missions for me for a while, as long as you let me run some tests on you. *And* you have to get a life of your own and quit trailing me like a lost puppy. It's getting a bit pathetic."

"Fine," he huffs, narrowing his eyes at me. He bites his lip as though he wants to say more, but only nods. We finish our coffees in silence.

We circle back around the perimeter of the market, which is now full of life, and jump onto the caboose of the Hov-tram as it skims along Shelton Avenue. Barron stares out of the window with his back to me. His sandy hair flops so far over his eyes that I can't tell if he's actually looking at something, or if he's still sulking.

A woman and a little girl about three or four years old step onto the Hov-tram and settle a few seats away, facing us. Barron sits back, leaning his shoulder against mine, and pulls out an energy bar from his backpack. He tears into it as though he hasn't eaten for a week, then pulls out another one, offering it to me. I shake my head; I'm still buzzing from the blast of adrenaline and endorphins that were released when I came back.

The little girl stares at Barron. He gets that a lot. Doesn't matter how old they are. He has some weird magnetism that draws in any female within a three-foot radius. I don't get it. Sure, he's relatively attractive I

guess – he’s my twin after all – but if they could see him when he tries to chew off his toenails, they’d soon be running in the opposite direction.

I poke my tongue out at the girl. She smiles, returning the gesture. Barron shifts uncomfortably in his seat next to me as the woman stares at him, too. “I think we’re being followed,” he mumbles out of the corner of his mouth. I look around us. Apart from the woman and her daughter, we’re alone.

“What are you talking about? You think the little girl is undercover?” I mock-whisper back.

He shakes his head, nodding to the transparent door that separates our car and the next. We’re being observed by a man in a dark grey suit. He seems to be talking to someone as he watches us, but if there’s someone next to him, they’re out of sight.

“Next time we stop at the lights, jump out and run,” Barron murmurs.

I nod, pulling my hood further down over my face, and stare down at the floor. I hear the swoosh of the door as someone enters our car, then heavy footsteps as they plod along the metal floor towards us. I glance up to see the man watching me as he takes the seat opposite. I look down again, my heart pounding, hands sweating. The Hov-tram starts to slow, its brakes letting out a hiss in protest. Barron grabs my hand.

“Now!” he barks. We jump up and leap out of the open door of the Hov-tram while it’s still moving. Something snaps at the back of my heel as I land awkwardly on the tarmac – probably my Achilles tendon. Luckily for me, I know it will heal in a few seconds.

Barron turns sharply, pulling me as I limp along down some steps that lead to the underground station. I grab the handrail to stop him from dragging me any further. “Barron, wait! Where are we going?” I glance back. The station entrance is deserted. “He’s not following us.”

“No, but *she* is.”

I follow his gaze. The woman from the Hov-tram stands at the top of the stairwell looking down at us, her daughter nowhere to be seen. Barron tears off down the stairs without me, not seeing the little girl emerge around the corner a second later to take the woman’s hand as she helps her down the stairs. I shake my head at Barron’s paranoia. The little girl recognises me, and pokes her tongue out again.

"Barron!" I call after him, but he's already running along the platform.

I chase after him taking two steps at a time, the pain in my heel gone. He slams into an old man waiting at the far end of the platform and screams like a girl.

"Barron! What the hell is wrong with you?" I shout, giving the man an apologetic shrug as I run past.

"They're coming, Tam! They know we're here."

I glance around, confused. It's still too early for the early morning rush of commuters. There are only five of us on the platform. Me and Barron; the old man who is glaring at me like *I* was the one who hit him; and the woman and the little girl. "Barron, calm down. Nobody's after us."

A waft of warm air pushes out from the dark tunnel, gently at first, then more forceful as the train heads closer. "Barron." I reach for his arm, but he steps back. The ground rumbles beneath my feet. Barron takes another step backwards so that he's on the edge of the platform. "*Barron!*" I say more urgently, holding my hand out to him.

His eyes are wild, his pupils huge as they shift from side to side as though he's a cornered animal. "Come here, Barron. Please! I won't let anyone hurt you." I have to shout now, because the noise of the oncoming train and the wind as it bellows through the tunnel is deafening.

"Tam," he mouths, his face ashen as he takes another small step back to plummet into the path of the train.

CHAPTER TWO

We discovered our *gift* the first time Barron died. We were five years old. Our step-dad, Mort, came home bladdered as usual. I don't know what it was that set him off that time. Maybe Mum hadn't put enough cheese in his macaroni, or it was too cold, or too watery, or some other lame excuse he'd made up to beat the crap out of her, but anyway, his demented reasoning was irrelevant. Punishment was inevitable.

Except this time, Barron, who was such a quiet, timid kid, crawled out from under the coffee table with the wonky leg that we were hiding under, and walked right up to Mort as he laid into Mum. He tapped him on the back, and said in a voice so eerily calm and composed, that I can still hear it in my head today: "*No more.*"

Mort turned around, and for a second the edges of his mouth twitched and I thought he was going to laugh – that he'd actually leave Mum alone. Because who could resist such a cute kid like Barron, with the dimples and the big blue eyes, and the lisp he eventually grew out of. She must have imagined the same thing, because she made the mistake of trying to force her bleeding, swollen lip into the slight curve of a smile.

And that's when Mort roundhouse-kicked Barron in the head.

The train doesn't stop. Doesn't even slow down. It carries right on over Barron's body, dragging it halfway to the next station. I jump down between the humming steel tracks a second after it passes, ignoring the yells from the man, the shrieks from the woman, and the cries from her little girl. I shut them all out. The info-screen on the wall flashes red, telling me that the next train is due in four minutes.

That's all the time I need.

I race between the electrified lines into the pitch black, hoping my feet will find his body – if he's still in one piece. I don't let myself think of what will happen if he's not. I've never gone as far as complete limb amputation; everyone has their limits – even immortals.

A train horn echoes through the tunnel, the sound vibrating through the wooden sleepers beneath my bare feet. I can't tell if it's coming from ahead or behind. I run faster until my toe catches on something soft and sticky. Crouching on my hands and knees, I reach in the darkness for Barron, gasping when I feel a hand. I pat my fingers slowly up his arm, holding my breath as I move further across to his chest, then down to his waist, then legs. Most of his bones feel broken, and there's a *lot* of blood, but at least . . . I reach his face, and let out a sob in relief . . . at least he's still in one piece.

More or less.

I press my finger and thumb against his wrist, waiting for the pulse to kick in. At least two minutes have already passed; it shouldn't take much longer. Voices call out behind me as spotlights dance along the track.

"Come on, Barron," I whisper. "Come back to me."

I reach for his neck to see if I can find a pulse there instead, pulling away when I feel that he barely *has* a neck anymore. His head has been all

but severed, clinging on by a sliver of skin and sinew. I thank god I can't see him, although my imagination is doing a pretty good job at filling in the blanks. I swallow down the rising bile that burns in my throat, and drag his head closer to his body, hoping that might help it reattach faster.

The scientist in me wishes I had something to document the moment he comes back from *this*, but the sister in me is trying to calm the hell down and not scream at him to wake up until I puke up my lungs. Instead, I do what I always do when under extreme stress, and recite the periodic table in alphabetical order, over and over in my head: *Actinium, Aluminium, Americium . . .*

"Miss! Miss, you shouldn't be down here," a man's voice booms. He's wearing one of those massive, one-size-doesn't-fit-all, luminous yellow jackets. A torch shines in my face, flicking down onto Barron then quickly away again. I reach for Barron's hand, but don't look at him. I can't look at him. I finally understand why he hates my experiments; to see your twin – your best friend – like this . . . *Antimony, Argon, Arsenic . . .*

"Miss, please step away from the body," a softer, woman's voice pleads.

My mind races. I need to get these people out of here. How the hell am I going to explain it when Barron suddenly wakes up and walks away?

"He has a pulse," I lie. "But it's very weak. Can you get the medics?"

The man scans his light over Barron's body, lingering for a moment at his head, then coughs as though he's going to throw up. I think I might join him. "Miss . . . I'm sorry, I don't think . . ."

I blow out a long breath. "Listen to me, I'm *the* science resident at Palmer Global. I'm telling you he has a pulse." I squeeze Barron's hand in mine with every ounce of strength I have left, as though I can jump-start his regeneration through sheer will. "But he won't for much longer. Just go and get the freaking medics!"

In the dim torchlight, I see them exchange looks. They wander slowly back down the tunnel towards the platform. The man mumbles in a low voice into his radio, thinking I can't hear him, telling whoever is on the other end to shut off the power to the tracks; that there's a fatality on line seven.

I lie down and curl up on the sharp, crunchy gravel next to Barron. The hairs on my arms stand on end from the static emanating from the

tracks, but I don't care if I get electrocuted. I count my breaths in and out. It smells of piss down here. I wonder what else is with us, watching from the shadows.

"Barron," I whisper into his ear, stroking his hair like I used to when we were small and he was scared. *We* were scared.

"I need you to come back now, okay? It's been almost five minutes. My record is five and a half. You don't want to be beaten by a girl do you?"

He doesn't answer me. Doesn't move. Doesn't breathe.

"Think, Tam, *think!*" I bang the palm of my hand against my forehead, running through months of research data and hypotheses in my head. Barron died and came back before. Once. I've died and come back a lot more than once. We share the same DNA. If I can come back more than once, so can he. What's different now? What's blocking whatever biological, or neurological, or even freaking *magical* process, that reanimates our dead bodies? Not only reanimates them, but repairs them in minutes.

I sit up suddenly, wiping at my snot and tears with the sleeve of Barron's jacket. There must be a factor I haven't considered. Maybe there's an actual obstruction; something to do with his head or . . . who knows what else. I can't see a damn thing down here to assess his injuries properly. If I could figure out what happens to us when we come back – *why* we come back – maybe I can fix whatever is broken.

I can fix my brother.

PHOENIX by Katrina Charman

SYNOPSIS

They call her The Phoenix. Death is nothing new to Tambrey Palmer. A science prodigy, she uses her ability to regenerate to help others, until the day her twin brother jumps in front of a train – and stays dead. When the most powerful man in Nidus City discovers her gift, he manipulates her into becoming an unwitting weapon – one without fear, or mercy. But Tambrey has finally woken up, and she wants revenge.

BIOGRAPHY

Katrina lives in a tiny village in the middle of nowhere, with her husband, three daughters and a manic depressive hamster. She has a BA (Hons) in English and Creative Studies, and is the joint Writing Features Editor for the SCBWI British Isles online mag.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘What an opening! Excuse the pun, but it has such impact. That’s how to get a lot of agents and editors sitting up in their seats. Great pace, great synopsis too. I look forward to seeing this in print one day soon.’

‘A fresh, original concept, a strong, edgy narrator, brilliant pacing and a lot of heart; what’s not to love?’

‘Outstanding opening chapters – excellent premise, authentic voice, and a very deft handling of tension. Structure also impressive with good exposition. Want to read more!’

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THE VOYAGE OF THE ONION

By Claire Fayers

CHAPTER ONE – MARRIAGE

Aldebran Boswell's Olde Booke of Scientific Knowledgee

Lawes of Motion, Number One

A body, once sette in motion, shall continue in the same direction until such a time as a force does acte upon it to change its course.

Some saye this is alsoe true of stories.

Brine was in the magician's library when she heard the tramp of feet. She crammed Boswell's Olde Book of Knowledgee back onto the shelf just in time: the door opened and Farris Magus swept in, followed by a man who was a bit shorter, a lot fatter and had a face like a fish on a bad day. They both stopped when they saw her.

'What are you doing here, Seaborne?' Magus barked.

Brine grabbed a cloth and waved it. 'Dusting.'

Magus gave her a disbelieving look and shook back his robes, sending out a flurry of stale magic that made Brine cough.

'Get out!'

Brine dropped him a curtsy and ran.

Outside, she shut the door firmly then leaned against it. People came to see Farris Magus for two reasons – either he owed them money or they wanted him to cast a spell. Often both. But the fish-faced visitor wasn't just anyone. He was Penn Turbill, the richest man on the whole island cluster of Minutes – and the biggest miser. No way would he have lent Magus

money, and what could the miser possibly want that he could only get by magic? He already owned almost everything.

Holding her breath, Brine turned her head until her ear was pressed to the wooden door.

‘... Very young,’ Penn Turbill was saying.

‘And works very hard,’ Magus replied. ‘I have the contract right here.’

A floorboard creaked, followed by the rattle of keys and the louder creak of the door into Magus’s private study. Then silence. Brine released an uneven breath and stood back.

A hand grabbed her shoulder. ‘Got you!’

Brine shouted and lashed out with the only weapon she had to hand: the duster. It connected limply.

‘Nice aim,’ said Peter Magus, flicking away a lump of fluff that was exactly the same beige as his hair. He stared hard at her, waiting for something. ‘Didn’t we decide that servants are supposed to curtsy to family members?’

‘You might have. I didn’t.’ Anyway, Peter was no more family than she was. It was pure luck that he was Magus’s adopted heir and she was the servant. Luck, and Brine’s allergy to magic. She retrieved the duster and sneezed into it.

‘You’re going to sneeze yourself to death one day,’ Peter commented, grinning. He nodded at the library door. ‘What’s Bladder-Face doing here?’

Brine felt a smile tug her lips. She turned it into a scowl. ‘Penn Turbill? How should I know – I’m only the servant.’ She tucked the duster into the waistband of her skirt and stalked away. At the top of the stairs, she turned back. Peter was leaning against the door, his ear to the wood. ‘But if you ask me,’ Brine said loudly, making him jump, ‘it’s going to mean trouble.’

Penn Turbill didn’t leave the house until the sun was setting. Brine watched from an upstairs window as he hurried down the steep little path to the beach. She stood and stared, drumming her fingers on the windowsill, until his boat had shrunk to a black dot against the waves. Magus was plotting something and she didn’t know what. She didn’t like the feeling.

The door creaked behind her. Brine spun round. Peter held up his

hands. ‘Don’t throw anything. Farris wants to see us both downstairs. He didn’t say why, but I think it’s to do with Penn Turbill.’

Farris Magus was waiting for them in the sitting room. With his arms crossed behind his head and his feet on a stool, he looked as if he was posing for a portrait. Worse, he was smiling. Brine had spent most of her life in the magician’s house and she’d seen him smile maybe six times. Mainly, he alternated between a vague, irritated frown, and a full-blown, thunderous scowl, the latter usually happening when he found Brine somewhere she shouldn’t be. The grin that stretched his face now was so alien that Brine pinched herself to make sure she wasn’t in the middle of a nightmare.

‘Come in, come in.’ Magus stood up, still beaming, so that his smile seemed to lift him out of the chair by his teeth. He poured wine into three goblets and held two of them out. Peter tasted his cautiously. Brine stared into hers, wondering what was in it and how much Magus had already drunk.

Magus took a long gulp from his own goblet and wiped his chin on his sleeve. His gaze bumped around the room. Brine started forward thinking he was going to fall over. Magus waved her away. ‘I am perfectly well, thank you, Seaborne.’ He fell back into his chair with a bump. ‘In fact, I have good news for you both. I spoke to Penn Turbill today and we reached an agreement. Peter, you are going to marry his daughter.’

The goblet fell from Peter’s hand. He didn’t appear to notice. He stood, staring at the magician, his mouth opening and shutting.

Brine looked down at the spreading wine stain. ‘I’ll get a cloth,’ she said.

Magus stopped her. ‘That’s not the only thing we agreed. Obviously, Brine, I’ll have no need of a servant once we have a wife in the house. Penn Turbill has considered your age, your hard-working nature and your – ah – dubious parentage, and has very kindly agreed to buy you. You will be going to live with him.’

A dull clatter sounded, a thousand miles away.

‘Make that two cloths,’ said Peter.

Brine wasn’t sure how she got to sleep that night, but she woke to the sound of shouting. She lay in bed for a minute wondering why her stomach was churning, then she remembered. She groaned and rolled over, burying her

face in the pillow. Words such as ‘ungrateful’, ‘stupid’ and ‘brat’ filtered through the wall.

‘I’m not marrying Bladder-Face’s daughter,’ Peter announced, marching in on her as she was cooking breakfast a little later. ‘I’m sixteen. I’m too young to get married.’ His left cheek was scarlet as if he’d been slapped. Brine decided it was better not to comment on it. She turned a fish on the fire.

‘What are you going to do then? Run away and join the pirates?’

Peter glared at her.

Brine stabbed the fish hard. Peter had got the better part of the deal. She’d spent the past seven years working for Magus. She cleaned his house, cooked his food, washed his smelly robes until her hands were red and raw, and in return he was passing her off to the first person who offered him money. ‘It’s not that bad,’ she said, though she knew it was. ‘At least Turbill’s got money. And his house is huge. The biggest house on the biggest island.’ Ten times the size, ten times the cleaning. She glanced sideways at Peter. ‘Your children are going to be *so* ugly.’

Peter stuck his tongue out at her and sat on the table. Brine watched the fish smoulder. The nearest one looked a bit like Penn Turbill – it certainly had the same, glazed expression.

‘I’ve heard,’ Peter said, breaking into her thoughts, ‘that Bladder-Face can’t read. There’s not a single book in his house.’

Brine turned cold inside. Peter saw her face and flashed her a triumphant grin. ‘Magus might not have noticed you sneaking into the library all the time but I have. I was planning to blackmail you one day.’ He tapped the side of his nose. ‘You know what they say – knowledge is money.’

‘No it’s not, it’s power.’ Actually, it was neither. It was freedom, the chance to escape, even if it was only for an hour or two. In Penn Turbill’s house there would be no escape. She turned the fish over again, watching the juices spit as they hit the fire. A dull weight settled over her. ‘Have you tried talking to Magus?’

Peter pointed to his reddened cheek. They both sighed. The smell of burning fish wafted between them.

‘Well,’ Brine said, ‘if Magus won’t change his mind, we’ll have to make Turbill change his.’

They stared at each other morosely. 'How?' asked Peter.

One of the fish ignited. Brine snatched it out of the flames by the tail. 'You're a magician, aren't you? I'm no expert, but how about you put a spell on him?'

The library was a different world at night. Shadows crawled together, piling up against the door that led to Farris Magus's private study. Brine could feel it behind her, a heap of dark at her back, even while she tried to read by candlelight.

The islande cluster of Minutes, said Aldebran Boswell's Olde Booke of Scientific Knowledgee, lies to the north-west of the Atlas Ocean. It consists of more than twenty islandes, set so close that you may sail between them in a matter of minutes. Beware, however, the . . .

Brine snapped the book shut. By the friendly light of day, this plan had seemed easy. Get what they needed here, row to Turbill's island where Peter would cast the mind change spell, then back and into bed while Magus was still snoring. Now, in the quiet of night, she could think of a hundred things that would almost certainly go wrong.

The library door opened. Brine bit back a scream. Peter grinned at her, put a finger to his lips and held up a key. Brine's heart thudded. 'Where's Magus?'

'Snoring like a blunt-nosed whale.' Peter let out a noisy breath. They both paused, watching each other in the candlelight. Peter glanced back to the library door. The night was getting to him, too, it seemed. 'I could try talking to Farris again. Maybe he'll . . .'

Brine snatched the key from his hand. If they thought any more about this, they wouldn't go through with it, and then she'd be stuck with Penn Turbill for the rest of her life.

She opened the door to Magus's study and coughed as the stink of sweat and old magic wafted out. The dryness in her mouth spread down her throat. She'd never set foot in this room before, not even to clean it. Shelves covered every wall and books, boxes and bottles covered every shelf. A driftwood table leaned against the only clear space below the window.

'Magus is going to kill us,' Peter muttered. The candle shook in his hand. 'Only if he catches us. Hurry up.'

He nodded, his lips tight. Passing Brine the candle, he wiped his hands on his trousers and reached up to take a box off a shelf. Brine held her breath as he lifted the lid. She'd expected it to be locked. Peter cast her a smile over his shoulder. Carefully, he slid his fingers into the box and lifted out . . .

. . . Another box.

In that box was another box. Inside that one, a tiny casket made of gold-plated wood.

Inside that, nestled between twenty layers of wool which were already fraying under the corrosive onslaught of pure magic, lay a narrow sliver of amber shell. It was no longer than Brine's little finger and it was the most precious thing in the whole world.

According to Aldebran Boswell, starshell fell to earth in the wake of a shooting star, hence its name. According to everyone else, this was nonsense. Starshell came from the shell of the largest sea-turtle that ever lived, and the reason it was called starshell is because people like Boswell didn't know any better. Either that or it was the claw of the tentacled lurkweed that once crowded the ocean bed. Or oysters made it when they wanted a change from pearls. There were parts of the world where people risked their lives for it, diving hundreds of feet through the coldest parts of the ocean and sometimes, only sometimes, emerging half-drowned with a glistening shard in their hands. Even they couldn't agree on what it was. But whatever it was made of, one thing was known for sure: starshell was the only thing in the whole world that held magic. Without it there would be no magicians, no spells, no Farris Magus.

For half a minute, Brine was silent, gazing down at the glowing shell. This piece of starshell was special. It had been found on a gold chain around her neck when she herself had been found adrift in a rowing boat. A skinny child, around seven years old, wearing the price of the entire island cluster around her grubby neck. They'd asked her her name and she couldn't remember – she couldn't remember anything. So they called her Brine because she'd come from saltwater, and Seaborne because that's what she was. Sea-borne.

Farris Magus had been quick to lay claim to the starshell. Unfortunately for Brine, the islanders had insisted he couldn't have the shell without

the child so he'd taken Brine in and kept her as a servant. If it wasn't for the starshell, she might be a fisherman's daughter by now. Or she might have starved to death. She stifled a sneeze on her fist. 'Can we get on with it?'

'Right.' Peter didn't look at her as he lifted the starshell out of the box and folded the layers of wool over it. His fingers trembled. Gripping the candle hard, Brine followed him back through the library and down the stairs. The house was quiet, the only sound the rumble of Magus snoring, like faraway thunder. They crept along the hall until the front door was before them, a faint crack of moonlight showing along the top.

Brine's heart quickened fearfully. She told it to behave. They were safe. Magus was asleep, the rowing boat was waiting, nothing bad was going to happen. She drew in a deep breath, held it and opened the door.

A flood of moonlight made her blink. The grass looked silver, criss-crossed with the long shadows of the trees. The path to the beach curved away between them. Brine glanced at Peter. His face was frozen in a grin of mad terror.

'Nearly there,' Brine whispered. She started down the path.

A whisper of sound stopped her dead. Beside her, Peter turned and let out a low cry of dismay.

Farris Magus burst through the door. He was wearing his dressing gown and slippers and his hair swung loose about his face. Brine might have laughed, except for his eyes. They glittered with a light that went beyond mere rage. They were twin shards of ice, full of vengeance and the promise of long and painful punishment. Brine felt a whimper rise in her throat and clamped her lips together to stop it escaping.

The magician advanced upon them with steps that made the grass tremble. 'Thieves.' Magus's voice was a low, hoarse snarl. 'I take you into my house, treat you as my own children. I feed you and clothe you and teach you, and this is how you repay me.' He pointed at them with a long, shaking finger. 'Give me back my starshell.'

Brine tensed. Peter put his hands behind his back. 'What starshell?'

Magus's eyes flashed. 'Don't insult my intelligence. Do you really think I'd leave it unprotected in an ordinary box? The moment you put your thieving hand on it, I knew. Give it to me.'

Brine felt the air thicken. Peter pushed the starshell back at her. She missed it as she sneezed. Magus curled his fist and drew his arm back.

‘It was Brine’s idea!’ Peter shouted. ‘She took it, not me.’

Brine’s cheeks flooded with heat. ‘Liar!’

‘Thief!’ Magus roared.

Peter yelled in fright and stumbled back.

Crunch.

The sound froze them all where they stood.

Slowly, reluctantly, Brine looked down. Down at the imprint of Peter’s shoe on the grass, and the flattened, wool-wrapped packet that lay in the middle of it. Her mouth turned as dry as sand.

Magus let out a wordless roar. Peter yelped in panic, scooped up the broken starshell and bolted down the hill. Brine hesitated a moment then ran after him. Magus, cursing loudly, was just behind, but she was a lot younger than him and a lot faster. And, at this moment, a lot more desperate. The path gave way to loose sand. Dark against the shoreline, the rowing boat bobbed as if it was waving to her. Brine didn’t pause. With a final burst of speed, she flung herself past Peter and into the boat.

‘I’ll kill you!’ Magus shouted, stumbling onto the beach. Peter landed beside Brine with a crash. She threw off the mooring rope and heaved on the oars. They shot away from shore as if someone had told the boat their lives depended on it.

Magus ran into the water after them, shouting threats and waving his fists, but he was too late. They were out of his reach.

Brine let out a breath and leaned on the oars, trembling. Peter’s face was white, his hair standing up in sweaty clumps. He tried to smile. ‘Well, that could have been worse.’

‘Really? How?’

‘We’re still alive, aren’t we?’ Peter unwrapped the starshell and groaned. It had snapped in two across the middle. ‘I suppose,’ he said slowly, ‘it’s better in a way. We’ve got two pieces now, where we only had one before.’

Brine shook her head. ‘Keep telling yourself that: you might start believing it soon. Thanks for blaming me, by the way.’

‘Well it *was* your idea.’

‘I didn’t notice you objecting at the time.’

‘That’s because you never listen to a word I say.’

The boat swung in a lazy circle. Peter didn’t offer to help as Brine began to row again. She looked around uncertainly. The single, bright light of Orion’s star hung in the north. She turned the boat towards it, feeling it pick up speed as the tide swept them away from land.

For a long while, Brine didn’t care where she rowed. She lost track of time, letting the waves carry them, resting for long minutes between each oar stroke. A rosy pink crept across the sky from the east. Brine sat up and looked around. ‘Uh, Peter,’ she said after a while. ‘You know you said things could be worse. I think they might be.’

The islande cluster of Minutes lies to the north-west of the Atlas Ocean. It consists of more than twenty islandes, which are so close together that you may sail between them in a matter of minutes. Beware, however, the sudden currents that can sweepe an unwary boat straighte out to sea.

People say the world was once made entirely of sea until Orion stole fire from the stars and drove back the water to make land. Brine wished he’d tried a bit harder. There was nothing to see but water in any direction. A speckle of dots to the east might be Minutes or might just be a result of staring at the rising sun.

Brine kicked Peter, who was cradling the broken starshells, his face rigid with concentration. ‘What are you doing?’

‘Checking how far out we are.’ A thin streak of orange flame leaped high in the air and blazed westward. Peter lowered his hands. ‘About twelve miles, if you’re interested.’

‘The only thing I’m interested in is getting home in one piece.’ Brine sat back and closed her stinging eyes. When she licked her lips, she tasted salt.

She didn’t remember what had happened when she was seven years old, didn’t remember anything before Farris Magus’s house. Had it been like this, she wondered? Drifting on the ocean in this same boat, no food, no water, no one to hear her cry. She groaned.

Peter touched her arm. ‘Brine, I can see something.’

Brine blinked. A dark smudge far away might have been an island, except that she knew there was no island out there. And islands didn’t usually appear to be heading towards you. A surge of panic jerked her upright.

They'd both heard stories of the ships that sailed the great oceans – and the type of people who sailed in them. Peter shaded his eyes and watched the ship take shape behind them. It was getting bigger every second, cutting through the waves like a knife through . . . well, through water.

Brine rowed with her eyes shut, her breath coming in ragged gulps. 'Do something.'

'I can't!' Peter gripped the starshell tight. 'I can make people forget things, and I can find things and pull them towards me, but that's it. Unless you want the ship pulled any closer?'

'No.'

Peter tried to grin but his lips felt glued together. 'Look on the bright side – how many people get to say they were captured by pirates?'

'None – because they're all dead.' Brine stopped rowing and stared at him. 'Wait – you can pull things?'

He nodded.

'Then pull Minutes.'

Peter's mouth fell open. She'd flipped, he thought. The night on the sea had been too much for her. He swallowed hard. 'Brine,' he said gently, 'you can't pull an island, it's stuck to the seabed.'

She leaned on the oars. 'And we're in a boat. Boswell's third law of motion, for goodness' sake – for every action, there's an opposite reaction.'

Peter's heart raced. You couldn't move yourself by pulling on something immovable. It was impossible. It was also their only chance. He glanced back at the ship. A black and white flag waved at them from the top of the main mast, and, either side, little strings of lanterns danced like tethered stars. Cupping the fragments of starshell in his hands, Peter raised them high. He felt the tug of the islands at once, heavy and solid as an anchor. He braced himself against the boat and pulled tentatively. The starshells flared, scorching his palms. The next try jerked him forward. He bashed his head on the floor of the boat. Brine pulled him up again. 'It's working. Try harder!'

Groaning, Peter locked every muscle, and heaved.

Curls of smoke rose from his fingers. The boat shuddered and began to speed up. Peter opened his eyes and grinned. He was doing it – he was actually doing it.

Brine screamed. 'Look out!'

Too late, Peter realised the ship had changed direction and was cutting across their path. His concentration scattered. The boat swung wildly as the starshells let out a final blaze of light and turned black, their magic exhausted.

Brine threw the oars down. 'Well, at least we tried.'

They stared up at a ship bigger than a house. Each plank that made up the hull was longer than their boat. High on the prow, in faded paint, they could make out letters. Half an 'O', the bottom strokes of an 'N'.

A rope uncurred and landed between them. They gazed in silence at the man who climbed down. He was short and so broad across the shoulders he was almost rectangular. His arms were blue with tattoos and thick enough to double up as oars. He grinned at them both, revealing grimy, off-white teeth. 'Ahoy, my hearties,' he said. 'Cheer up – you've just been rescued by Cassie O'Pia.'

THE VOYAGE OF THE ONION by Claire Fayers

SYNOPSIS

Misadventure lands Peter and Brine on board the *Onion*, the finest ship on the eight oceans. Then the Captain launches a quest to the gold-strewn top of the world and they can't really refuse to go along. Guided by the nefarious magician, Marfak West, they battle storms and sea-monsters until they uncover the true secret of the north – a source of magic with the power to reshape the world.

BIOGRAPHY

Claire started out writing romantic comedies for women's magazines. She turned her attention to novel writing after winning a place on the Welsh Academy's mentoring scheme. She now works in a science library and devotes all her free time to writing.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Love the classic middle grade interpretation of a pirate story. How fun!'

'Beautifully oddball characters, great for the age group. Really enjoyed the world and the original magic elements. Great exposition and world-building in general. Felt plausible, confident and authentic.'

'I loved the Voyage of the Onion. Delightful characters, great pace, totally unexpected. It's also an excellent example of limiting magic powers to great story effect.'

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TRAITOR GIRL

By Rachel Rivett

PROLOGUE

Listen! I'm about to take a risk that will put you in danger. I'm not sorry; I don't see I have a choice. All I can do is make this record so you'll know what happened and hope maybe then you'll know what to do. In my hand I hold a sliver of memory crystal. When I speak, the light within it pulses, remembering, so you can unlock the words and hear this story. I'll hide it for you and somehow you must find it. You must. Otherwise . . . we haven't a chance . . .

It's hard to know where to start. With the man whose eyes burnt blue as he held a sword to my throat; as he tore the heart from my world . . . ? No, before that. The fire was the beginning; when I woke to the sound of the world ending, to the screaming of the trees . . .

Before dawn. Smoke. The air alive with a burning rain of sparks and ashes. It wasn't happening, it couldn't be happening. I swatted at my bare arms, my singed hair, coughing, choking. The clash and shout of men and weapons beat at me on each hot gust of wind. Eyes watering, still half tangled in blanket, I wriggled on my elbows to the edge of the hill and looked down at the Forest that guards the Grove. Flames licked the branches, turning the green to leaping gold. I closed my eyes, my hands dragging through my hair. Who would do this? How would they dare? It was sacrilege to come here with weapons. Didn't they know the danger?

I lay with my cheek pressed to the earth and gulped the low air into my scorched lungs. My trees! My climbing oak; my towering beech: the best look-out point in all the forest; my willow swing across the stream. I brushed my eyes roughly with my fist. The loss was far more than that. Someone was trying to destroy the deep magic of the forest . . . the Grove . . .

The Grove, where the Jewel that holds the heart of the world in its matrix sits at the Sacred Spring . . .

I reached for my knife. I had to do something.

But then truth crept through me, bleak as poison.

This was my fault.

I was supposed to be the Seer, the Daughter of the Grove; the one who received the Visions that would protect us. Last night I had lain here on the Green Hill moon-bathing beneath an ink-dark sky. Soaking up spells to strengthen my gift I'd sought out Visions of what may-come-to-be. Now I woke to attack and destruction. A chill sweat broke out on my brow. The irony here was painfully, shamefully obvious. I was supposed to be the Seer. All night I'd begged for a Vision.

But I'd Seen nothing.

Nothing of this. Nothing at all.

It was almost funny.

I stayed frozen on the hillside listening to the cries, the striking of swords ringing from the edge of the forest. What should I do? I dug my fingers into the soft earth. Were my family there fighting for their lives? Had my stupid brother been right all along? For the thousandth time I wished I was a Warrior and not a Seer. How could I even call myself a Seer? I hadn't foreseen this.

But then . . . an idea. Perhaps these enemies of the Grove didn't know about me. Perhaps they hadn't yet found the Jewel. If I could go there now . . . and secret it away into the depths of the forest, the Old Ones would help me hide it. I chewed my thumbnail trying not to consider the holes in my plan. Whoever waged war on the Grove mustn't lay hands on the Jewel's immense power. The energy it holds could destroy a world.

But even as I thought this the shouting grew louder, carrying up the slope of the hill. The ground beneath me trembled with the heavy tramp of boots. They were coming. After all, they knew about me and now they sought me out. With fumbling hands I reached for my Seer's staff and tucked it in my belt. I knotted the tangled strands of my long hair to keep it from my eyes and clumsily fastened it with one of my few possessions: a bone pin. The pin had been amongst the gifts brought by pilgrims, back when pilgrims still came to seek inspiration at the Grove. My mother had laughed when she saw the pin; my wild hair was something of a family joke. But that had been in the days when she still smiled. Before my failure as a Seer had become such an embarrassment. Well, now I'd reached new depths and plummeted straight down to disaster.

A scream tore through the air as a life ended. Oh please not my parents. Not even my

stupid brother. Grimly, I put my knife between my teeth and began to crawl towards the burning forest . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Maya stood, slightly apart from the others, in the shadows of the old warehouse. She leaned against a pillar, her thumbs hooked in the knife belt slung across her hips. She could do this. She could look calm, indifferent. She could make sure no one noticed the way her hands trembled, the way her heart fluttered. No one must suspect her. Especially not Zedd. If they thought she was on to something they'd follow her. And that would ruin everything.

Maya looked down in an attempt to hide the smile that flickered over her lips. She always buzzed like this before the Scavenge, but today . . . today felt different. Today she really would find something special . . . something that would please the Chief, and earn her a true place in the gang.

How good it would be to finally belong!

Maya chewed her thumbnail and then forced herself to stop. If only the Chief would hurry up. It was so quiet; Zedd could probably hear the wild hammer of her heart over the soft murmur of voices. She pressed her hand against her chest to calm it, as somewhere in the distance, a bell chimed softly; like a peal from a bell tower. But surely there was nothing like that in the Dry Town? Frowning slightly, Maya turned her head, wanting to gauge the direction, but the note had already faded away. She shrugged. None of the rest of the gang seemed to have heard it. All eyes focused on the Chief's doorway. It must be time.

Maya watched from under her lashes as the tall man ducked under the dirty blanket that separated his office from the cavernous main room. He walked slowly through the pooled light cast by three high windows near the roof; the only ones not boarded up. Slightly stooped, his skin pale, his hair hanging lank to his jaw, an old blanket tied around his shoulders, he didn't look like much of a leader. But in his own way, he was. Hadn't he gathered up all these orphans of the Dry Town and offered them some protection? Maya studied him. His eyes were bright. A little too bright, perhaps. He looked ill.

In his hand the Chief held a tall wooden cup. Stopping beside the barrel

that held the Gang's water ration, he raised it in the air. Maya glanced at the others: at Fenn, the eldest of the older girls, her sweep of black hair half-hiding the frown that shadowed her features; at Edge, only seven, his face fierce with determination; at Cass and the little ones, eyes wide, unable to stop their tongues from licking their dry lips; at Zedd. Dear Goddess, his small, hard eyes looked right at her; and his lips mouthed something.

Maya flicked her eyes away and back to the Chief, fighting to keep her features calm. Zedd was quite far away but that didn't matter. It was clear what he'd said. The same thing as always: *traitor-girl*. Zedd had called her that from the day she'd been brought here, weak and confused. She was the girl with no memory. A question mark hung over her. A suspicion. She was a risk and she wasn't welcome, he'd made that plain. Always better not to attract his attention.

"Right!" The Chief took the ladle and scooped some of the precious water from the barrel. The air in the room seemed to tighten as thirty pairs of eyes watched it pour into the wooden cup. "As ever, this will be the reward for the one who returns from the Scavenge with the most significant find." He held up the cup, and Maya saw how his fingers glistened where a few drops of water had spilled. She pushed her lips together to stop herself from licking them. If Zedd knew how thirsty she was, he'd probably cut her ration. Or drink it himself.

"Remember," the Chief went on, "many things are useful: wood, rags, sacking, rope, bone, food, scrap metal; anything that can be reused. Young children, stick to the official refuse dumps. You others, if you wish to search those parts of the Dry Town recently evacuated, the risk is your own. If you are questioned by the Glass City's Patrol give them my name and I will try to help you. The river, though, is strictly out of bounds. If the Patrol catches you there they will assume you are a rebel and take you to the Glass City to be . . . dealt with." A slight shiver ran round the room and Cass buried her face in Fenn's skirt with a little yelp. Maya chewed her lip. She'd heard the rumours about the Patrols, they all had.

The Chief studied the group, his gaze travelling to each face. "Run into trouble at the river and you're on your own. Don't go there. Understand?"

There was some shifting and scuffling as people nodded or murmured their agreement. Maya studied the floor at her feet, saying nothing. You'd

have to be crazy to risk going to the river; but who liked being told what to do?

“But also,” the Chief’s voice broke slightly and he coughed, “also keep your eyes open for . . . ’ his words faltered and he glanced at Zedd as if for support. Maya risked a quick look towards Zedd and caught the brief jut of his chin; a silent communication. The Chief swallowed and went on, “Look out for anything unusual. For anything that seems to have . . . power. For anything strikingly out of place. For anything that seems to have a use you are not sure of, or a value that is beyond price because . . . because we are running out of time.”

He sighed and leaned heavily on the water barrel. Zedd strode across the space between them and pulled out a crate so the Chief could sit down. A low muttering had broken out amongst the others. Maya tucked a strand of tangled hair behind her ear, thinking. Most of that speech they’d heard before, but not the last part. Running out of time? What did he mean? She caught Edge’s gaze, his eyes coal-black; he raised his eyebrows at her, questioning, then wiggling them comically. She half-smiled and gave a slight shrug before quickly looking away. Zedd didn’t like the others talking to her. No point getting Edge in trouble.

The sound of the bell shimmered through her again, a silvery whisper that was almost a voice, that felt like a plea. The walls tilted and blurred, and Maya pressed her fingers to her temples as the room span around her. She stood, waiting for the sensation to pass, her stomach queasy, her skin sheening with a shivery sweat. If only she could get out into the air and breathe.

As her head quietened down she wiped her damp face with the sleeve of her shirt and glanced round, eyes narrowed. Why did no one else seem to hear it? Fenn spoke to the other girls; Edge pulled faces to make the littlest ones laugh. Could it be . . . ? She shook her head at the silliness of the idea, but the thought persisted. Was the sound in her head? She did get weird things sometimes: pictures almost too brief to see; words that made no particular sense; but never anything like this. The sound didn’t hurt exactly, but it tugged at her, insistent. Pulling her outside.

Maya hugged herself as feelings bubbled and thrilled inside her like a spring. What if there was something calling out to her; something she

could find and bring back? But even as she thought this the feeling pooled and puddled. What if there wasn't? And even if there was she'd likely mess it up. Or she wouldn't be able to find it. Or worse, someone else might find it first. Maya eased her head back and scrunched up her shoulders, trying to loosen the taut muscles. The effort of keeping her expression calm was making her jaw ache. If the Chief would just hurry up and finish so she could go out and look for it, whatever it was. What was taking so long?

Zedd was leaning over, talking to the Chief in a low urgent whisper. The Chief listened, head bowed, then gestured with impatience. "Fetch it, Zedd," he said with some of his old authority. "They'll have to know sooner or later."

Still scowling, Zedd disappeared into the Chief's room and returned with a small device. He placed it carefully on the dirty floor. Maya leaned forward to see. It was impossibly smooth and black. Unnatural. It was from the Glass City, it had to be. The thought made her scalp tingle.

The Chief raised his head to address them all. "I received this today. From the City. From Lord Crow, himself. Every house and warehouse and factory in our section of the Dry town was given a device like this today. You know what that means?"

"It means the City's coming for us!" Edge cried it out, his voice high with surprise.

The Chief nodded. "It seems our time has finally come."

Maya felt her heart twist inside her and made an effort to keep her expression calm. Could it be true?

The Chief leaned towards the black device and pressed a tiny raised button with his finger.

Maya gasped and stepped back. They all did. Some of the smaller children shrieked and ran to hide themselves in Fenn's skirts. There were rumours of Lord Crow's strange magics but this . . . Lord Crow had sent an image of himself, small but somehow staggering. It hung in the air, perfect in every detail, as if he were really there. A young, handsome man, eyes devastatingly blue. His golden hair shone as if he were bathed in sunlight. His presence made the room warmer, brighter. He seemed to look directly into Maya's eyes, to speak straight to her heart, his clear voice ringing out in welcome.

“My people, you have waited so patiently, and in difficult conditions. But soon I will reward your patience. I will make up for your suffering. The City is coming. Prepare to feel its embrace. No more struggling in the Dry Town. Now is the time for you to share my dream, for us to dream the same dream. There will be water for all. Knowledge. Harmony. Innovative work and reward. You will be looked after. *I* will look after you. Take heart.” He held out his arms as if to embrace them. The image snapped off.

Maya let out a long slow breath. Her face, her fingertips, the back of her knees all felt flushed with a curious, confusing heat. It was tantalising to glimpse the magic of Lord Crow: a promise of rescue from the squalor and danger and thirst of life in the Dry Town. Just think! Water whenever you wanted it. She couldn’t wait for Lord Crow and his Glass City to come and rescue her. But then she sighed. It was no use getting too excited. The Glass City sent these messages out ages before you were evacuated. It might be another six moons, and there was a lot of surviving to do in the meantime. A lot of not-getting-killed. Like today for instance. Today the important thing was to survive the Scavenge.

The gang crowded round the device talking and laughing quietly, daring each other to touch its strange surface. Maya edged forward with them until she was close to where the Chief and Zedd were talking. She crouched down and picked up Cass who’d been knocked over and had scraped her knee.

Zedd nodded, slowly. “So it’s come then. The City’s coming.”

The Chief stared broodingly at the now-silent device. “As we knew it would. The City grows and grows. It seems unstoppable.”

Zedd blinked. “Unless . . .”

Unless? Unless what? Maya looked up, unthinking, and found Zedd was looking straight at her, his eyes narrowed. “Listening were you?” he hissed. He stood up abruptly. “Right then, everybody out for the Scavenge. Find what you can and bring it back here to me. You know the rules.”

Maya fumbled to set Cass on her feet, nearly toppling over in her hurry to slip out with the others. Stupid to be so careless. Stupid to attract Zedd’s attention like that.

“Not you!” Zedd slapped his hand down on her shoulder. “You can stay here and guard the Warehouse.”

CHAPTER TWO

Maya jerked away, trying to shake him off. "What, now? No way, Zedd, that's not fair! It's not even my turn."

He raised his eyebrows. "You arguing with me?"

"No . . ." Maya swayed; she felt dizzy. She tried to stop herself from speaking and found she couldn't. "It's just . . . no one's raided the warehouse for moons. We probably don't even need a guard." Her voice came out all high and squeaky. Her eyes followed the last stragglers as they picked up their sacks and left the warehouse.

"You think?" Zedd stood in front of her, arms folded. "News-sheets reported two Dry Towners killed by a rebel-raid in Section 9."

Maya swallowed. "Did they take the water ration?"

"Every last barrel. It'll do you good to prove you can be trusted, traitor-girl. Do a good job and maybe I won't tell the Chief to throw you out. Or maybe I will." He laughed, picking up a long sharpened stick and throwing it at her. She leapt sideways as the point skimmed past her leg and clattered on the floor. "Don't say I don't look after you." He turned away, walking quickly across the cavernous space and out the door.

A plague on Zedd! Picking up the stick, Maya paced the deserted warehouse striking out at the stone pillars and wooden crates. It wasn't much of a weapon. And no good at all if rebels came to loot, curse him. That was probably his plan. Let the rebels finish her off, and then he'd be rid of her. She stopped and leaned her forehead against a pillar. Her lungs hurt, she wasn't breathing properly.

She needed to think. She needed a plan.

If Zedd told the Chief to throw her out, would he? Probably. Zedd was his deputy, after all. She knocked her forehead gently against the pillar. She couldn't bear to be stuck in here while the others went off on the Scavenge. She'd been so sure she'd find something amazing. And now it was even more important to find something. And quick. There was no way she'd give it to Zedd; but if she could get it to the Chief direct, he'd be so pleased Zedd would have to back off. Maybe then things would change around here.

Her vision blurred and she closed her eyes as the sound of the bell sang through her once again, louder now; urgent. She could feel its vibration ringing in her blood, rattling her bones. It was hard to ignore . . . like the

crying of an animal caught in a trap. Her heart reached out for it . . . whatever it was.

As the sound faded, Maya threw down the staff and ran to the spyholes on each of the four walls of the warehouse. She lifted the dark, heavy cloth nailed loosely over them and looked out. The streets were quiet with not a rebel in sight. She turned and leaned back against the wall, thinking. She would be quick. She would run all the way and be back before the others. For a moment her eyes fell on the water barrel. Her mouth was so dry, but it was no use taking any. They'd know, they always did. They marked the water level. And besides, it wouldn't be fair on the others. She thought of wide-eyed Cass, always thirsty. Maya often shared her own ration with the little girl. Making up her mind she ran to where the boards were loose on the south side of the warehouse and slipped out.

She walked quickly, not thinking this way that way, letting her feet follow their own path. Growing was the sense of something waiting for her, willing her on. It was still early. The dusty streets were quiet round the warehouse. There were a few morning cook-fires lit, and the rich, spicy smell of dry-bean stew drew the odd Dry Towner out to trade for a bowlful and then squat to eat.

Once it would have been lively, so Fenn said, with markets full of weavers selling cloth and spinners selling thread; stalls full of embroidery and carpentry and clay pots; full of colourful bartering, arguments and laughter. But that was when the old Governor had been in charge. He'd enjoyed trade with the Old Town that grew up and thrived around his great manor house. It was when he became frail that Lord Crow had come, a relative some said (though no one seemed to know for sure), from some far off place, (though no one seemed to know where).

Maya looked up at the shining spires of the Glass City that towered over the roofs of the Dry Town like a diamond mountain. Lord Crow had brought new ideas and new people with strange skills. He hired workers from the Old Town and built the great dam across the river, stemming its flow, to give him the power he needed to create and fuel his great City. He pumped the waste into the little water that still flowed, and to prevent what was left of the Old Town from dying of thirst he delivered water rations in barrels to sustain them until the City could come for them. And so the

Dry Town was born. And now it waited. Half dying of thirst, unable to compete with the extraordinary machines and goods made in the City, the people endured, desperate for the City to absorb them.

Maya let her hair fall forward to hide her face as she passed the closed wooden doors of the Cloud House, quickening her pace as the doormen leered at her. Probably half the town were in there, drifting in that other world the Cloud Flower seeds offered them, their eyes blank and staring. Did it make the waiting bearable? Perhaps, like her, they were dreaming of their new life in the Glass City.

She walked and walked, so lost in thought that it was only when she stopped to catch her breath that she realised how far she'd come. Maya hesitated, shivering, at the entrance to a narrow alley. Had she made a mistake? Surely, this couldn't be right. Oily wisps of mist drifted through the alley to curl its thin fingers around her.

The forbidden river. Why did it have to be here of all places, to the one place she couldn't search? And yet the sense of something waiting for her was so strong it was almost an ache. She heard again the whispering shiver of sound encouraging her. Pulling her shawl up over her head, Maya glanced up and down the street then ducked into the alley.

TRAITOR GIRL by Rachel Rivett

SYNOPSIS

Maya is the girl with no memory, no home, no friends, nothing at all to lose. But then she finds something everyone wants: a jewel with the power to change the world. Seduced by Lord Crow and courted by Kez, quicksilver member of the rebels, it's impossible to act without betraying someone. When everyone seeks to control her thinking, Maya finds there's only one thing left to do. What she does best. The unthinkable.

BIOGRAPHY

Author of three picture books, Rachel Rivett has an MA in Writing for Children from Winchester University. She has run a young people's drama group and worked with children at risk of exclusion. She home-educates her four free-range children, believing that the best learning happens when people follow their hearts.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Good, taut writing style, with a vivid evocation of place.'

'Confident, lyrical writing, and the feeling of the world nicely depicted. Nicely drawn characters and good exposition for the most part. I wanted to read on.'

'The prologue is arresting and the world-building clear, detailed and convincing. Maya's voice is strong and distinctive, making her instantly relatable. The contrast between the prologue and the first chapter settings is intriguing.'

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A GOOD HIDING

By Shirley-Anne McMillan

CHAPTER ONE – NOLLAIG

In the bathroom I stood on the sticky lino shifting my weight from one foot onto the other, brushing my teeth in front of the mirror and waiting for the test to work. I already knew what it would say. I brushed and brushed until my gums started to bleed. The little plastic gadget was sitting on the edge of the bath. I rinsed and spat and dropped my toothbrush into my bag.

The rain tapped against the window as if somebody needed my attention. If there's one thing you can guarantee in Belfast in November, it's rain. I mean, you get rain all year round, but it's a sure thing from about September on. The skies get darker, the sun starts struggling to get up in the morning and you can see the shadows of the clouds projected onto Cave Hill. I used to lie in bed with the curtains open and watch them and imagine what they meant, like they were messages from God or the devil or something. Like those people who see Jesus in a piece of toast.

When I woke up that morning there was a shadow on the south face that was shaped like an angel. My alarm went off and I slammed my hand down hard on it and hoped that Dad hadn't heard. I waited for a second until I could hear the loud drone of his boozy snoring and then I pulled back one side of the curtains. It looked like an angel to me anyway. It had a lumpy triangular shaped body and two fanned-out wings. Like when you're a wee kid and you make your body into an angel picture by lying down in the snow and waving your arms and legs about. But the more I looked at the shadow the less it seemed like something special. Sometimes you're just too tired to imagine good things. And then the sun

broke through the bruises of the sky and chased it away. It started to rain and I closed the curtain.

Dad always sleeps until about lunchtime. He'll get up, forget to eat anything, pour himself a whiskey and put the telly on, just in time for some rubbish lunchtime quiz show or something. He wasn't always a waster. He used to drive the bus to school, which was good, because I always got there on time, and bad, because it meant I could never mitch off. Different now, of course. Sometimes I'd come home from school and he'd still be in bed, which was fine by me because it meant I didn't have to talk to him. I could get changed and go out. Some days I didn't have to watch him wasting his life at all.

I got out of bed and pulled on my freezing jeans. I was set to skip school that day but it meant an early start. Glen High is totally on-the-ball about kids mitching off. They normally catch up with you about 11.30 a.m. You might think there are no possible advantages to having an alcoholic da but actually there are. One of the main advantages was that it gave me an extra couple of hours of freedom on days when I couldn't face school. But on this particular day I had loads to do and even with the extra time I had to hurry. I found my bra and shirt under a towel and took a breath as I stopped and had a look around the room. Clothes on the floor, a dirty mug, a couple of books. It wasn't much to say goodbye to but it still felt a bit sad. It's not every day you leave home.

There wasn't a choice any more. I'd thought about leaving before, loads of times, but now I had to make a move. You can put up with a lot I reckon, loads of people do, but then something will happen and you have to do something about it. It was going to mean being tough, really tough, forgetting about dreams and angel shadows and stupid romantic ideas. It was going to mean forgetting about Stephen.

I found my red boots and wound the laces around the hooks. Quicker to put on trainers but I wasn't going without my old boots. The blood rushed to my head as I bent over. I made a mental note to eat something.

Stephen was going to be so pissed off. But shut up, I couldn't think of him now. Most people wouldn't notice I was gone. *Most people*. That was the main thing. There wouldn't be any internet campaigns to bring me back. Even if Stephen wanted to, there'd be no one to email because he

was the only one that cared. There's this thing that Ms Laker the drama teacher used to say: 'If life gives you lemons, make lemonade.' It's meant to mean that if your life's crap then you should turn it into something brilliant instead. It's a stupid thing to say though because you need sugar to make lemonade and what if you haven't got any? So I had decided: my life was full of lemons and I had no sugar so the choice was either put up with mouldy old fruit or kill myself, or, option three, go and look somewhere else for something good – forget about the dumb lemons and the stupid things teachers say and find out if I can make things different on my own, somewhere else. But it would mean really on my own – no Dad, no friends with good intentions that might tout on me when things got tough. Just me.

I found my old black duffel bag jammed down the side of the bed. Big enough to hold what I needed, but small enough that it wouldn't make people wonder where I was going. I sat on the bed and emptied it out: a bus receipt, half a packet of Chewits and fifty pence. I unwrapped one of the sweets. It was half melted and it stuck to the paper but I ate it anyway and chucked the rest in the bin with the bus ticket.

Here is what I put in my bag:

Twenty £10 notes. I'd been nicking one out of Dad's wallet every week for ages now, in case of emergencies, and this was an emergency. I shoved them into my wallet.

Packet of chocolate biscuits

Tube of Pringles (I popped it open and ate three at once)

Three apples (for vitamins)

Two small bottles of Coke

A load of underwear, two T-shirts and my big green sweater

Phone

Personal CD player and headphones. (My mum's. I know it's sad not to have an MP3 player, but it wasn't an emergency so I never got myself one.)

Travelling light. As light as I could for someone in my position.

First thing: a letter. I hated doing it this way but I needed to be sure no one was going to follow me. I rooted around to find something to write on – the back of an old piece of GCSE coursework about deprived housing in our area.

Dear Dad,

It was impossible to write. I opened the curtains again and looked at the hills, big and solitary on the horizon. Maybe Dad wouldn't survive this. But he was almost dead now anyway. A zombie dad. He hardly spoke, only went out if he was going to the offices. All he did was watch telly and empty his glass. A fat tear splashed on the page in front of me and the words swam into a blur. I scrunched up the note, wiped my face with the bottom of my T-shirt and started again.

Dear Dad,

I have to go. You won't see me again so don't try looking. Sort out the drinking, it's killing you.

Nollaig

I read it back and it sounded cold, which wasn't exactly how I felt. He didn't deserve my note, the old bastard. But I needed to leave something so he knew I'd meant to go. I could imagine him reading it and thinking 'about bloody time'.

It would have to do. It felt hard to breathe, like if I screamed or something the thing blocking my throat might come out. I couldn't do that. I had to stay tough. But standing in front of the bathroom mirror I didn't feel tough. Because, despite running away from everyone and leaving everything behind, there was one thing I would have to carry with me, and I needed to make sure it was really there.

I held my breath and picked up the test and there it was, the little blue line connecting what I'd imagined to how things really were. I knew it would be there but when I saw it I doubled over, just managing to lurch to the toilet bowl before throwing up. Great, now I had to flush. Dad stirred next door. He called out in a sleepy slur, 'Noll? Wha's goin' on?'

I used to have this dream when I was wee, a nightmare really, about being cornered by a monster that I couldn't see properly; I could only hear it snarling and see the light glinting off its teeth. Sometimes when Dad spoke, even when he was so drunk that I knew he couldn't do anything, it felt like his voice was so big and low that someday it might actually become

a thing on its own and attack you. I wished I wasn't so afraid of him. It wasn't always like that. He used to be a normal dad, a normal person, the kind that drinks tea in the morning and might even eat some toast. But that seemed like a long time ago now.

'It's not the mornin' yet, Da. Go back to sleep.'

'Urgh.'

A typical response. I tiptoed toward his room listening to the slow, rhythmic snoring.

Standing in the hall outside his room I noticed that the picture was crooked. Mum's picture. She'd found it in the garage when we moved in here. It was a large print called 'The Three Marys' and it showed three women standing in long robes looking a bit mystical and swoony – like they were all in love or something. They were all gazing up into the sky and clutching their hands to their chests. The print was faded and had a green tinge to it. It was rippled in the middle because it hadn't been framed properly.

I hated that picture. It seemed stupid to have it up in the hall, romantic Bible bollocks in the middle of our crappy lives. But it was Mum's and she had liked it so I left it up. I stretched my hand out to straighten The Three Marys and as I reached up and touched the frame the first Mary looked at me. I swear to God she did. She'd been looking sadly up to heaven and when I touched the frame her head moved and her eyes met mine.

It must have been a split second – a tiny moment – but when she looked at me I noticed her eyes were black like mine and it was like everything except our eyes looking at each other disappeared. I missed a breath and pulled my hand back and the print swung back into its crooked position and the Mary was looking at heaven again and I snapped back to where I'd been – the hallway, the blue line of the pregnancy test, the note in my hand.

The pregnancy test. I suppose getting shocked into reality can make you a bit crazy. I mean, I'd already known really. I'd started to *feel* it. My belly had this slight curve to it that it never had before and I knew that soon I'd be able to see it really clearly. Everyone would. That's why it was time to go. But until I saw the result it was like I could keep it inside me – like a secret story, just for me. And now there was a pregnancy test telling the

story too: yes, you are going to have a baby, yes, you are going to be a mother, yes, yes, yes, this is real and there will be another person, there *is* another person under your skin. Maybe it was normal to see mad things when you felt mad. I straightened the picture and shoved the note underneath Dad's bedroom door, crept downstairs and out, into the wet morning light.

CHAPTER TWO – STEPHEN

Oh. My. God. Batty McFelan and his daily friggin' OBSESSION with school uniform. It's like he'd start picking on people's uniform if he couldn't think of anything else to do. Today it was my shoes. So what if Converse shoes aren't 'school regulation'? (They're black with sliver trim – I got them ordered from New York and I'm telling you, they are bloody class.) I'd been wearing them since the start of term. And I know he noticed before today. Everyone noticed before today. Hello? That's the whole point! God. He was jealous, probably. Sitting there in his dog-poo coloured suit taking the register like he was bored out of his head. At least he gets paid to be bored. At least he didn't have to go to double maths first lesson.

'Wear them tomorrow and it's detention,' he said.

'Aye, Sir.'

'And don't roll your eyes at me, lad. I'm watching you th'day!'

I turned towards Mark for some moral support and, get this, Mark totally turned away and started chatting to Paula Magee! All right, I wasn't meant to acknowledge him in public but a sympathetic look might have been nice. Urgh. That was my morning. Not even nine am and it was already a completely rubbish day. And Nollaig wasn't even in. Who was I gonna bitch about McFelan to? I hoped she was just late. We'd be able to send notes during maths at least.

But she never showed up. I texted her a few times. No reply. It wasn't particularly unusual for her to be absent. Some days she just didn't bother coming in, especially if she'd had a heavy time with her auld man the night before. He used to be OK, Nollaig's da. He was always a bit stern and stiff – the type that doesn't give much away – but most men round here are like that – you can't tell what's going on with them. It was different in my last school. People – I mean men, and boys – were a bit, well, softer round the edges. Anyway, in the last couple of years Nollaig's da had got worse. It's

hard to remember the times when he wasn't always drunk, and sometimes he gives her a slap. She doesn't like me talking about it really. Things are bad for Nollaig. The days when she comes to school and her eyes are red and she says hello with her teeth gritted – those are the days I know not to ask. I know that sounds bad – like if you're someone's friend you should ask, but trust me I've learnt when to ask and when to shut up, and so has everyone else, even the teachers.

In maths we were doing quadratic equations and you could tell that nobody could be arsed. Craig and Arnie were giggling at the back of the class like a couple of primary school kids and every so often they'd look over at Emma McConkey and burst out laughing, but you knew they were doing it deliberately. Emma was ignoring them, facing the board, looking as if she was concentrating really hard on the equation that Mrs Poole was drawing in big characters with a green pen. Rumour had it that Emma had been down the reccy with Arnie last week but she'd refused to give him what he was after. She'd pay for that.

'Oh, Craig and Aaron, put a sock in it!' said Mrs Poole, finally snapping.

'Put a cock in *what*, Miss?'

'That's it! OUT!' She indicated the door.

Arnie fist-bumped Craig as he swaggered out. I glanced over at Mark but he was pretending to be engrossed in the equations too. Arsehole. Why did I put up with him? But I knew why. When we were together, alone, when he wasn't pretending I didn't exist, he made me forget the way he treated me in school. I used to try and write it down so that I'd remember: 'Today Mark was a total prick in PE. He actually sniggered when Craig called me Queen of the Flower Fairies, as if he's not one himself! Twat!' But no matter how I tried to remember, I always forgot as soon as he paid me any attention. I hated myself for liking him.

'Stephen Corr. Snap out of it and start getting some work done please!' Her voice was tense. The McThick Twins had rattled her.

'Yes, Miss.' I picked up my pen.

'He's dreaming about bums and fit blokes, Miss!' called a voice at the back of the room.

'Right, Craig!' she slammed the board marker down on her desk and the whole class jumped. 'I've had enough of this today. You can leave too.'

‘Wha?? I didn’t swear! I was only messin’!’

‘Out. Now.’

‘SAKE!’

Craig scraped his chair back as noisily as he could, stood up and slammed it under the table again. He picked up his bag and gave Mrs Poole the evil eye as he left. She held his gaze, giving him the evil eye back. It was brilliant. The best thing to happen in maths in ages. I smiled over at Emma and she smiled back. I wished Nollaig was here to see this. It was about time for Craig to get put in his place. Arnie was the really nasty one – I reckoned there wasn’t much hope for him – but Craig? He was just a follower – Arnie’s shadow, an arrogant wee shite. His family were loaded and everyone knew he’d get away with anything he liked at school because of who his da was and how much publicity he gave the school. When Daddy’s in charge of half the country you can do what you like, can’t you? School fairs, Christmas concerts, the opening of the new sports hall, there was Craig in the paper, like he was a model citizen, beaming out of his smart designer gear, with his posh lad boy-band haircut and his fat da, Councillor William McRoberts, standing there like he was Jesus Christ himself.

‘What are you smirking at, Stephen?’

I snapped out of my daydream.

‘Nothing, Miss.’

But it wasn’t nothing. I’d be smirking all day remembering the look of shock on Craig’s face when Mrs Poole kicked him out. Sweet!

But I wasn’t smiling for long.

CHAPTER THREE – NOLLAIG

Leaving the house was easy. The gate squeaked as I closed it and I didn’t bother doing the latch. I felt a little thrill run down my back thinking that I’d never have to be back here again. People feel sorry for kids who run away but I bet no one runs away unless it’s worse for them at home. I wondered how many kids had made it. How many had got away and lived happily ever after. You only hear about the ones who end up becoming crack-heads and prostitutes or . . . let’s not think of that. That wasn’t going to be me.

There was a child’s plastic Winnie-the-Pooh football in the next garden.

One day maybe I'd have a house; maybe I'd be buying my kid plastic junk from the Pound Shop. Maybe everything would be OK. It had to be. I turned right and made my way to the corner, going over my plan.

Up until I missed my period four months ago everything was the same as it always had been. Boring school (but at least Stephen was there), hanging around town until as late as I could, coming home and trying to avoid Dad, doing whatever I needed to do (sometimes nicking a couple of quid off him, sometimes going out again for some food at the Spar, sometimes even doing some homework, depending on what mood I was in). But then, boom, everything was different and I ended up pregnant. Yeah, I know it doesn't happen quite like that, believe me I know, but I didn't want to think about how it happened.

I know I should have done the pregnancy test straight away but it wasn't that easy. For one thing, I was busy. There's lots to sort out when you've got a dad like mine. The day-to-day stuff like getting food and having clean clothes – those things are easy. It's fooling everyone else that's the hard part. People notice things. Too many missed homeworks; falling asleep in class; bills not getting paid on time; the odd bruise on your face. You have to have a supply of stories that never run out. Your brain's buzzing all the time thinking of what's around the corner; who will be the next one to spot that your dad isn't behaving like a dad.

And then you have to think about yourself too – about what'll happen if you do the things that other kids do to get through it. Did I feel like taking the stuff that Lee Riddell was selling round the back of Tesco? Too right I did.

'Imagine how great it would be to *know* when you're next going to feel good?' he said to me one time, grabbing my hand and pressing two of the little pills into my palm. 'Imagine having control over it. That's what this stuff does. Life's shit, but you take this and will feel amazing. Nothing will hurt, you'll want to be alive, you'll *feel fucking alive* . . .'

But I put them back into his hand and he shrugged and walked off, shaking his head like I was a total loser. You just have to look at the kids who follow Lee round to see how much control they have. Their eyes are dead – they're like ghosts. But I'd still been tempted. I wanted to have that control so badly and the best I could do was to console myself every night,

as Dad snorted and stumbled around the house, with the idea that at least things can't get worse.

And then they did get worse.

Imagine waiting for that private girl thing that's meant to happen every month . . . and it being a week late. And then two weeks. And then three. And you know why. Every time you go to use the loo you hope it will be there and it's not and you *know* why. And you also know that as soon as you stop waiting for it to come you're going to have to start thinking about what's in its place. Thinking about it makes you feel sick. Or maybe that's not the reason you're feeling sick. And the thought of it makes you feel sick again. And you don't know whether you're actually, really sick or . . . You do a Google search on 'periods stopped, feeling sick, not pregnant' just to see if maybe it could possibly be something else, something else, please something else.

But it's not something else.

Imagine that.

A GOOD HIDING by Shirley-Anne McMillan

SYNOPSIS

Nollaig decides to run away when she learns she is pregnant. Aided by Stephen, she plans to hide in the crypt of a nearby church. Events take an unexpected turn when they find a bra in the vicar's room. As they blackmail the vicar into helping them, eventually learning his secret, Stephen and Nollaig also find out more about one another than they had ever anticipated. A young adult story with hints of magical realism.

BIOGRAPHY

Shirley-Anne McMillan is a teacher and writer from Co. Down, Northern Ireland where she divides her time between parenting, teaching, writing, and running a Gay Straight Alliance high school group. Shirley-Anne attended Queen's University in Belfast and studied for an MA in Creative Writing at Manchester Metropolitan University.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Strong, interesting opening. Nice voice and some lovely writing – "The sun broke through the bruises of the sky". Good sense of these characters' world, intriguing.'

'I love Stephen. We need more strong gay characters in UK YA.'

'Fresh, immediate voice and a very engaging beginning. Authentic dialogue and a likeable, sympathetic main character. I wanted to know what would happen to her.'

Contact: mistertumnus12@gmail.com

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FIRE GIRL

By Matt Ralphs

PROLOGUE

Darkwood Forest, England, 1666

Thirteen years after the end of the Witch War

Mary Applegate awoke with a lump of fear lodged in her throat. *There's someone in my room*, she thought.

She lay still as a corpse, listening, smelling, sensing for the presence – the *thing* – she felt sure was watching her, but all she heard were whispering trees and the distant screech of an owl. There was nothing to explain the unease plucking at her nerves, nothing except a faint coppery smell, like warm blood.

Her elbows cracked as she sat up in bed. 'Foolish old woman,' she said with a shake of her head. 'There's nothing here that hasn't been conjured up in your own mind. Dreams, that's all. Just dreams.'

Cold air prickled her skin. The kitchen fire must have gone out. Wrapping a blanket around her shoulders, she clambered out of bed and padded downstairs. A draught blew through the creaking front door, carrying in the autumn smells of dead leaves and decay.

'Door's blown open again,' she muttered, closing it and sliding the bolt across. 'I'll get around to fixing it one of these days.'

The plaster walls and wooden beams of her forest cabin were rough under her fingers as she hobbled through the kitchen to the fireplace. 'Not quite dead yet,' she said, feeling weak heat rising from the grate. Flames crackled as she stirred the embers with a poker and threw on a few logs.

‘I won’t be able to sleep now,’ she grumbled. ‘I may as well brew some tea.’

The silence bothered her. The dark world Mary lived in had become more oppressive since the death of her goose-familiar, Gander. She missed his voice and the sound of webbed feet slapping on the floorboards. A pang of sadness shot through her as she remembered laying him into the grave.

Sighing, she hung a kettle over the fire and settled down at the table to wait for the water to boil. The room warmed up, lulling her into a doze.

Mary was woken by a torrent of furious banging at the front door. She clutched her heart, wincing as pain lanced down her arm. No one visited her. No one knew where she lived. Or so she had thought.

‘Who’s there?’ she said, climbing unsteadily to her feet and creeping towards the door. ‘What do you want?’ There was no reply.

This is my home, she thought. I won’t be made to feel afraid in it.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped outside. The cold bit hard and the air was brittle with frost. Birds fidgeted in the trees, their wings rustling like parchment.

Ravens, Mary thought. An unkindness of them.

‘Cold as a grave tonight.’

The speaker was close enough for Mary to feel his breath on her cheek. Heart banging, she stepped back and stumbled over the doorstep.

‘May I come in?’

The man’s soft, deep voice made her think of quicksand, and as he sidled into the cabin she smelt damp mud and feathers.

‘Who are you?’ she said, turning on the spot to follow his movements.

‘I’m just a traveller seeking shelter from the cold. Did I startle you?’

Mary hid her fear behind a frown. ‘Not at all. It takes more than a late night visitor to frighten me.’

‘Is that so?’ A chair creaked as he sat down at the table.

He sounds big, Mary thought.

‘My name is Nicolas Swyer,’ he said, ‘and I thank you for your hospitality. My, what a lovely fire.’

Mary felt a stab of annoyance when she heard his muddy boots grate

against the floorboards. *Coming in here and messing up my clean floor*, she thought. *Cheek.*

‘Are you making tea?’ Swyer said. ‘I’d appreciate a cup to warm me.’

Mary gritted her teeth. ‘You’d be most welcome.’

‘I don’t suppose you get many visitors, living as you do so deep in the forest.’

‘None at this hour, certainly.’ Mary carefully poured hot water into the teapot. ‘Are you lost?’ She gathered two cups from the sink and sat down opposite Swyer. The spoon chinked as she stirred the tea.

‘Allow me,’ he said, taking the teapot from her. His skin felt clammy. Course hairs bristled on the back of his hands. ‘I’m going to Rivenpike,’ he continued, ‘where I have business to attend to.’

‘Rivenpike?’ she said.

‘That’s right. Do you know it?’

She heard a trickle as he poured the tea. ‘I used to. I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Rivenpike was Purged by Lord Cromwell’s Witch Hunters months ago. Not a single soul was spared. It’s a ghost town now, so they say.’

‘Do they now? Nonetheless, to Rivenpike I am bound. But I took this detour to visit you . . . Blind Mary Applegate.’

‘How do you know my name?’ she said, nearly choking on her drink.

‘I know all about you, gandrieth,’ he said. ‘I know why you live alone. I know who blinded you, and why they did it. I know exactly who and what you are.’

Fear tightened around Mary’s throat. ‘Are you a Witch Hunter?’

Swyer chuckled. ‘On the contrary, they’ve been chasing me for years. Tell me, Mary, why have you hidden yourself away in Darkwood?’

‘It’s the only place I’m safe.’ She fiddled nervously with a silver bracelet around her wrist.

‘Not any more. These days Cromwell’s Witch Hunters venture further into the forests to root out our kind.’

Mary picked up her cup, aware of her trembling fingers.

‘Did you know that the Coven is gathering again?’ he continued.

‘I still have some contacts from the old days, and I’d heard rumours. It sounds to me like the Coven has chosen a dark road since the war ended. I want no part of it.’

‘So what *do* you want?’

Mary leant forward and hissed, ‘To be left alone.’

Swyer tutted. ‘The world has changed, Mary. It’s become dangerous for we magic wielders. Not a day passes without more of us being betrayed and taken to the Tower. Cromwell is hell-bent on destroying us, and I say it’s time to fight back.’

‘My fighting days are over,’ Mary said. ‘I’m too old for what you say is coming.’

‘Come now, Mary, you have more strength than you give yourself credit for.’ Swyer’s smooth voice oozed into her ears. ‘And right now I need your help.’

‘And what do you think a tired old hedge witch like me can do?’ She flinched as Swyer laid his cold hand over hers. It felt as if his thumb was nothing more than a blunt stump.

‘I want information,’ he said, squeezing her fingers, ‘information that I am prepared to go to great lengths to get from you.’

‘Why should I tell you anything?’ Mary said, hating the tremor in her voice.

‘Because I’m going to give you something in exchange.’ Mary heard Swyer stand up and stride behind her, wincing as he grabbed her head with both hands and pressed his fingertips against her eyes. She cried out as bright white pain stabbed into her skull. When he let go her skin felt hot and bruised. ‘Open your eyes,’ he said.

Mary obeyed, heart thumping. At first all she saw was the usual blackness, then dark colours swirling as the blindness that had veiled her sight for decades slowly lifted. Tears filled her eyes as shapes swam into focus: her half-empty cup, the teapot, the dining table covered in scratches, the glowing hearth, and shelves lined with jars and copper pans.

Swyer loomed behind her, casting a hunched shadow on the wall; she couldn’t tell if it was a trick of the light, but it looked as though there was something wrong with his back.

Shivering with shock, Mary looked at her hands and saw crooked fingers, winding veins and the shape of bones through tissue-thin skin. ‘I look so old,’ she said.

‘Time has less mercy than I do, *gandrieth*,’ Swyer whispered, his breath

chilling her neck. 'I've given you back your sight. *Quid pro quo*. Now you will answer my questions.' She felt his hands on her shoulders, squeezing until the bones grated. 'We need the Pureheart and the power she wields. You know who I'm talking about, and I know you know where she's hiding.'

'I shan't tell you anything,' Mary failed to conjure the courage to turn and face him. 'Now get out of my home.'

'I was hoping for some gratitude,' Swyer sighed. 'Never mind. I have other ways to get what I want.' His shadow straightened up. 'Rawhead, come out and greet our hostess.'

The door to the cupboard under the stairs creaked open, unleashing a smell of blood so thick that Mary could taste it.

'Come here, Rawhead,' Swyer said. 'Come and sit at the table.'

A shadow moved inside the cupboard, and then a membrane-smearing head, smooth and featureless except for two gaping nostrils, emerged into the light.

The thing that watched me as I slept! Mary thought. She flung a hand to her throat, fighting a rising tide of panic.

The demon's crook-backed body had been skinned, revealing a tortured mass of flesh, muscle and pulsing veins. It loped towards the table, its black claws gouging the floorboards.

'Demon,' she whispered. 'But how . . . ?' She was so fixated on the repulsive apparition in front of her that she hardly noticed Swyer's thumbless hand reach down and pick up his cup.

'Delicious tea,' he said. 'Most refreshing.'

'How dare you bring this hell-spawn into my house?' Mary said. She still couldn't see Swyer, but she knew that he was smiling. She pointed a shaking finger at the demon. 'I command thee to leave this place.'

Rawhead yawned. Its serpentine tongue quivered across the table, tasting the air.

'Your magic won't have any effect on Rawhead, I assure you,' Swyer said. 'Count yourself privileged. Few ever see such a beautiful demon, and fewer survive to tell of it.'

Although Mary wished with all her hammering heart that she was blind again, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the beast. 'Summoning creatures from the Otherworld breaks Coven laws.'

‘The ancient laws have changed in light of our new outlook.’

‘To allow demon-binding spells? But what if it fails? What if you were to die and this thing was allowed to roam free?’

‘I’m not planning to die, and all our demonic familiars are under tight control.’

Mary’s eyes widened. ‘Don’t tell me others in the Coven have summoned such abominations as well?’

‘We are at war, gandrieth. We need weapons with which to fight.’

‘You’ll bring the world’s end down on us all,’ Mary said, wringing her hands together.

‘I only want to make England safe for our kind to live in again. Now, to business. Where is the Pureheart?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Answer the question, or Rawhead’s next meal will be human flesh. He’ll start with your feet.’

Mary stared as the demon champed its drooling jaws.

‘Now tell me,’ Swyer said. ‘Where can I find Hecate Hooper?’

CHAPTER ONE: HECATE AND HAZEL

There are two breeds of witch. ‘Hedge witches’, ‘gandrieth’ or ‘cunning folk’ possess no innate magic. They use spells, curses and potions to achieve their evil aims. The other breed is far more dangerous.

Taken from The English Witch Plague by Jacob Sprenger

With the sun warm on her back, Hazel Hooper strolled through the orchard clutching a basket of apples under her arm.

So, Mum thinks I can’t cook, does she? Just because my toadstool bread made us both sick! Well, I’m going to bake the best pie ever, just to show her. She glanced down at the shiny apples, plucked out the largest and took a bite. Like all the fruit in the Glade it was sweet and delicious.

She rounded a bee-covered rosebush and froze, mid-bite, as she saw something large and ginger burst out of the grass onto the path. It was Tom, her mum’s bad tempered cat-familiar, with whom Hazel was in a perpetual state of war.

What are you up to, Tom? she thought.

He didn't notice her because he already had something to play with clamped in his mouth – a plump little dormouse.

Tom dropped his captive and sat down, curling his tail around his paws. He turned his head, feigning disinterest in his victim. But when the shivering dormouse tried to creep away, Tom pounced, pressing his paw onto its back and unsheathing his claws. The dormouse's eyes popped with fright.

Heart pounding, Hazel didn't notice the air around her crackle with magic and the smell of spice and sun-warmed wood. All she felt was the usual flash of temper as she cocked her arm and hurled her half-eaten apple towards a puddle in front of her archenemy. A perfect shot, it splashed up the muddy water to drench Tom.

'Pick on something your own size,' Hazel yelled as he yowled off through the trees. She knelt down next to the motionless dormouse and with hands still shaking with anger, gently picked him up. 'Hold on. Mum'll be able to help.'

She scampered to the cottage and burst into the kitchen. 'Mum, look what I—' A foul smell stopped her dead.

Her mother, Hecate, was staring into a simmering cauldron, with one hand on her hip and the other stroking her chin.

Hazel wrinkled her nose. 'Eugh, disgusting! What *is* that smell?'

'Mm, it needs something else, doesn't it,' Hecate murmured. 'Be a love and pass me some marjoram, would you?'

Hazel handed her a bundle of marjoram from the sideboard. Hecate examined it, removed a sprig and threw it over her shoulder, then dropped the remainder into the steaming pot.

'Perfect,' she said as she stirred the gloopy mixture. 'Maybe we should open the windows.'

'Your cooking gets better by the day,' Hazel said, keeping a straight face. 'Add a dash of dung and it'll be perfect.'

Hecate elbowed her playfully in the ribs. 'Very funny. It's actually a batch of boggart repellent. Mary asked me to make some because they're getting at her chickens again. Ah, I see you've picked apples for the pie.'

'Yes, and when you've tasted it you can take back what you said about my cooking,' Hazel said, plonking the basket on the table with an air of affronted dignity.

Hecate's eyes shone with amusement. 'Only if you don't poison us to death.'

'It was an accident . . .' Hazel muttered.

'I'm only teasing. I'm sure you won't kill us with your pie. Now, you burst in here as if the devil was after you. What's got you so riled up?'

Hazel held out the comatose dormouse. 'Who do you think? Tom of course! All that good-for-nothing familiar likes to do is torment animals smaller than him.'

Hecate frowned and peered at the mouse in Hazel's palm. 'Ah, don't worry. I'll have him up and about in no time.' She cupped her hands over the animal, touched her lips to its nose, and then exhaled a silver mist that seeped into its fur.

Hazel smiled as the dormouse opened its eyes and sat up as if nothing had happened. It blinked at her and set to work cleaning its whiskers. *Maybe one day I'll be able to cast magic too. I'd love to be able to help animals like that,* she thought, in awe of her mother's life-giving powers. But so far she'd felt no stirrings of magic inside her, only a temper that she was finding harder to control.

Hecate turned to Tom who sat on the windowsill, balefully watching proceedings. 'Don't play with your food,' she scolded, 'or no milk for you.' Tom yawned and went back to licking his paws. 'And as for you . . .' She patted down Hazel's tangled red hair. 'You could run a comb through this every so often. It looks like the Briar Hedge. And I see you've been climbing trees in your best dress again. Look, the stitching's coming undone.'

Climbing trees is the only way I can get a glimpse outside the Glade, Hazel thought. *And what's the point of brushing my hair and being neat when we never, ever see anyone?* She opened her mouth to argue back, but changed her mind and mumbled an apology instead. Talking back wouldn't help. Mum was as stubborn as she was, and she didn't want to spoil such a nice day with an argument.

'Oh, and Mary's coming to see us next week,' Hecate said. 'She's bringing that book on herb-lore I was telling you about.'

Bo-ring! Hazel thought, but she kept it to herself. She'd much rather pore over the book on demonology that her mum kept locked in the trunk. Now that *did* look interesting.

‘It’s got a very informative section on poisonous toadstools,’ Hecate continued, with one eyebrow raised.

‘Oh, good,’ Hazel said without enthusiasm. She watched the dormouse waddle towards the fruit bowl. ‘Is it true Mary’s familiar died last month?’

‘That’s right, sweeting. It was Gander’s time to pass on.’

‘So she’s all alone?’

‘Well, she has us.’

‘But she *lives* alone. She must be so lonely.’

Hecate gave a little shake of her head. ‘Mary’s a tough old bird, and she’s used to her own company.’

The dormouse was struggling to climb into the fruit bowl so Hazel gave his portly bottom a lift and he tumbled inside. ‘But she’s blind and getting old, Mum. I think it’s sad – no one should be on their own all the time.’

Hecate put her arm around her. ‘And I’m sure you have a suggestion, as usual.’

‘Well, why don’t I go and stay with her – keep her company? Just for a day or two?’

‘That means leaving the Glade,’ Hecate sighed.

‘But, Mum, it’d just be for a day!’

‘We can never go beyond the Briar Hedge. We’ve talked about this.’

‘No we haven’t,’ Hazel snapped. ‘You’ve told me I can’t leave, but we’ve never talked about *why*.’

‘You’re too young to understand—’

‘I’m *thirteen*!’

‘Exactly.’

Hazel folded her arms. ‘I just want to know why you’re trapping me here.’

‘But this is our home. I thought you liked it.’

‘You’re right, I love the Glade, but I’ve been stuck here all my life! I want to go past the Briar Hedge, I want to see the rest of England and I want to meet other people. Why don’t you understand that?’ She took a deep breath to calm her temper, which was running out of control. ‘I mean, are you going to keep me here *forever*?’

Hecate looked at the floor. ‘You don’t know what it’s like out there,’ she said.

Hazel tried to push down her anger and soften her voice when she saw the anguish in her mum's face. 'So can you at least tell me?'

Hecate raised her head and stared at Hazel. 'It's just not straightforward – why I've kept you here all these years.' She plucked up the dormouse from the fruit bowl and put him in her pocket. 'Give me time to think,' she said. 'I'm going to let this fellow go then take a dip in the pool. Why don't you put the kettle on? Tea always makes things better, I always say. I won't be long.'

Hazel watched her mother step outside into the sun, wondering what could possibly be so bad outside the Glade. All she knew was that she'd made up her mind: she just had to get out.

CHAPTER TWO: RAWHEAD

Demons are unholy creatures in endless forms most foul. Each is unique in the way it tries to trick, deceive and kill humans, who they hate with ferocious intent.

Taken from Notes on Witchcraft and Demonology by Dr Neil Fallon

Hazel rested her chin in her hands and watched Hecate skirt around the pool. When she reached a willow tree on the opposite bank, Hecate put the dormouse down by a tangle of roots. He stood up on his hind legs, gave her a friendly nod and potted away into the grass.

Hazel tried to be patient as she watched dandelion seeds sailing on the breeze, and swallows swooping and diving as they hunted midges over the pool. Reeds swayed in the current, verdant green under the glittering surface. She took a depth breath. Sweet scents of honeysuckle and lavender drifted through the door, carrying with them a faint coppery smell that she couldn't quite identify.

Hazel banged her leg on the table as she stood up, upsetting the basket. Shiny red apples rolled and fell onto the flagstones with heavy thumps, but Hazel didn't stop to pick them up. Her instincts pulled her towards the door, where the scent of blood filled her nostrils.

Outside, her mum was lifting her dress over her knees and wading into the pool. Waist-deep in the water, she trailed her hands on the surface, making ripples. She looked up and waved at Hazel.

But Hazel's returned smile froze when she saw a bone-white shape under the water cruising up behind her mum. A warning cry stuck in Hazel's throat as she stood paralysed in the doorway, watching as an eyeless white head thrust forward on a gristly neck broke the pool's surface. It loomed up, skinless arms drawn back and clawed fingers folded like a praying mantis ready to strike.

Hazel's mind sang with panic as the thing poised, unfurling its talons and reaching towards Hecate. Then, with supernatural speed, it grabbed her throat and waist with sinewy arms, squeezing her into an embrace whilst lifting her out of the pool.

Hecate screamed and twisted in its grip as she was dragged towards the bank, her legs thrashing silver arcs of water across the pool. For an electrifying moment she locked eyes with Hazel and screamed, 'Run, Hazel – run!'

But Hazel didn't move. Only one thought burst through her terror: *Leave my mum alone!*

Released from the shackles of fear, she gasped and threw back her head. Rage ignited in her chest and an image of her heart, burning like a sun, seared into her mind. She felt the rush of what could only be magic pumping through her veins, filling her with so much anger she thought it would crack her skull and split her bones. She saw her arms glow as molten magic leaked through her pores and dripped onto the ground.

Her vision turned red. *What's happening to me?* she thought, opening her mouth to scream and instead unleashing a boiling wave of fire from her outstretched arms. The fire rolled across the pool towards the demon and Hecate.

Sensing the danger, the demon pivoted on one leg, bending low to shield Hecate and staggering as the firestorm broke across its shoulders, staying silent even as its flesh withered, blistered, burned and peeled.

Just as suddenly as it had arrived, Hazel felt her heart empty of its magic and the fire vanished. She crumpled to the ground like a dropped puppet, raising her head just in time to see the smoking demon bounding through the trees, carrying her mum away as gently as if she were a new-born baby.

FIRE GIRL by Matt Ralphs

SYNOPSIS

Thirteen-year-old Hazel is a witch living in a world where magic is outlawed. After witnessing her mum being kidnapped by a terrifying demon, she is forced to employ the services of a freelance Witch Hunter to help track her down. But Hazel knows that one false move could betray her identity as a witch, and if she allows that to happen, both her and her mother's fates are sealed.

BIOGRAPHY

Matt Ralphs is an editor with twelve years' experience in the publishing industry. He loves a great story well told, and is passionate about encouraging children to read. He is happiest when cruising the waterways on his canal boat home with a mug of tea.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Spooky storytelling and a strong, dark sense of mood. You just know that even though her midnight visitor gives Mary her sight back, it's not out of the goodness of his heart . . .'

'Really good prologue with some great ideas in the Rawhead (creepy!) and general world building. Good exposition in revealing the blind character, and nicely dark all round.'

'A great piece of writing – accessible, accomplished and vivid. It's a strong opening to the book. I felt as if I was in the cottage with Blind Mary.'

Contact: matt.ralps66@gmail.com

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SOUTHEND LOADED

By Susan Sandercock

CHAPTER ONE

Dylan's kissing and touching me everywhere. We're squeezed onto a tiny settee in the beach hut we've sneaked into. A warm breeze blows the smell of Southend beach – dirty sand, salt and candyfloss – through the thin walls. Dylan presses closer to me and I feel him hard against the inside of my thigh.

"Wait," I say. "Have you got something?"

"Got what, babe?"

"You know."

"Don't worry about that."

"Dylan . . ." I push my hands against his chest.

He rolls off me and sighs. "All right, all right." He makes a show of going through all our clothes on the floor until he finds his wallet in the pocket of his Armani jeans. He pulls out a foil packet and kneels between my legs to roll the condom on. It dawns on me that I'm really going to do it. Maddie always says the first time's no good, "Like when it's Pancake Day and you have to throw the first one away because the pan isn't hot enough."

Only Maddie could compare losing your virginity to cooking. I bite my cheeks to keep from laughing.

"Can you shift yourself up the sofa a bit, and lay yourself down as much as you can?"

I do what he says. "Will it hurt?" Despite the fetid heat of the confined space, my legs quiver.

"Sometimes it does, sometimes not. I'll be gentle." He pushes forwards and I feel a slow ache as the boy I love, who I've wanted since we were eleven, becomes a part of me.

He's gorgeous, so gorgeous.

"These cupcakes are bloody lovely," Maddie says, munching her latest baking creation. We're in the college cafeteria and my hands are cupped around a mug of coffee, hoping some of the warmth will travel through my skin to soothe the cold space inside.

I push away the cupcake Maddie's placed in front of me and look over her shoulder to the other side of the room, where Dylan's standing with his arms around Nicole Davis. His beautiful face – those dark eyes, that full, almost feminine, mouth – is poised towards hers. The fringe of his French crop teases her forehead as he leans in to kiss her, just like it used to with me.

Maddie peers over her shoulder then turns back round, rolling her eyes. "Oh my days."

"I wasn't looking at him." But it's like when we went to the ice rink for my twelfth birthday and I fell onto my arm. Maddie asked if it hurt and I said, "No." She knew I was lying then too.

Maddie fixes me with a stare. "You should be so over him, Petra. How long was it you were together, again?"

"Nineteen days."

"Then if you carry on like this, you'll be pining for him for as long as you were together. A really wank way to spend your teenage existence."

I stare into my coffee, thinking of that day at the ice rink. An X-ray at the hospital confirmed a clean fracture. But you can't put a cast on a broken heart.

"The guy's a smackhead," Maddie says.

"You don't know that for sure."

"The whole college knows. Except you, because you're blinded by love." Maddie raises her eyebrows. "You should ask him."

I stare down into my half empty mug.

"I mean it, hun. It'll help you get over him."

"Maybe."

Maddie slaps her thighs, as if to change the subject. "I can fix you up with one of Ryan's band mates. How about the bass player? He used to be in that group we saw in the beer tent at Reading."

There's no way I'd accept a date arranged by Maddie's boyfriend, Ryan. To be honest, all his mates, with their long hair, beanie hats and electric

guitars, scare me a bit. And they'll probably die from blood poisoning by the time they're twenty, from all the tattoos.

My mobile vibrates. Dylan! No. It's only Zed:

How's it going? Still on for our jog tonight? ☺

These flickers of hope that creep up on me make it all hurt more. When reality crawls back again, how Dylan dumped me after he got what he wanted, it makes everything a million times worse. Still, at least Zed would never let me down. I put my phone away.

"It won't be Dylan, will it?" Maddie must have noticed the disappointment in my eyes. "Simultaneously texting and sucking the face off a dog is physically impossible."

I glance over at Dylan, but he's not glued to Nicole any more. His eyes are wide, his hands outstretched in that accusing way of his, as if to say, "What've I done now?" Then he reaches out for her and she slaps him off. "Don't touch me," she shouts.

Everyone stares and the room goes still. Even Maddie turns round to look.

Dylan's doing his jittery, nervous thing of glancing around the room, like he's literally watching his back. "Shush, babe." He tugs Nicole's wrist. "This ain't the place to discuss this."

"My parents were right about you!" Nicole sounds like she's close to tears. I feel a pang of sympathy.

Dylan tightens his grip on her wrist and yanks her towards him. "You're hurting me," Nicole says in a tiny voice. The same tone I used to plead with Dylan not to finish with me. Dylan tugs Nicole towards the exit. "If you really loved me then you'd get out of this."

"Shut up, Nicole."

"Dylan, please listen to me. Blake's dangerous."

My heart's still thumping when I go into Art. Dylan and Blake. I can't believe he'd be so stupid. Again. If Zed mentions Dylan tonight, what'll I say? But, and it's a big but, if Dylan and Nicole are arguing, then maybe they're going to split up, which could mean he'll get back in touch with me and—

I grab a thick pencil and scrape dark shading into the underside of the

model's neck. *Don't go there*, I tell myself. Because it hurts to pretend, like when I've dreamed of Dylan all night and in the first second of waking think we're still together, then have to go through losing him all over again. Don't go there because—

Nicole walks in – eyes red, head down – and slides into her usual seat. “You all right?” someone asks but she just shrugs and picks up a beige pastel.

Maddie murmurs, “Look at Nicole's wrist!”

I follow Maddie's gaze. Nicole's wearing a bracelet of purple bruises.

“I told you that boy's an animal,” Maddie whispers. “You're only this gutted about breaking up with Dylan because he popped your cherry. It gets easier, trust me.”

Maddie should know. She lost her virginity when she was fifteen. When she started dating Ryan, her latest, she told me she needed to start counting on her other hand.

Bex, our teacher, circulates the room and the class falls silent. I quickly text Zed, letting him know I'm definitely on for a jog this evening.

He texts straightaway:

Great! 7ish OK?

I text back:

Yeah, that's fine.

He replies:

Cool. A warning – I have the cheesiest film quote ever. You better be ready ☺

I slip my mobile back into my bag. Me and Zed play this game of trying to outdo each other with corny sentences from movies. The person with the naffest quote is the winner and gets out of buying ice creams at the end of the jog. It sounds like Zed's going to be champion tonight as usual.

Whatever. I have more important things on my mind.

I pick up a slim leaded pencil sharpened to a long, thin point. My eyes dart from the life model to my easel and back again, that distance where everything can be lost for good, and scratch grey lines onto my page around the tendons of her neck. The pencil's point tears a hole in the paper. My fingers press into the hard wood until my hand and even my wrist feel like they're on fire.

“It always makes me feel like a lesbian when I have to shade in her tits.” Maddie's voice cuts into my concentration.

“What?”

Maddie gestures to a melon-sized breast on her sketch, filled with varying shades of grey. “I mean this.”

My cheeks feel hot. Bex, our teacher, is coming towards us, the classroom’s full, and Maddie’s talking in a loud voice about lesbians.

Bex stands behind Maddie and admires her work. “Nice shading, Petra.”

“No, Bex. I’m Maddie.” People are always getting us confused. We’ve both got long, dark hair and we’ve hung out together since before we were teenagers.

“Sorry, Maddie.” Bex leans towards Maddie and hands her a rubber. “Maybe just lighten up this patch around here.” Bex points to the model’s chest.

Maddie taps her drawing. “It makes me feel like I’m doing something gay when I touch her boobs.”

Bex laughs. “What’re you like?”

“Well, not gay if that’s what you’re thinking!” Maddie laughs. “Although I’m sure my boyfriend wouldn’t mind if I wanted to experiment, as long as he got to watch.”

My cheeks flame a darker red but Maddie doesn’t care. I could never get away with saying stuff like that in front of the teacher and the whole class. They’d think I was weird, or really was gay. She’s so streetwise it’s like a protective bubble.

Won’t Dylan need a similar shield now he’s in with Blake again?

CHAPTER TWO

Dylan walks over to me and holds out his hand. “C’mon,” he says, “I’ll protect you.”

Oh my God, he’s touching me! A warm wave curls up inside. Me and Dylan are still only eleven but most of our classmates are twelve. That’s why we understand each other like this, isn’t it? He senses I’m nervous about sneaking out of school.

We squeeze through the gap in the wire fence at the bottom of the field and head into the woods on the other side. Maddie’s already with the rest of the group underneath an oak tree covered with green leaves, chatting to Zed and Blake and all the other older kids.

Dylan leads me towards them and we lean against the tree. He takes a cigarette from Blake who’s talking to Zed in a voice that gets louder and louder. Dylan passes me the ciggie and I shake my head. He drops my hand to light it and goes back to talking to the others.

Icy realisation floods me. I was stupid to think Dylan held my hand because he fancies me. He's one of the popular kids, so why'd he look at me?

"Fuck off!" Blake suddenly shouts in Zed's face. "Go away NOW."

What the? The backs of my hands prickle. What the hell's got into Blake?

Maddie tries to break them apart. "Blake, Zed hasn't even—"

"Fuck off!" Blake pushes Maddie to the ground. She was so mad to try and stand up to him. When Blake gets into one of his rages there's nothing anyone can do. Yesterday I saw him kick a classroom desk apart and the kid behind him burst into tears.

And now we're so far away from all the teachers. Even the lunchtime assistants and senior prefects don't know we're here.

No one does.

Blake lunges at Zed and punches him full in the face. All the girls squeal and the boys try to drag him away, and then Blake's curled up in a ball on the dusty soil, legs hugged close to his body, hands pressed against his ears, shouting over and over again, "Na na na na na na na."

I take a deep breath and review my almost completed sketch. With the dark bruising of the heavier shading contrasted with the scratches of the thinner pencil, the model's expression looks traumatised and damaged, like she's been punched. Bex tells us it's the end of our lesson and we all pack up. Me and Maddie head to the car park.

I'm really pleased Bex liked my sketch as well as Maddie's. It's good to know the way I capture light and shade is improving, and that if I carry on practising noses I'll be fine. When Bex chooses the best pictures for the End of Year Show, I really think mine might be good enough.

Outside it's a gentle spring day. The daffodils, which have recently come out, bob in the soft breeze and it's warm enough for me to put my cardigan in my bag. We reach Maddie's car and as soon as she sticks her keys in the ignition, beat driven music overlaid with the soft thrum of guitars blares out. It's her favourite group, Indigo Red.

Maddie pulls out of the car park and we're singing along to the lyrics, dancing in our seats, when Dylan swerves in front of us on his motorbike.

I scream. Maddie slams down the brakes so hard I lurch back into my seat.

Maddie starts to get out but I'm frozen.

“Petra!” Dylan bangs on the windscreen, his eyes fixed on mine. “Get out now!”

His pupils are huge, his brow furrowed. His startled expression’s turned him into the little boy in white knee socks in the photo hanging in his hallway all over again.

I stumble from the car, the smell of burning tyres prickling my nose and eyes, and head towards Dylan. He toys with his mobile then laces his fingers with mine. It’s so good to have his hand in mine again that a small moan escapes my lips.

“You’re going to hurt her all over again, aren’t you?” Maddie curls her lip at Dylan. “I should’ve floored the accelerator.”

“Shut it, you bitch,” Dylan snaps.

I pull my hand from Dylan’s. Maddie’s my best mate and, much as I love him, that was out of order. And why’s he so angry? Maddie says stuff like that to him all the time but he usually ignores it. Something’s really got to him, and it’s not just the argument with Nicole.

Dylan fidgets with his phone, people are always texting him, then shoves it into his jeans pocket. His whole face is white, even his lips. “OK, let’s go,” he says to me, gesturing to his motorbike.

“What?” I glance from Maddie, who’s glaring at Dylan with her arms folded, to Dylan and back again.

“C’mon.” Dylan straddles his motorbike as another car pulls up behind Maddie’s. The driver toots his horn; she’s blocking the exit.

I turn back to Dylan. “Where to?”

“Just – c’mon!”

The guy in the car behind Maddie beeps his horn. Again and again.

“We’d better go.” Maddie looks Dylan up and down and turns to me. “Come on, hun.” When I don’t follow she looks back at me, shaking her head. “You’re not really going off with him, are you?”

Dylan stares at me, his lopsided smile reaching all the way to his eyes. My pulse flickers in my neck, hard. I can still do that to him, light him up from the inside. “C’mon, babe.” He picks up my hand again.

Whatever’s bothering him, it’s me he’s come looking for. It’s me he wants, needs. Not Nicole or anyone else. Me.

We head towards his motorbike.

"Fine!" Maddie's tires squeal as she drives away. "Ask him, Petra!" she shouts from her open window.

Is she crazy? How am I supposed to ask if he's a smackhead?

Pulling myself up onto Dylan's bike, I wrap my trembling arms around his waist. I press my face into his leather jacket and inhale lungfuls of his scent. Cloves, sawn wood and fresh aftershave. My mouth waters. I'm so close to him I can feel his heart beating, see the muscles tensing under his Moschino T-shirt.

The engine starts, sending a sharp thrill up from between my legs, travelling all the way out to the tips of my fingers and toes. What on earth am I doing? I've never ridden on his bike before, on any bike with an engine. My arms and legs are totally exposed. I'm not even wearing a helmet.

"Here we go," Dylan says and then we're moving. I push my mouth against his back to stifle the half-excited, half-terrified yelp that escapes my lips.

Typical Dylan. Pushing the boundaries of ecstasy and terror.

Dylan swerves so sharply coming out of the car park that the bike leans heavily to one side and we dip close to the pavement. I clutch him tightly.

Dylan laughs. "Nicole always hated that part too."

Hated. Past tense. Does that mean . . . ?

Dylan cuts through the traffic along the high street. Coming out onto the dual carriageway, he zooms through the red traffic lights. I cling to him, my fingertips numb, as motorists scream obscenities and blast their horns.

"Dylan!" I shout through the traffic fumes. "You could've killed us!"

"All part of the fun, babe."

"You could've knocked someone down!"

"Yeah, but I didn't."

I close my eyes, feeling panicked. Dylan's always doing stuff like that, taking risks. He lives for what feels good in the moment, never thinking of consequences further down the line.

Maddie's right when she says we've got nothing in common.

When we reach Southend seafront I have the confidence to open my eyes again. We're travelling at a more normal speed. I'm holding Dylan, rather than clasp him for dear life. The sea breeze carries the sharp smell of seaweed, warm sand and fresh doughnuts.

The fact that I haven't got a metal cage around my arms and legs now feels liberating. The warm air flaps my ponytail and caresses my face. I no longer imagine my head crushed open like a watermelon. I stop worrying that if the police see us, they'll arrest me because I haven't got a helmet. I stop thinking of everything apart from Dylan and me zooming along the golden mile, past the arches, and then those little expensive restaurants that my parents sometimes take me to as a treat on sunny days just like this.

We reach Chalkwell. At the bottom of the beach the tide's crawling in, the tiny waves edged with silver and making that lovely familiar whooshing sound. Then into old Leigh and the hot smell of cobbles and cockle sheds, beers in the afternoon sun.

We head up the hill, through the Broadway and past my road. He's not dropping me home then. I don't know where we're going, but I don't care. A new one for someone who "makes a plan to make a plan" according to Maddie.

We head towards our old school, past the places where we all used to hang out. I remember how terrified I always was of Blake, worrying what he'd do the next time he turned weird.

Then we're through to the area my parents call "the other side of town". A place where they definitely wouldn't want their daughter to be, even in broad daylight.

Dylan heads along his road into the estate. There's a dead end, with small closes coming off in both directions. The first time Dylan brought me here he referred to the old joke that the further down his road you live, the more "socially undesirable" you are. I'd just laughed and told him I didn't believe that, although I do a bit; Blake lives in the close right at the bottom of Dylan's road.

He unlocks his front door and we head into the hallway. There's a sense of comfort about being back in Dylan's house again, of everything looking and smelling the same as when we were together. The same child gate at the bottom of the stairs to keep Prince, the family's Akita, from running out of the door. The same lavender scent of polish. The thinning carpets vacuumed until the pile sticks straight up.

Dylan checks his phone and then puts it away again. He looks at me, his eyes twinkling.

Despite myself, my stomach turns to water.

He gestures to the half open lounge door. One of those afternoon quiz shows is blaring out and there's a pill organiser on the corner table. "My dad's in, we'd better go upstairs." Dylan's dad is home on disability. He used to work in the city before he was diagnosed with MS. They lived in a much nicer area before he became ill, but now they survive on Dylan's mum's part-time wage.

Dylan opens the child gate, shoves Prince aside, and leads me upstairs. Slamming the bedroom door shut behind us, he sits us down on his bed. A warmth seeps through me. The last time we were here we spent a whole afternoon touching each other with our hands, our lips, our mouths.

Maybe he's remembering that too, because a sad look crosses his face as he takes my hand. "Look, I feel bad for the way things ended between us," he says but it sounds rehearsed, "I never meant to mistreat you or anything."

My throat tightens and my heart races.

Dylan kisses the back of my hand. "You're the best thing that's ever happened to me. I was an idiot to let you go." His fingers brush the side of my face. "I'd forgotten how beautiful you are." He smiles his full-on smile, the one that shows all his teeth, that he only does when he's really happy around the people he's closest to because he's so self-conscious about his chipped front teeth. That smile, his touch, make the bruises of the past eight days begin to fade.

But if we're going to start again there's one thing I need to know. "Earlier, when you were arguing with Nicole, she said you're in with Blake again."

"Me and Nicole was having a bust up. It's finished now."

I don't want to ruin things, can't spoil the best moment of my life, but I have to ask, "Maddie and Zed, they say you take drugs, that you . . . you can't control what you take any more. Is it true?"

The edges of Dylan's lips twitch upwards. "Babe, do I look not in control to you?"

"That's not what I meant." He's doing that thing of looking around the room again, eyes darting from one corner to the next. I take a deep breath and press on. "I mean, I know you take stuff at parties, but—"

Dylan exhales noisily. "I'm gonna make a cup a tea. Want one?"

“OK.” I curse myself. Maddie’ll be so smug when she finds out I’ve chickened out of asking him yet again.

“Back in a bit.” Dylan stands so quickly that his mobile tumbles out of his pocket.

“Wait—” I say, holding it towards him, but he’s already heading downstairs.

His mobile vibrates and I glance at the screen. A text. An unrecognised mobile number:

nice but i no u can send me sum betta pics

I touch the screen and the conversation comes up.

My heart stops.

It’s a photo of me in the beach hut and I’m naked.

SOUTHEND LOADED by Susan Sandercock

SYNOPSIS

Sixteen-year-old Petra has hung out with the same friendship group her whole teenage life in the Essex seaside town of Southend. Petra thinks she knows everything about her friends, but she doesn't. So when the gorgeous Dylan Austin, who Petra's been in love with since she was eleven, blackmails her into paying off a psychopath's drugs debts, Petra ends up in a race against time to save herself and everyone she cares about.

BIOGRAPHY

Susan's short story 'Sea Canaries' is included in Tony Bradman's acclaimed anthology, *Under the Weather*. She is a media lecturer in a sixth form college near Southend, which is a constant source of inspiration for her writing. Her other hobbies include baking; she once made 150 cupcakes in one week.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A fresh, authentic British voice, accessible and direct. I like the mixed feeling of annoyance and concern you get when a character you like is making bad choices, drawing you further into the story.'

'The writing is good. It's strong and it feels as though the writer is in control of it. It's also accessible and fluid, making for an easy read (regardless of the difficult subject matter).'

'It's a powerful, important concept exploring the darker side – abuse – of these intense teenage relationships.'

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ATTICUS TRUMP AND THE ASTRO FART

By Bronwen Roscoe

CHAPTER ONE – SOME GLOVES AND A COAT

Atticus Trump, inventor, was royally fed up. In front of him, propped up against his bowl of cornflakes, was a birthday card and next to that, a small parcel.

‘Open it, Attie,’ cooed Mum over her cup of tea. ‘What do you think it is?’

‘A robotic hand?’ said his younger brother Alfie.

‘A top secret intruder alarm?’ said his older brother Alroy.

‘A pair of buzzerks bug goggles with special hinged prismatic lenses?’ said Atticus.

‘Keep going!’ boomed Dad.

Atticus sighed. Mum and Dad didn’t believe in presents. They preferred ethical alternative gifts. Whenever anyone had a birthday, they got one of those charity cards that say ‘your gift is a goat in Africa’. At last count, Atticus was sponsoring:

A flock of ducks in Bangladesh	✓
A wormery in Zambia	✓
A European bee-eater in Sri Lanka	✓
A one-horned rhinoceros in Nepal	✓
A family of sloths in Belize	✓
A granny in Milton Keynes	✓

‘Go on, Attie, open it,’ said Alfie.

Atticus pushed his cornflakes aside, opened the envelope and read the card:

Dear Atticus, my name is Victor and I am a Peruvian alpaca, I am three years old and I like to eat low-protein hay. Thank you for adopting me!

‘Thanks, Mum and Dad,’ said Atticus glumly.

‘It was that or a portable eco loo in Kenya,’ beamed Mum. ‘We thought you’d prefer the alpaca. Now open the parcel!’

Atticus opened the parcel, pulled out something woolly and read the label: ‘Deluxe fingerless gloves’.

‘Deluxe fingerless *alpaca* gloves,’ corrected Mum. ‘Try them on!’

‘But, Mum, it’s July,’ said Atticus, ‘it’s baking outside.’

‘It was nippy this morning,’ said Mum, ‘try them on.’

Atticus sighed. He liked to help, he really did. But boys need toys.

So Atticus made stuff. Not the kind of tat that they show you on children’s telly, like a potato hedgehog or macaroni binoculars. Atticus didn’t bother with that.

By the age of two, Atticus had built a scale model of the Great Wall of China using bus tickets and Blu-Tack. When he was four, he made a rechargeable robot that played Subbuteo and spoke Flemish. At the age of six, he invented an aqua blaster water pistol that refilled itself. By the time he was eight, he had constructed a remote controlled amphibious tank, disguised as a mallard duck.

For his last science project he made a thermonuclear reactor out of Lego. It actually worked . . . it almost worked . . . okay . . . it was never in a million, billion, gazillion *years* going to work. But it looked very realistic. The point is he was inventive.

‘Thanks for the gloves and the goat,’ said Atticus, popping the last cornflake into his mouth.

‘Alpaca,’ corrected Mum.

‘Alpaca,’ sighed Atticus. ‘Can I go and finish the shelter I’m building for Augustus?’

‘Yes,’ said Mum, ‘but don’t leave a mess.’

Atticus went into the living room where he was building a retreat for his friend Augustus Blast. Augustus wanted somewhere to escape from his older sisters, Margaret and Madge. ‘I don’t blame him,’ muttered Atticus, as he crawled into the hideaway. ‘Margaret and Madge are mad.’

But the project wasn’t going well. The retreat had to be waterproof and Atticus had run out of plastic sheeting. ‘Grud!’ shouted Atticus, hurling the last sheet across the room. He was tired. He needed a break, it was the school holidays; everyone else had gone away.

But Dad was too busy to take them anywhere. He worked as a diver at the local golf course, and July was peak season. Dad held the record in Piggott Splott, where they lived, for retrieving the most number of golf balls in a single dive. ‘Fourteen, in one go, now that’s breath control,’ Dad was fond of saying. The world record was held by an eighty-six-year-old from Arizona. He managed fifty-three, with an arthritic hip. Dad had no chance of beating that, thought Atticus.

Mum was busy too. She’d just started a new business, Bilingual Bump, teaching French to unborn babies. Atticus wasn’t sure that a baby that hadn’t even been born would want to learn French. He was even less certain that Mum could teach it; she only knew three phrases:

<i>Je cherche Spartacus</i>	I’m looking for Spartacus (Spartacus was Atticus’s dad)
<i>Evacuez les lieux!</i>	Evacuate the area!
<i>Mon Français est mauvais</i>	My French is bad (that, at least, was true)

But every time Atticus tried to point any of this out, Mum got a faraway look in her eyes and started singing ‘I believe I can fly’. That was even less likely, so basically Atticus left her to it.

All in all, there was zero chance of them going anywhere. Less than zero, Atticus thought sadly. He abandoned the retreat and flicked on the telly, where a very large man in a very tight suit was talking very quickly about the dangers of sending a rhinoceros into space.

Suddenly, an idea hit him. Bam! Just like that.

CHAPTER TWO – FREEZE DRIED STRAWBERRY ICE CREAM

Atticus ran into the kitchen where his brothers were trying to fix a battery powered bandicoot.

‘I’m off!’ he cried.

‘Good!’ said Alroy.

‘Where?’ asked Alfie.

‘To space,’ said Atticus. ‘I want to see the stars!’

‘Try looking out the window, toad face!’ crowed Alroy.

‘I don’t just want to look at them, cabbage breath,’ snorted Atticus, ‘I want to visit them. It’s the holidays, I need a break.’

‘You wozzer,’ said Alroy, ‘How will you get there?’

‘I’m going to build a rocket!’ said Atticus.

‘A rocket,’ Alfie jumped up. ‘Can I come?’

‘Yep,’ cried Atticus, dancing about the room. ‘You can even bring Muriel!’

Muriel was Alfie’s dog.

Atticus started making the rocket, using to guide him a travel supplement from *The Daily Splott*.

‘Can I help?’ asked Alfie.

‘Okay,’ agreed Atticus, ‘but you must do what I say.’

‘Promise,’ said Alfie.

‘And wash your hands before you touch anything,’ said Atticus, ‘they’re covered in . . . Alfie what are they covered in? It looks disgusting!’

Alfie looked at his hands. ‘Um, triple chocolate fudge meltdown.’

‘Gross,’ muttered Alroy.

Alfie loved to eat. It was more of a hobby. He emptied the fridge, he cleaned out the cupboards and scoured the sofa for stray snacks. He didn’t care about best before dates. He didn’t care about mould. If it was edible and immobile, Alfie ate it. And when he’d worked his way through the fridge and the cupboards and the sofa, he picked his nose and ate that too. He was an eating machine.

He should have been enormous, thought Atticus; the biggest, fattest, porkiest boy that ever lived. But Alfie was actually quite a skinny little thing. He probably had worms.

‘Are you *sure* you want to go into space, Alfie?’ asked Atticus. ‘The

rocket can't carry much food; we might run out and you'll be hungry.'

'Yes,' said Alfie, 'cause if we run out, we can always restock.'

'Restock – where?' asked Atticus.

'The moon,' replied Alfie.

'You twonk!' cried Alroy. 'There's no food on the moon!'

'I think you'll find there is,' muttered Alfie.

'I think you'll find you're mad!' scoffed Alroy.

'I think you'll find that the moon is made of cheese,' cried Alfie.

'C'mon, Alfie, only small children think the moon is made of cheese,' said Atticus kindly.

'It *is* made of cheese,' insisted Alfie, 'I should know, I studied it for a science project. It's bigger than Pluto but smaller than Earth, and it's milk-based, like a great big ball of Edam, tumbling through space.'

Alfie was a big fan of dairy. Basically, he wanted to go on a cheese-centred trip.

'Milk-based? It's a dry dusty rock, you twozzer,' sniggered Alroy.

'You haven't been there so how do you know?' Alfie sniffed.

'I know. Everyone knows. It's rock!'

'It's cheese!' persisted Alfie, 'the surface is Emmental, it's yellow, hard and full of holes. But the centre, that's soft, like Cotswold Brie or Gorgonzola or Stinking Bishop.'

'Or like your head,' laughed Alroy.

Alfie ignored him. 'There's something else.'

'What's that?' asked Atticus.

'Every single person who has ever walked on the moon is American.'

'So?' said Alroy.

'Americans *love* food!' said Alfie. 'Have you seen how much they eat?'

'What does that prove?' asked Alroy.

'It proves that something made them want to go to the moon, again and again and again . . .'

'Adventure?' said Atticus.

'Fame?' said Alroy.

'Freeze dried strawberry ice cream?' said Atticus.

'Space toilets?' said Alroy.

'Cheese,' beamed Alfie. 'It has to be cheese!'

'If you say so.' Alroy rolled his eyes.

Atticus tried to change the subject, 'Alfie, do you want to help build the rocket or not?'

'Yes,' said Alfie, wiping his hands on a pair of underpants that were drying on the radiator. 'What do you want me to do?'

'Find stuff!' said Atticus, producing a list from his pocket. 'I need cardboard, plastic, tinfoil, string, a ruler, a compass, some scissors, a roll of wire, a box of paper clips, two batteries, a calculator, the globe in Dad's study, a circuit board, the remote control from the telly in the spare room, a bicycle pump, a rubber ring and a frying pan.'

'A frying pan, really?' Alfie scratched his head.

'Yes, please,' said Atticus, 'non-stick.'

Alfie scoured the house, while Atticus consulted books, took measurements and poured over diagrams.

'Are you sure you know what you're doing?' asked Alroy, peering over a book he was reading on the art of fixing things.

'Of course I do!' said Atticus, waving the travel supplement under Alroy's nose. 'This is *full* of useful stuff!'

'I doubt that,' sniffed Alroy. 'You do know that rockets are quite complicated; they're not easy to make. Remember what happened with the reactor.'

'This is different,' sniffed Atticus, 'I know exactly what I'm doing!'

'Of course you do,' sighed Alroy and returned to his book.

By lunchtime the rocket was half-built. It occupied the entire living room, an enormous hulk of metal and rubber, painted in stripes of blue and white, topped by a bright red nose that scraped the ceiling, and flanked on either side by two slender rocket boosters.

'I'll finish the guidance system, and then we're almost done,' said Atticus, attaching the globe to a small battery-powered calculator. 'Alfie, you make the interplanetary probe. I've drawn a diagram – it's simple; you'll need an aerial from the telly, a battery and a bit of wire.'

Alfie sat down with the diagram and tried to assemble the probe. It was hard going. 'Attie, I need your help,' he wailed after a few minutes, kicking the probe across the room, where it bounced off Alroy's head and landed with a clunk on the floor.

'Alroy!' shrieked Alfie. 'You almost broke it!'

'Broke it? It bounced off me; I didn't do anything!' cried Alroy, rubbing his head.

Atticus inspected the probe. 'It's fine, nothing's broken; stop flapping.'

'But he almost broke it,' cried Alfie.

'But I didn't break it!' said Alroy. 'So stop going on!'

'Don't worry about the probe, Alfie, I'll finish it,' said Atticus quickly, 'focus on the launcher instead. They're not always reliable. Will you check that for me?'

Alfie frowned. 'Really? I didn't know. Okay, Attie, show me what to do.'

By teatime, the rocket was ready for flight. 'It's brilliant!' declared Atticus.

'The best rocket ever,' agreed Alfie.

'But does it work?' asked Alroy.

'Of course it works,' cried Atticus, 'do you want to come with us or not?'

'I've got nothing better to do,' muttered Alroy.

'Then let's get going,' said Atticus. 'I'll check the rocket boosters, Alroy, you tidy up and, Alfie, you fetch supplies.'

'I didn't make the mess, why should I tidy it up?' moaned Alroy, but Atticus was already inspecting the boosters. Alfie grabbed a pen and a sheet of paper and made a list of everything they'd need:

Apples

Beans

Cheese and onion crisps

Vanilla toffee

Chocolate milk

Fizzy drinks

Bonio Meaty Treats (for Alfie and Muriel)

String

Glue

A hankie

A photo of Mum

A water bowl for Muriel

A notebook

A torch

Josephine?

‘Attie, can I bring Josephine?’ asked Alfie.

‘Erm, I’m not sure goldfish have any utility in space,’ said Atticus, emerging from behind a booster.

‘Oh go on, she won’t take up much room,’ Alfie pleaded. ‘Please, please, please!’ Before Atticus could reply, Alfie darted upstairs to the bedroom and tried to lift the goldfish bowl from the table on which it sat. It was too heavy; Josephine nearly sloshed out.

‘Alfie,’ shrieked Atticus, from the doorway, ‘you almost dropped her!’

‘Sorry,’ mumbled Alfie, pushing the bowl back onto the table.

‘I don’t think goldfish are ready for spaceflight,’ said Atticus. Alfie sighed and crossed her off the list.

Before they left, Alroy wrote a note to Mum and Dad.

Dear Mum and Dad,

We’ve gone out for the day. Attie built a rocket and by the time you read this, we’ll probably be orbiting Jupiter.

Sorry about the mess and thanks for the loan of the globe.

Love Alroy

PS Muriel’s with us

PPS Josephine isn’t

PPPS We’ll be back for tea

CHAPTER THREE – DEEP, DARK, MYSTERIOUS SPACE

The setting sun cast an orangey pink glow on the rocket, lighting up the room, as the boys and Muriel boarded the craft. ‘It’s a bit cramped,’ moaned Alroy, ‘I don’t like small spaces.’

‘Bat breath,’ said Alfie, ‘no one made you come!’

‘I’ll be captain,’ said Atticus, ignoring his brothers. ‘Alroy, you navigate and, Alfie, you look after Muriel.’

Atticus performed the final safety checks and began the countdown, ‘Ten . . . nine . . . eight . . .’

Outside, conditions were perfect. A pale apricot sun was low in the sky. A cool breeze drifted through the garden. Trees swayed, branches trembled, leaves scattered. Back in the living room, the rocket began to shudder and shiver and jump into life. Alfie perched on the edge of his

seat, one hand on Muriel's snout, while Atticus flicked switches and Alroy consulted maps.

'Seven . . . six . . . five . . . four,' hollered Atticus. Suddenly the engines burst into life.

Muriel barked. Alfie squealed. Someone, somewhere was calling them for tea.

'Three . . . two . . . one.' The rocket began to judder and shake; everything and everyone began to wobble and quiver. 'Hold tight,' cried Atticus above the roar of the engines. The carton of chocolate milk shimmied off the shelf where Alfie had stored the supplies and landed, with a thud, on the floor of the cabin.

'BLAST OFF!' bellowed Atticus and, with an immense **BANG!** the rocket lifted off the floor of the living room. Billowing white clouds filled the room.

'Look at all of that smoke,' gasped Alfie. 'Mum'll go mad.'

'It's steam, badger breath,' spluttered Alroy.

'Stream then, she'll still go mad,' said Alfie, biting his lip.

'I can't believe it, we're actually moving,' said Alroy, who was quite surprised that a non-stick frying pan, a couple of batteries and a bit of tinfoil were capable of propelling them anywhere.

'Of course we're moving,' scowled Atticus, 'what did you expect?'

Alroy was about to reply 'not very much' when the rocket leapt forward. The boys fell silent. With wide eyes, racing hearts and clammy hands they braced themselves. Pinned down in their seats by the force of lift-off, it felt like the world's fattest man was sitting on their chests.

Up, up, up went the rocket. Shuddering and sputtering and coughing, it pushed its way through the ceiling, upsetting the lightshade and chipping the plaster.

Up, up, up it went, through the bedrooms, thrusting into the dusty eaves, splintering the wooden beams and disturbing the cobwebs. And still it climbed, bursting through the roof, scattering tiles and narrowly missing a large, untidy nest, belonging to a family of glossy starlings, who began to whistle and chatter as the rocket roared past them on its way to the stars.

Up and up it went. Blasting, and bellowing and thundering along,

it pushed Atticus, Alroy, Alfie and Muriel higher and higher into a vast empty sky.

Far below, their neighbour Mr Bunker ran out of his house and stood on the doorstep holding a broken roof tile and mouthing something very rude at the departing rocket. He was wearing pants the colour of dirty dishwater, and a string vest that was more holes than fabric. Mum appeared too, a look of alarm on her face and what looked like a frozen sausage in her hand.

Still the rocket climbed, unaware of the drama below. Up, up, up it soared, faster and faster, leaving everyone and everything behind; Mum, Dad, Mr Bunker, houses, shops, schools, streets (dinner, thought Alfie), Piggott Splott, getting smaller and smaller and smaller as the rocket sped on.

The boosters fell away and slowly, carefully, the rocket began to tilt and lean on its side. 'I'm going to be sick,' moaned Alfie, pinned down in his seat as the ship rumbled and rattled and roared. But no one noticed.

'We're following our gravity turn trajectory,' bellowed Atticus. Muriel barked. Alfie burped. Alroy grinned. In a little over two minutes, the rocket was pushing through an unlimited expanse of deep, dark, mysterious space. From the cabin window, noses pressed against the tinted glass, the boys could see the earth rolling by, far beneath them; sprawling cities, vast empty deserts and the deep blues and greens and greys of the ocean shifting beneath a listless sky, all of it tumbling through the blackness of space.

CHAPTER FOUR – BEANS, BURPS AND ASTRO-FARTS

'Space travel is full of perils unknown and unseen,' said Atticus gravely, bobbing up and down beside the control panel.

'But if you don't know them, and you can't see them, why worry?' asked Alroy, floating past him.

'He's got a point,' grinned Alfie, sailing through the air. 'I like it up here, it's so quiet!'

'Not like home,' cried Alroy, bobbing up and down. 'It's fun being weightless!'

'You're not actually weightless, you dozer, it just feels that way,' said Atticus.

'Like flying, only better!' agreed Alfie, somersaulting over the controls. 'What shall we do now, Attie?'

'You can look after Muriel and clean the filters,' said Atticus. 'Alroy, you check the support systems and update the computer equipment.'

'Okay,' said Alfie.

'What will you do?' asked Alroy.

'Research!' cried Atticus. 'Bacteria and bugs are more potent in space.'

'So?' asked Alroy.

'So I'm going to stop washing, to see what happens,' replied Atticus.

'Nothing new there,' said Alroy.

'Things smell different too,' said Atticus ignoring Alroy, 'so you and Alfie can sniff my feet and armpits at regular intervals and I'll record the results.'

'Gross,' said Alroy.

'It's a shame Mum's not on-board,' said Alfie. 'She has a big nose and it's well trained; a bit like a sniffer dog, only not as wet. She'd like to help!'

Atticus wasn't so sure about that. 'Astronauts can't burp in space,' he cried and for a second experiment, guzzled the coke.

'Attie, that was mine!' cried Alfie. 'I was saving it!'

'Belching in space is impossible,' grinned Atticus, opening and closing his mouth like a demented goldfish.

Belching might have been impossible, but apparently farting was not. The next experiment was the most daring. 'I want to find out if an astro fart can propel an astronaut and, if so, how far!' said Atticus.

'Is that a good idea?' asked Alroy. 'It sounds risky.'

Atticus was a man of science. 'Discovery carries risk!' he crowed.

'And farts carry smell,' said Alroy, 'which is more worrying.'

'But things smell different in space!' declared Atticus.

'Which means they might smell worse,' said Alroy and he floated off in search of a peg for his nose.

'I need someone to eat those,' cried Atticus, ignoring Alroy and pointing to the tin of beans that Alfie had packed.

'Me, me, me,' cried Alfie floating over.

Atticus opened the tin of beans and handed them to his brother. After a few mouthfuls, Alfie paused. 'These beans taste funny, Attie, how old are they?'

‘Mum bought them last week,’ replied Atticus. ‘They’re fine, just eat them.’

So Alfie did. He made short work of it. ‘Now what?’ he asked, licking the last of the tomato sauce from his lips.

‘Now,’ replied Atticus, ‘we wait!’

They didn’t have to wait long. Alfie’s stomach began to rumble, a long, low growl, and his bottom started to hiss, like air escaping from a balloon. The hissing built to a crescendo and was followed by rich, booming PARP, PARP, PARP!

It was the worst kind of fart. He couldn’t contain it, he couldn’t escape it and worst of all, he couldn’t control it. But it didn’t stop there. A series of quick little cracks followed, like corks popping out of a bottle. And still it went on.

It was a real stinker; more than a whiff, worse than a pong, enough to make your eyes water, enough to make you cry. Atticus wondered what he had unleashed.

‘You are aware that flammable gases build up in an enclosed space and can ignite?’ called Alroy from the far end of the cabin.

‘Er, no,’ replied Atticus. It was time to act. He did a quick sum.

beans + Bean²

(rocket) + 3²

[4 x 2] + 5x

n

= a bad idea

It wasn’t good. ‘We need to free the fart!’ he cried.

PARP, PARP, CRACK, CRACK, HISS

‘Free it? Not likely! We need to cork it,’ said Alroy.

‘Cork it? No way!’ Alfie floated to the far end of the cabin.

HISS, PARP, CRACK, CRACK, CRACK

‘We don’t have a cork,’ said Atticus. ‘But I know what we can do – release it into space!’

‘Since when did I become ‘it’?’ howled Alfie.

‘Not you, twizzle pants, the fart,’ replied Atticus, ‘we need to free the fart and I know how.’

CRACK, PARP, PARP, CRACK, CRACK, HISS

‘Hurry up and get on with it!’ bellowed Alroy. Atticus grabbed Alfie and made for the airlock.

‘Hold onto these,’ ordered Atticus, pointing to two handles on either side of the hatch. ‘I’m going to open the airlock and when I do, I want you to push, as hard as you can, push that fart, every last whiff, into space!’

Alfie placed himself next to the hatch; he grasped the handles, positioned his bottom in the direction of the cosmos and waited. Atticus left the airlock, closed the door and peered through the window. ‘I’m going to open the airlock now!’ he mouthed to Alfie. ‘Hold tight and push!’

Atticus flicked a button and the airlock opened, just enough for Alfie to fit his bottom through the gap. ‘Push, Alfie, push!’ cried Atticus. Alfie pushed. He heaved. He strained.

And fired a great, green, gassy cloud into the ether.

‘Is that all of it, Alfie, is that the lot?’ mouthed Atticus through the window as the gaseous green pong went intergalactic.

‘I think so,’ replied Alfie, rubbing his bottom and floating into the airlock. ‘Attie, don’t include me in your experiments ever again! I nearly fired myself into space!’

‘Hmm,’ said Atticus, floating into the airlock, ‘I’m not sure we know very much more about astro farts . . . oh, yuck, disgusting, Alfie, it smells like something died in here!’

‘Died? I nearly died, bat breath. Me!’

But Atticus wasn’t listening. He was looking out of the window at the interstellar stinker. ‘Where d’you think it’s going, Alfie, and why is it glowing?’

Alfie peered out of the porthole. The gaseous green orb was indeed glowing; a strange, shimmering halo getting fainter and fainter as it drifted deep into space.

ATTICUS TRUMP AND THE ASTRO FART by Bronwen Roscoe

SYNOPSIS

When Atticus Trump, inventor, jets off to the stars for a mini-break with his brothers and Muriel the dog, he's after rest and relaxation. But space is full of perils, from astro farts and dogs on jet packs, to lunar landings and loonier cheese monsters. Even worse, when his greedy brother Alfie discovers food tastes different in space, he tries to abort the mission, with disastrous results, leaving Atticus to get them all home again.

BIOGRAPHY

Bronwen Roscoe lives in Surrey with her husband, three sons, two goldfish and a dog. She works for the BBC and spends most of her time pretending to be a writer. Atticus Trump is her first book.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Some genuinely funny detail – mum's Bilingual Bump business made me laugh out loud.'

'Great beginning. Very funny and original . . . I love the bonkered-ness of the boys building a rocket that actually takes off. It's joyous to think that something like that could actually happen (albeit in children's fiction).'

'A fun, imaginative take on boys and space adventure, with some good funny bits. Felt very child-centric.'

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VICKERY BARNET RECURRING

By Sarah Dalkin

CHAPTER ONE

Bounds Green, London, N10

Gritty eyes.

Seven thirty. Oh man, was that all?

He needed to pee.

The phone sounded normal now. Shuddering at the memory, he pulled back the curtain and squinted into the watery sun. Maybe he'd invented it all. Maybe he hadn't heard what he thought he'd heard. After all, his brain was barely functioning; it was over a week since he'd slept a full eight hours. Dan said it was night terrors – but Google said that night terrors wiped your memories, and whatever stampeded through his head last night had shredded him in stereoscopic 3-D ultra high definition. Instead of no memories he had too many memories; sounds and images he could taste and smell.

His mobile vibrated. It was okay; just a text from Dan.

u going in?

No, he wasn't. He was knackered. And freaked out, actually. *2 tired*, Vickery replied.

skvng bstrd.

Vickery pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. Earlier this morning, when his phone rang, he'd nearly fallen off the bed to get to the handset because who the hell called for a chat at fourteen minutes past three? The screen had registered *unknown number*. At first he'd heard nothing . . . then

a rattle . . . then a whistle . . . and then . . . whispering. Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiit. He'd slammed the mobile into the duvet and sat up.

Seconds later, when it rang again, the clamour had nearly cracked his skull and he'd dropped the phone on the floor. A thousand clashing voices burst from the receiver. Curving and bowing, they'd gushed like a river. WTF?

A zillion words, fused into one discordant cry.

But not quite.

Because one word stood out. Familiar and personal, it pierced the din. One distinct word – snarled and bellowed and squealed and grunted.

Vickery. Vickery. Vickery. Vickery.

So, no. He wasn't going in today.

When he opened the cereal cupboard, a faint cardboard smell wafted out, flakes scattering as he lifted the porridge jar. He shook it, weighed it, decided he didn't feel hungry and put it back. Then he sat at the kitchen table, folding forward and pressing his face against the plastic cover. He should probably get dressed, but that would involve moving.

From behind, his mum dropped her handbag on the table. She zipped her jacket and adjusted the fingers of her gloves and then opened the dishwasher. "If we ever want to use this again someone needs to unload it."

Vickery groaned and closed his eyes, finding a new, cool patch of table for his cheek.

"Are you all right?" Peeling off a glove, his mum frowned and pressed her hand against his forehead. "You don't have a temperature."

He creased his nose. "I think I had a hallucination while I was still half asleep."

She pursed her lips. "That's different from a dream, is it?"

"I don't know," he said, trying to keep his voice level. It felt real this morning but now . . . he didn't know any more. The initial punch of fear had dulled, leaving him worn out. He massaged away the pain behind his left eye. "Well, I'm not going in."

"Clearly." His mum glanced at the clock. "But some of us have to." She grabbed her bag and started for the door, pausing to check her pockets. "If you're no better by lunchtime I want you to call the doctor."

“Mmmm.” Maybe.

“I mean it.”

“I heard you.”

“Oh, and you know Jess and Rafi are coming down tomorrow?”

He nodded, without lifting his head. She’d said so last night. Twice. “Are you going to work?”

“Where else?” His mum sighed. Since her promotion they hardly saw her. “And I want to do some shopping for the party.”

Oh God, the Christmas party. Still, there should be plenty of lager and if a couple of girls came over, it would be fine. Which reminded him. “Can you get me some deodorant?”

“I thought you’d never ask.” She grimaced as she swung the bag over her shoulder. “You’ve done all your homework?”

“Nearly,” he lied. Of course he hadn’t. He’d done his usual and left it to the last minute.

Vickery followed her from the kitchen but diverted to the living room, where, after digging the history file from his bag, he lay, feet up on the sofa, balancing his laptop on his chest. He’d known about the history assignment for eight weeks. And now – according to the timer on the bottom right of his screen – he had a little less than six hours to research, write and deliver it before the end of term.

Six whole hours. No problem.

So – what nonsense had they come up with for this term’s history project?

Using The Internet: Internet as research tool.

*Trace your family history up to five generations, noting addresses,
jobs, births, marriages and deaths – and record the methods
you use to gather the information.*

Vickery yawned, tapping his fingers on the side of the computer. Oh, come on – anyone with half a brain could do this kind of stuff. By A level most of the lower sixth claimed they were close to hacking MI5. However, it wouldn’t be totally straightforward. While he wasn’t the only adoptee at college, he was the only one abandoned at birth. He had two ways to go: Vickery Mitchell, his adopted name, or Vickery Barnet, the name they found stuffed down his nappy.

The floorboard creaked.

“Tea?” his dad asked. “What you doing?”

Keeping his eyes on the screen, Vickery tipped his head towards the sheet of paper poking from the file on the floor. “Yeah. Please. History.”

With his foot, his dad slid the sheet towards the window and began to read. The old man hated history. No, he hated the way schools taught history. He thought it amounted to state controlled brainwashing.

Nodding at the floor, his dad asked, “Are you going to do this?”

Vickery looked up. “It’s homework. I have to.”

Smiling from one side of his mouth, his dad looked through the glass. “Yes. Yes, of course.” He shook his head. “I’ll put the kettle on.”

“Adopted is all right, you know. Even in family trees,” Vickery called after him. And it was all right. He couldn’t explain it, but the adoption agony he’d heard so much about had never seemed to hit him. Of course he wondered about his birth mum and assumed he’d probably try to find her one day, but the fact of his adoption didn’t tear him up like in the movies. He’d never been lied to and, he supposed, he’d always felt wanted. At least, he’d never felt unwanted. Those books and leaflets he’d been given talked about a sense of betrayal, of loneliness and not belonging, but really – maybe he was shallow or something – he was okay with it all. Occasionally his parents acted like buttheads, and, now and then, they all fought – but mostly it was fine. He liked them. Loved them. There wasn’t much wrong with Mum, Dad and Bounds Green, London, N10. Sorry.

He directed the arrow over the search results. He’d check out both his surnames and whichever looked juiciest, he’d follow up. For no particular reason he started with his birth name and the first hit on *Vickery Barnet, Ancestor*, led to a page from a family history website. It looked like some sort of certificate, stamped with the date of Feb 23, 1919 and the words “Free Port of New York: Ellis Island”.

He’d heard of Ellis Island, where the immigrants queued to get into the States back in the day. “Listen to this,” he yelled towards the kitchen. “It’s from Ellis Island. *Vickery Barnet of Limerick in Ireland, aged three years, accompanied by his aunt, Winnie Docherty, sailed from the Port of Dublin.*”

A few seconds later his dad poked his head around the door. “Go on.”

“That’s all it says.” Vickery tried out his American accent, “Another Vickery Barnet. Wha’ d’ya know?” It sounded rubbish. He clicked back

to the search results and selected the second hit while his dad fumbled for his glasses.

An article from a 1932 *New York Times* appeared – “East 15th Street duo sent down at last”. It read:

Sixteen year old Vickery Barnet, originally from Limerick in Ireland, was today sent to the Orange County State Training School for Boys while his half-brother and partner-in-crime, Robert Danby, was sentenced to Sing Sing prison. The pair have stolen paintings worth hundreds of dollars from a client of their East 15th Street garage.

The paintings, still to be recovered, are works by American masters, Thomas Eakins and James Henry Beard. Judge Petersen said of Barnet, who protested his innocence, that he was a precocious and evil mind and had deserved a full prison sentence if only he had been old enough.

How cool was this?

His dad squatted on the arm of the sofa holding up a delaying finger while he read. “I thought you were going to look at Mitchell. Blimey. Move over properly. No, go and take the teabags out.”

Okay. It wasn’t a relative, just someone with the same name, but that would do fine. What would school know? He’d never heard of another Vickery Barnet. It was an unusual name. Actually, until now, he’d thought it unique. He’d googled it before and never come up with anything apart from an Annie May Vickery-Barnet in Darlington, South Carolina, but that was a hyphenated second name, not a forename and surname. These hits had only recently made it to the top of the search engine. Whatever the reason, they’d liven up his history assignment, thank you very much.

He chucked the teabags into the sink and then thought better of it, dumping them in the compost caddy. When he returned to the living room, his dad had discovered a website about New York criminals. Hunched and glaring, he rolled the cursor over murderers, bootleggers and gangsters before settling on a short paragraph about the 15th Street duo. Vickery squatted on the arm of the sofa and pushed his feet under the cushion.

“Go on, then. Read it out loud.”

Pulling at his lower lip, his dad stared at the screen and then at his knuckles. He removed his glasses and wiped them on the sofa before staring at the screen again.

“Dad,” Vickery whispered.

“Sorry. Slight headache. *Raised by his aunt until her death in 1927, child art thief Vickery Barnet then passed into the care of his half-brother, Robert Danby.*”

“And they were robbers?” Vickery said.

“*They owned a successful garage on the Lower East Side of Manhattan until the Great Depression of the 1930s when their business began to fail and they decided to supplement their income by criminal means.*” He glanced at Vickery.

“Go on.”

“*Once captured, their trial progressed quickly, aided by the confession and full cooperation of Robert Danby.* That’s it. Okay?”

“Robert Danby turned State’s evidence?”

His dad struggled up. “Apparently so. Don’t you want to look at the Mitchell family?” He passed the laptop to Vickery.

“It’s no big deal, Dad. I’ll do both.” Vickery settled back into the saggy sofa and readjusted the angle of the screen.

“I need more milk.” His dad picked up his tea and left the room.

Imagine being an art thief. It was a step up from the usual bikes, phones and laptops. Not that they had mobile phones and laptops back then, but anyway. He should print this. He copied and pasted everything onto a flash drive and slid the laptop under the sofa. Dropping the drive into his pocket, he sloped into the hall, where he found his dad squatting beside the hall sideboard and glaring at something in his hand.

“What’s that?” Vickery asked, though he could see it was a photograph.

“Nothing.”

Vickery half laughed, half frowned. “Dad, you’ve got a photograph in your hand.” The old man really wasn’t with it.

“Oh, yeah, it’s from the adoption box.” He held out a dog-eared, black and white picture of a baby, dumped against a backdrop of wild hills. On the back, in old fashioned ink, it said *VB, nine months, Co. Cork.*

“When was I in Ireland?” Vickery asked.

“Before we had you, I guess,” his dad replied. He sounded a bit shaky.

Three in the morning and Vickery couldn’t sleep. Or maybe, his brain wouldn’t let him sleep. He kicked off the duvet and crawled to the computer where he searched again for *The New York Times*. After re-reading the story

he lost the next fifty minutes because he couldn't go to bed until he scored less than two hundred moves in Spider Solitaire.

He'd minimised the paper's site, but to shut everything down needed to expand it again. And that's when he noticed the thumbnail picture in the top right corner. He'd have a look and then switch off.

"Danby and Barnet – motoring excellence for the discerning driver." Now filling the screen, two young men posed with an open-topped motor car parked below the commercial sign. The older of the two, wearing a flying jacket, leaned against the workshop door. The man, possibly in his twenties, had been landed with a swooping mop of white blond hair and a very wide mouth.

But in the front of the car, one arm resting on the steering wheel, sat a teenager: tight lips, dirty blond hair and squinty eyes.

He swallowed and blinked.

His tight lips, dirty blond hair and squinty eyes.

Vickery gripped the table with both hands and straightened his back, drawing away from the computer. This couldn't be right. It wasn't possible that two people could look exactly the same, was it? Twins, yeah – but two people living nearly a century apart? Maybe someone was having a joke and they'd pasted Vickery's head into the picture. But why would anyone do that? He blinked away a wave of dizziness and leant into the laptop, resting his chest on the desk and drumming his fingers on the machine.

A doppelganger.

But a doppelganger with the same name. His stomach fluttered and the desk shuddered in time with his heartbeat. This changed everything. This had to be an ancestor. No two people could look so alike and not be related. Could they? He checked the time again. Seven minutes past four. Too late to wake anyone now. He'd save the page and switch off – but not before taking another look. Unfortunately the angle of the photograph hid the left side of the boy's head so he couldn't tell if they shared the same mangled ear, folding in on itself as if it was trying to crawl back inside. That would have been the clincher. He fell onto the bed and dragged the duvet over his face. He'd never sleep now. Two Vickery Barnets. Two *identical* Vickery Barnets.

When the mobile rang his body lurched. What time was it? Quarter

past four. He grabbed the phone from the desk. *Unknown number*. Should he answer it? It stopped ringing. He slid the volume control to silent and stared.

God, it was quiet. The central heating had clicked off hours ago leaving only the hiss of electricity and the rumble of the North Circular Road. Against this, his breath sounded thunderous. Shut up. He sat on the end of the bed shivering, then grabbed a T-shirt and forced his arms through the sleeves. Next time the phone erupted, vibrating in his hand, he was ready for it. He swallowed and answered.

“Hello?”

No clicks, no whistle and no roaring symphony of words – but this time a broken tone, similar to a foreign dial sound. When the whispering started he slapped it off. He couldn’t help it. It was an automatic response.

It rang again. He listened to a few seconds of rolling air until it cleared. Then Vickery heard one word before the line died.

“Gotcha.”

CHAPTER TWO

Bounds Green, London, N10

Rafi lay on the sofa and Pointless, her dog, lay on her stomach. Every now and then she let him lick her chin. “It’s just a little kiss,” she muttered when Vickery made puking noises.

“He nibbles his own butt, you know?”

Rafi ruffled the dog’s ears. “He doesn’t know what a lovely clean doggy you are.”

His cousin Rafi and his Aunt Jess had arrived just as Vickery woke up so they must have left North Yorkshire at some inhuman hour to reach London before breakfast.

Five months (since he’d last seen her) had made a big difference to Rafi. Still dark and stocky, with frizzy hair down to her bum and eyebrows threatening to occupy the top half of her face, Rafi had discovered piercing.

“What’s Jess think?” He nodded at the two rings in her lower lip.

“She doesn’t mind.”

“Yeah. I bet.” They watched Pointless scratch his head. “Got any others? Belly button?” She flicked her hair back – it wafted like a lump of

bath foam – revealing five further rings along the side of her ear. “Blimey.” She looked like a panda, too. Up until thirteen she’d been a bit geeky and make-up free. Now, at fourteen, she’d started drawing on her face. And not in a good way. And she’d eaten a few too many pies, though it ran in the family. Jess, like his mother, was a giant of a woman. *Farmer’s daughters*, his mum always said, even though they weren’t.

He’d changed too, of course. Now slightly over five feet ten he no longer looked the scrawny kid of their childhood but – different gene pool – he still needed a belt.

Jess peeked around the living room door. “Collecting crockery, are you?” She sighed as she scooped up Vickery’s three used mugs. “Seriously, do us a favour and take you know who, while we sort dinner out. He must be desperate for a you-know-what after that car journey.”

Pointless loved the array of smells as they trudged towards Billyfields. Who’d have thought a dog’s bladder could contain enough pee to mark *every* tree, rubbish bin and gatepost – but apparently the supply was endless. The sky, already dark when they’d left the house, turned a deeper grey as they headed towards the abandoned, pre-war power station at the heart of the park. Vickery blew into his hands then wiped the dribble from his nose. Cold weather always did that to him.

So far, Rafi hadn’t shut up. Skidding over the frosty garden path in her pointy boots she’d grabbed his arm and clung on ever since, jabbering about some computer game she’d written for PCs; Flame Falls, or something. Impressive. Bloody impressive actually, but it wouldn’t do to inflate her already pompous opinion of it. So he kept his lips sealed.

“It’s creepy here.” She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out some gum.

He couldn’t disagree. By now they’d reached the open parkland where Vickery sank onto a bench and allowed Pointless the full extent of his leash. The dog raced in a wide circle, twisting around the bench and tangling himself – and everyone else – into a giant elastic web. Rafi slumped next to Vickery and stared at the city.

He’d hated Billyfields as a kid, holding his breath as he sprinted past, trying to stop the evil spirits invading his lungs. For as long as he could

remember the turbine hall had been boarded shut but the parkland had been reclaimed years ago, first by dog walkers and addicts, and then by Haringey Council's parks department. Still, he wouldn't want to spend the night here.

"I think I might have traced my family." Wow. He'd wanted to say something but hadn't known how to start, and then – out it burst. "I mean my blood family, my genetic family." Rafi stopped chewing and tucked her lower lip behind her teeth, presumably to help her concentrate.

"I didn't even know you were looking."

"I wasn't." This morning, when he got up, he'd accidentally nudged the mouse, sending the laptop buzzing and the screen flashing to life. Old time Vickery Barnet gawped at him through the camera. And in that moment he recognised that everything had changed. Twenty-four hours ago the possibility of another family had been a vague notion, filed away to be dealt with whenever. Now, he could be staring at a photograph of his great granddad. The US might be heaving with his cousins.

Swallowing the knot at the back of his throat, he told her everything, even describing the dreamlike phone calls – she might come up with some sort of explanation. She stared at Pointless throughout.

When he'd finished she swung her feet onto the bench and hugged her knees to her chest. "This is amazing. You know that don't you?"

"I don't know what I think yet. I kind of want it and don't want it at the same time."

"Yeah," she agreed. "Have you told Uncle Mike and Auntie Lou yet?"

"Dad knows some of it. But not the doppelganger bit. I need to chew on it first."

"It might upset them."

"I know. Dad was upset yesterday. He wanted me to look at the Mitchell family and I think he took it a bit personally when I looked at Barnet instead. I looked at the Mitchell family later and most of it ended up being about them anyway. But he was still pissed off." He sniffed and rubbed his nose. His parents might think they were losing him – and maybe they were. Maybe, if he traced his new family, he'd like them more. No, that was nonsense. Even if you did like the new lot, you wouldn't suddenly stop liking the old lot. He inhaled loudly and looked up at the

power station. “We won’t go much further.” He began to untangle the leash. “Once around the building and then we go back.”

The power station loomed above them. Dark trees crowded the perimeter of the park, forming a ring of black between them and the busy streets. Once they’d reached the middle, where they crossed the broad driveway, Rafi skidded off to look for a bin while Vickery led Pointless along the side of the turbine hall.

Turning the corner, he pitched into shadow. The thin track, choked with leaves, ran the gloomy length of the building and the thick undergrowth stretched almost to the walls, narrowing the path even more. He hesitated, giving his eyes a few moments to adjust. It looked dank and slippery and he really didn’t fancy it. He started to turn but, stupid as ever, Pointless bounded past, leaping through the leaves and sniffing the mouldy air. Vickery snorted and tramped after him. Get real – it’d only take a few minutes to reach the lighted tarmac drive.

He couldn’t get up much of a pace picking his way through the slimy debris. It probably never froze back here. He heard a snap to his left and paused to listen. Another snap. It sounded like branches breaking. Four more snaps, coming faster, louder. Hmmm, probably best not to stick around. As he speeded up he caught his foot on a loose stone, stumbled and grabbed the wall, dropping the end of the lead. Pointless barked and bounced into the shrub towards the sound of fracturing wood.

“Shit,” Vickery grunted, wiping his hands on the back of his jeans. No way was he following the dog into that. “Pointless,” he snarled. Somewhere to his right the dog snuffled and panted. He seemed to be tracking slightly ahead of Vickery until, woofing, he darted forward, maybe chasing a squirrel. Head down and, every now and then, calling out, Vickery skidded along the track. Stupid dog. Then he heard a voice.

VICKERY BARNET RECURRING by Sarah Dalkin

SYNOPSIS

Sixteen-year-old Vickery Barnet's suburban life crumbles when he discovers multiple versions of himself, scattered through history. The truth unfolds in contemporary London and 1930s New York, revealing all Vickerys are one: a quantum experiment creating a human bridge between all pasts, presents and futures. Times clash and realities chime. Access to the infinite is a desirable commodity – and others want in. They always want in, which makes Vickery a pretty desirable commodity too.

BIOGRAPHY

History, politics, travelling, adventure, big cities, big countryside, gardening, reading and writing – when Sarah's not working (she co-runs and co-owns a broadcast talent agency), she is probably thinking about something on this list. Incredibly, she still thinks we can change the world.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Great synopsis, excellent voice, and good pacing. A very promising concept and so far executed authentically. Would love to read more, particularly if the story moves to 1930s New York.'

'It's great to see speculative, high-concept, challenging YA told in such an engaging, approachable way. Bonus points, as well, for bringing in internet research in a way that doesn't feel boring on the page.'

'Really strong opening and a great concept. Solid pace, and the mystery is unravelling clearly and cleverly. Well done.'

Contact: sarah@jeremyhicks.com

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THE WING GIVER

By Emma Higham

PROLOGUE

This isn't going exactly to plan, was Callum's first thought at 0.001 seconds after jumping.

Am I wearing clean underwear? was the next at 0.002 seconds.

As he fell at 9.8 meters per second (minus air resistance) towards the rapidly approaching tarmac, Callum had just enough time for a few final thoughts to flash through his mind.

At 0.003 seconds, an impressive face-plant into the school playground cleared his mind of all thoughts apart from the really important one.

It hadn't worked.

Again.

Face down and clearing his tongue of a delicate crust of concrete and gravel, he began to pick over where this particular flight had gone wrong.

CHAPTER ONE

744.47 seconds previously and Callum felt on top of the world. Literally.

Standing on the Year 6's Portakabin, he quickly ran through some last minute flight suit safety checks. Once completed, he looked down at the crumpled piece of paper still lying in his hand.

FLYING AT SCHOOL A FOR AND AGAINST LIST

AGAINST

- Possible humiliation, on the same scale as suggesting the after-school bird-watching club.
- Definitely wouldn't help with current nickname of choice – Birdman Turdman.
- People still talking about medley of bird calls from last year's open mic show.

FOR

- Flying!

He tightened his fist, screwed the list into a small, sweaty ball and dropped it down towards the playground. Leaning over the edge of the roof, he watched it as it fell.

No signs of adverse wind conditions, he thought. *At least the weather seems to be on my side.*

As he looked out from his perch high above the playground, he wished he could say the same for the rest of the school establishment. Students had begun spilling out of their classrooms into the concrete freedom of the playground beyond and he could feel the nudges and points starting to build. A back of the throat, pit of the stomach, underpant-exposing sense of failure he knew all too well began to creep over him.

He looked across at his wings for moral support, flapped them a little and wondered whether this was the invention to finally do it. Whether this one would see him airborne.

Callum had enough home-grown aviation experience to know the level of detail required for any pre-flight planning and this one had been no different. This time he had gone back to basics; researched, thought, sketched and invented. With the help of his well-thumbed bird books and airplane journals, he had spent the last month in the caravan working on his new invention.

His heart raced as he thought through what he was about to do. With

every quickening palpitation he felt the buckles and straps strain across his chest. These wings were larger than anything he had constructed before. The pressure of keeping the bamboo skeleton firmly lifted started to make him feel shaky. Arching like a question mark at his knees, the wings rose up and over his shoulders, transforming him into the Angel Gabriel of the playground. A bright red tent, from when there were still family holidays, had been put to good use and the material pulled taut between each spine of his wings.

Deciding on the right location and date for the flight, as always, was a tricky process.

There were so many places he was banned from now that Callum's options were severely limited. The local park was a no-go after his all-over feather suit failed to cushion an emergency landing on Mrs Pettergrew, the surprisingly bony local councillor, at last year's summer fete. Fashioning the local youth club's canoe into a type of glider hadn't been applauded with the enthusiasm he'd expected, so that too was out of bounds.

But a flight at school? That was something he hadn't yet dared to dream.

With the location decided, all that remained was setting the flight date. Callum decided on the last day of term because, as jotted down in his always-to-hand notebook:

Moving up to secondary school in September means no post-summer punishment.

The teachers already have that 'I'm on a beach, leave me alone' look in their eyes, so the playground patrol will be relaxed.

It was the final lunchtime rehearsals of the So You Really Think You've Got Some Talent show so the playground wouldn't be too busy.

Or so he thought.

His bike helmet slipped over his eyes. He was getting hotter and hotter, standing so close to the sun on a metal frying pan of a roof. He pushed the helmet back and caught sight of Rowena in the middle of the growing crowd. She had been his right-hand wing-woman throughout every flight and there she was again, camera poised and ready to go. She tapped her watch, hunched her shoulders and gave him a double thumbs up, which he took to mean: *Hurry up, I'm hungry and this playground won't wait forever.*

And she was right. The small but growing crowd was getting restless. When Callum first scrambled his way on top of the Portakabin, there had only been a couple of people milling around the playground looking for something – or someone – to kick. Now there were at least forty pairs of eyes. And they were all looking his way.

He had to do it.

Now.

Just as he had made up his mind that *There's no time like the present, time waits for no man*, and all the other sayings his nan spouted, the double doors of the school hall burst open and out came a sprawling, clawing, brawling mass of kids. Everyone who was meant to be rehearsing for the talent show spilled into the playground and funnelled in Callum's general direction. He caught Mr Lawson in the middle of them spinning round, yelling something about 'stink bomb' and 'if you think this is funny, you are sorely mistaken', before there rang out across the playground a yell of:

'HEY. BIRDMAN TURDMAN!'

Followed by the unmistakeable, buttock-clenching sound of a clap.

Footballs hovered mid-air. Thumbs froze mid-text.

The clap ricocheted off the windows and walls of every classroom in the school before hitting Callum smack in the face.

Max Watkins from Callum's class stood in the centre of the crowd of onlookers, a look of spite pinching his face as he began to clap very slowly.

Again

And

Again.

Slow

And

Steady.

Like a drum roll for a sacrifice and he was the sacrificial-tied-up-apple-in-mouth lamb-for-the-slaughter. It didn't take long for everyone else to join in. Very quickly the claps grew louder and clearer as they gained more and more momentum.

Clap

Clap

Clap

Callum looked out over a playground packed tight with students starting to sniff the potential blood and danger in the air.

‘Jump.’

‘Jump.’

‘Jump.’

You don’t have to be an aeronautical engineer, thought Callum, to work out there is only one way out of this. Down with hopefully a moment or two of up beforehand.

Clap

Clap

Clap

Clap

With his bird’s eye view of the playground, he saw Max Watkins run towards Mr Lawson. *Tap, tap, tap* on his shoulder and then a finger pointed towards Callum. Mr Lawson turned and looked up at Callum getting ready to leap.

As he dashed through the clapping crowd, Callum couldn’t help but notice that Mr Lawson wasn’t exactly leading man material. His glasses slid down his nose and a fringe stuck to his forehead with the effort of running. He probably hadn’t figured on an afternoon spent negotiating stink bombs and flying students.

Teacher’s job descriptions don’t go into enough detail, Callum thought before he shook his head and focused on the job in hand.

Clap

Clap

Clap

Clap

Clap

Callum took a breath in. *Hopefully not my last*, he thought. Well practised over the years, he stretched out his homemade wings, awkwardly shuffled his feet closer to the edge of the roof and with every inch of his being, willed himself to:

Fly!

Fly!

FLY!

‘Get on with it!’ a voice yelled, as Mr Lawson got ever closer to the bottom of the Portakabin.

He hoped for magic.

He prayed for the air to lift him.

He . . .

Jumped.

CHAPTER TWO

Callum staggered in through the front door and caught a bruised rib on the unyielding brass door knob. He winced and paused, waiting for the pain to pass.

He closed the door behind him whilst attempting to give Mr Lawson an ‘I’m inside safe and sound’ wave. He needn’t have bothered. A distant blur of car tail lights swerved down the street as the teacher careered towards the start of his summer holidays.

Callum waited in the hallway and listened to the silence of the house. In his arms lay the crumpled evidence of his fifteen failed flight attempt:

Broken bamboo sticks (school property)

Ripped red tent (Mum’s property)

Deciding that retreating up the road to the caravan for a couple of hours was the best course of action, he swivelled round to go back the way he came.

A voice stopped him dead.

‘Callum. Kitchen. Now.’

He looked down at his hands, grazed raw from the gravel crash landing he had made just a couple of hours before. He made a half-hearted attempt to hide them behind his back. There was no speedy way to pretty up his torn school uniform or scuffed shoes and so he walked into the kitchen, bruised. But not yet beaten.

His mum sat silently at the kitchen table, arms folded in front of her. It was his first indication that this was going to be different from other post-flight tellings off. Callum saw her eyes do a quick sweep of the offending evidence; clocking the broken wings, the ripped school uniform and her torn tent. She let out a new sound through her teeth. A sound which Callum hadn’t heard before and of which he made a note for future reference.

Pssshhhhhzzzzssss.

He decided to get in quickly; to say something which might take the sting out of what was to come.

‘It should have worked,’ he said. ‘I planned it perfectly, better than any of the others. The wings were new. They should have given me more lift. They were perfect. They should have worked . . .’ He tried to sit down nonchalantly on a backside which had just borne the brunt of a very sore landing. He decided standing was a better option.

‘No, I don’t see, Callum. I don’t see at all.’

He did some quick on-the-spot calculations. The use of his name along with her calm voice confirmed that different tactics were being used. Usually she banged things around the kitchen when she was telling him off, taking her anger out on the cupboard doors or kitchen utensils. This time, she was very still and very silent. He’d read about this once, when doing some war research. Aggressors often try different tactics in order to get a signed confession.

Good cop/bad cop/I’m your friend/I’m not your friend, etc.

‘If it had worked you wouldn’t be angry,’ he said. ‘If it’d worked you’d be wanting to find out what happened and how I’d done it and what people had said afterwards. Because it would be amazing and everyone, even Mr Lawson, would be amazed. You wouldn’t be sitting here being silent.’ He paused, awaiting a response which didn’t come. ‘You’d at least say something.’

Callum’s mum stood up slowly and put both hands down on the table. When she lifted her head she fired a round of words at Callum so fast, so furious he considered retreating for cover under the kitchen table.

‘Maybe-you-can-tell-me-what-I-should-say-Callum?-Maybe-you-can-tell-me-what-I-should-say-to-my-ten-year-old-son-who-is-so-obsessed-with-flying-that-today-he-scaled-a-school-building-and-launched-himself-off-the-top-in-front-of-the-whole-school?-Maybe-then-you-can-tell-me-what-I-should-say-to-your-headteacher-when-he-calls-up-and-wonders-whether-you-might-need-to-speak-to-someone-because-surely-it-isn’t-normal-to-build-yourself-wings-and-throw-yourself-off-buildings.-Is-everything-okay-at-home?-Any-problems-I-should-be-aware-of?-What-am-I-meant-to-say-Callum?-Flying-children-isn’t-something-which-gets-discussed-in-parents’-meetings-or-How-To-Be-A-Better-Parent-handbooks! I have

run out of ways to tell you I need this to stop, Callum.’ This bit she said very slowly and deliberately so Callum could catch every mouthful. ‘That if you keep this up, one day you are going to seriously hurt yourself or someone else around you. No more building things God knows where. No more bird books from the library. No more phone calls from school. No more nothing. It’s over!’

She stopped.

Callum sat facing his mother. He felt the lonely, plate-spinning feeling of being totally misunderstood. His eyes started to sting and as he shifted in his seat; parts of the broken wings he was still holding fell noisily to the kitchen floor. He looked down at them miserably. *Stupid wings*, he thought. *Letting me down like that*. Swallowing back angry sobs, he got painfully to his feet before laying out his case for the defence.

‘You just don’t get it,’ he said. ‘You’re the same as everyone else. I don’t do it to try and annoy you. I do it because I have to.’

He quickly gathered up his stuff and made his way out of the kitchen, back towards the front door.

His mum, not missing a beat, followed him out of the room.

‘Don’t walk away from me, Callum. There are going to be some big changes around here this summer. No more flying plans. That’s it – over! Your first job is to write a letter of apology to Mr Lawson and everyone else whose careers you nearly wrecked today.’

He slammed his wings down with a pile of rubbish which still needed to be taken out and opened the front door. His mum followed him into the hallway.

‘And I’ve organised you a summer job too. Stanley’s expecting you tomorrow, after lunch. It’s all arranged. You’re to help him for as long as he needs you. Did you hear me Callum? Did you hear what I said?’

He had most definitely heard.

Loud/clear/over/out.

‘I’m going out,’ he yelled as the front door slammed shut behind him.

However no amount of slamming could block out what his mum said. The dream of a summer spent flying was dragged back down to earth with the realisation he would spend most of it with Stanley. Callum heard the loud burp and gurgle of his own sinking heart.

CHAPTER THREE

He sat on the caravan floor, breathing hard. His back pressed firmly against the door, warning the outside world to stay outside.

He had never seen his mum quite so serious about his flying before. She'd always had words in the past when he came back with a few more cuts and scrapes or when there was another phone call from a neighbour asking her to keep her son out of their trees. But she'd always seemed sort of pleased that he had something to occupy his time with. Or maybe it was just that she was too busy being sad about Callum's dad to really notice.

But lately she wouldn't stop going on about it. The anti-flying offensive really picked up as he approached the move to secondary school. Perhaps she thought this would be his cue to grow out of it, that the prospect of being around older kids and new teachers would scare him into stopping.

But how could he stop?

Callum had been dreaming about flying for as long as he could remember.

Pleased to be by himself, he looked around the caravan. It was an Aladdin's cave of inspiration and inventions. Plane mobiles and kites hung from the ceiling, pictures and photographs of helicopters, eagles, bats, hand gliders, wind turbines were wallpapered all over his walls. Every inch of spare space was taken up with something he had drawn or cut out over the years. Something with a story. Something that had taught him something new.

He pressed his hands into his eyes and tried to forget his day. He applied more and more pressure until tiny stars appeared behind his fingers, in the galaxy of his closed eyes. As he sat, hands pressed to his face, he began to slowly drift and lose himself in the darkness, before—

'CALLUM!'

A voice from outside interrupted his thoughts and forced Callum's eyes open with a start.

'CALLUM!'

A stampede of feet soon followed, signalling the arrival of an unexpected visitor. He attempted to get to his feet but didn't manage it before the door was violently shoved open behind him. Through the tiny gap which had been created, a Rowena-shaped parcel began prizing itself into the caravan.

'Where did you go?' she said, squeezing her left arm through, followed by her head which turned to look down at Callum whilst she took a momentary breather. He looked up at her.

'You missed all the fun,' she said, carrying on again and finally getting the last of her body fully squeezed inside. She jumped over his feet and sat on the plastic pull-down table.

'The playground went nuts. Mr Lawson tried to get everyone back in the hall to carry on the rehearsals but no one was budging. Everyone kept talking about you jumping.'

'Not jumping. Flying,' he said, getting carefully to his feet.

'Same difference. Where did you go?'

'I got sent to his office. He called my mum,' Callum said.

'Ah well. He can't do anything now can he? It's the last day of term. You'll be in a new school in September.'

'Yeah, well, I'm not so sure,' Callum said, looking over that day's flight designs stuck to the wall. Designs which should have seen the day pan out very differently.

'Are you okay?' Rowena said, noticing the grazes and tears on his clothes. 'I mean, did you get hurt or anything? You hit the ground pretty hard. I'll never understand how you can jump from that high and not break a leg or something. Like a cat. With nine lives or however many they're meant to have.'

'I'm okay,' he said, continuing to look over his sketches and pictures. 'I just don't get it is all. I thought we'd done it this time. You know how long we spent on this one. The design – it should have given me more lift. I mean, there wasn't even a second of anything but falling. I just jumped and there was the ground coming towards me.'

He pulled down one of his favourite drawings from the wall. They'd learnt about King Kai Kus in school and he'd managed to steal one of the colour printouts. The story of an Iranian king who wanted to explore the heavens so badly he tied birds to himself appealed greatly to Callum. Although he'd ruled it out as a possibility. Tying four eagles to a chair would definitely warrant a visit from the RSPCA.

Rowena sat, taking a long, hard look at Callum as he resumed the examination of his inventions.

‘Do you really think you can do it? I mean, really, honestly, truthfully think you can do it? I know we’ve talked about it enough but if this was the invention you thought was going to crack it . . .’

Callum stopped in front of a picture of a Chinese hot air balloon to look over at her.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Don’t get me wrong, I’m still with you. One hundred and ten per cent. But it’s going to get harder after today,’ she said. ‘You’re banned from almost every location within five miles of here and people run scared when they see you approaching. Wondering if you’ll have a glider tucked in your pants or something. I’m just saying what people are thinking.’

‘Oh,’ Callum stopped.

He wasn’t very good at thinking about how things he did looked to other people. He knew some people at school made fun of him behind his back but it never really bothered him. He just did what felt like his type of normal. ‘Not that I think it’s weird or anything,’ Rowena barrelled on, unaware of any uncomfortableness. ‘My dad says you’ll do something brilliant one day. Like be an aeronautical engineer or a pilot for a big airline or something.’

A sense of being misunderstood rose up strongly again. ‘But I don’t want to be an engineer or a pilot. I want to fly. Me. By myself. With no tricks or gadgets. Just me, in the sky.’

Rowena laughed loudly, showing off the two new fillings she’d got on her last trip to the dentist. ‘All right, all right. Keep your hair on.’ She planted a big smacking girl kiss on his cheek which he instantly wiped off. ‘I’m still your right-hand wing-woman.’

She stood up, gave a sailor’s salute goodbye and left the room.

He was just wondering whether he should take advice from someone who gives sailor salute goodbyes, when she popped her head back round the caravan door and deposited some photos of that afternoon’s failed flight attempt on the floor.

‘We better start planning your next flight though! If you fall off a bike, best thing to do is blah blah blah. And I need my front page story. Aye aye, Captain?’

He watched her leave, hurtling herself down the hill on her bike

towards home, before collapsing again on the floor.

If I could just capture something of that energy, he thought, maybe then I'd have the secret to this flying business.

CHAPTER FOUR

He spent that night at home avoiding eye contact with any of his family. Sitting in silence, they watched a relentless relay of reality shows, one after the other after the other.

Squeezed onto the sofa next to his nan, who always took up more than her fair share of space, Callum tried hard to disappear inside his jumper. His little sister had been sent to bed an hour earlier than usual, confused as to why everyone was behaving so oddly.

'Has someone died?' she asked, which only added to the uncomfortable gloom clinging to the house.

His mum sat on the chair in the corner, silent and still shrouded in a steely cloak of anger. She didn't have to look at Callum for him to know who'd put it there.

Tonight should be so different, he thought. We shouldn't be sitting watching telly. Flickering images of women wishing they were younger and houses in the sun mixed and morphed on the television with the pictures in his head of the night which should have been.

His mum standing on his doorstep, welcoming him home with a huge smile. Over their heads a painted banner hung on the front of the house.

'Callum. This time you really did it!'

The neighbours filling up every corner of the front yard, eating cake which his nan had made especially. A big cake with enough for everyone, a kestrel drawn on top and WELL DONE, CALLUM written shakily in icing sugar underneath. His mum opening a bottle of wine and letting him have a little bit mixed with lemonade like she did on very special occasions. His sister being allowed to stay up a little later so she could hear, straight from the horse's mouth, how he had done it. How he had flown high above the playground at school, swooping and gliding and performing airborne acrobatics.

Most importantly, everyone would be happy. Not the type of happy they were these days which always seemed more happy/sad rather than

plain, old-fashioned, run of the mill, reliably normal happy.

Instead here he was, suffocating on how ordinary everything was. A sensation not helped by pulling his jumper further and further over his face. He had a sinking feeling he was trying to ignore. It nagged at him, insisting he took notice, but he tried to push it away.

Not a fully formed thought. More a soft whisper or the ghost of a thought. He missed his dad.

Not that everything would be different if he were here now. He'd still be in trouble, probably even bigger trouble. But at least they wouldn't be watching shows about planning a wedding on a budget or skinny C-list celebrities. That would be something. In fact, that would be everything.

He waited for a good time to escape to his bedroom for the night, without attracting the suspicious glare of his mother. When his nan started snoring on his shoulder with the potential of dribbling to follow, he mumbled a 'goodnight' and went upstairs.

Door closed. Day over.

THE WING GIVER by Emma Higham

SYNOPSIS

Per ardua ad astra. Through difficulties to the stars. Easier said than done. At least for Callum McAndrew. All he wants to do is fly. By himself. In the sky. Hard enough. But made harder when you've not got your dad around. And you have to spend the summer working on old RAF veteran Stanley's garden. But might this unlikely friendship be just the thing to get Callum airborne? And what can stop the Wing Giver from entering his dreams?

BIOGRAPHY

Emma always wanted to be an actress but when cast as a panda in the school play, with her friends leaping by as gazelles, she started to rethink her career prospects. She now makes theatre for and with young people, ensuring any pandas are treated as humanely as possible.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'This piece really sparkled for me – original, surprising concept and I LOVED Callum as a character! Great voice and sense of humour; tension brilliantly maintained with the students clapping Callum off to his flight/fall. Fantastic first chapters and I want to read more.'

'It's very original, with a strong opening. I'm intrigued to read more.'

'Beautiful concept. It has the potential to be *Curious Incident* meets *October Sky* – a lovely, lyrical metaphorical adventure.'

Contact: highamemma@hotmail.com

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THIS GRIMM LIFE

By Christian Colussi

CHAPTER ONE

3:12 a.m.

The witching hour.

I've been listening to the soft sounds that ebb and flow while I'm usually fast asleep. Dad's snores, low, undulating like hills, the electric hum of the alarm clock by my bed, a tinkle of leaves from the tree in our garden, the rustle of a page being gently turned in the study.

There's no sound as beautiful as that of a page being turned. It's like that moment when the roller-coaster car reaches the top of the climb and you wait, poised, to find out what happens next. In the pitch darkness of my bedroom I listen to the page turns and each one feels like a breath exhaled. The night ebbs and flows through my body, another page turns, my chest expands, I breathe.

3:15 a.m.

The witching hour and someone is reading in the study?

My brain starts trying to make sense of what I'm hearing. Could it be Cynthia? I've hardly ever seen her read anything let alone at three in the morning. I let the darkness of my room fill my eyes then I throw my duvet back and feel my way to the bedroom door.

The light from the study burns fiercely in the dark of the house, illuminating the walls of the landing. I tiptoe down the stairs towards the warm glow, edge closer. Another rustle of skin on paper as a page turns and I know someone's definitely in there. I see the shelves of books stacked from floor to ceiling, the corner of Dad's desk, another page turns, I step inside.

Mum.

She's sat in her armchair, the one we used to squeeze on together when she used to read to me. But I'm sixteen now.

She's heard me and looks up.

"Bryony, you gave me a fright," she whispers.

I sit down on the floor beneath the light of the tall lamp. It's warmer here than in the rest of the house.

"Go back to bed, Bry. You have school tomorrow."

I shake my head and rest it against her leg. Her nightie is soft against my cheek and then I feel her fingers running through my hair and I close my eyes. There's something I need to tell her and I open my mouth but she cuts me off before the words come.

"I know what you want," she says, carefully lifting my head as she stands and walks to the shelf where she keeps all her books, away from Dad's science books, her magical books. She sits back down and opens *The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*. The pages rustle, they rustle so smoothly, so perfectly as she turns them, pausing then moving on. Looking for the right one.

"You never get bored of these do you?" she says.

I shake my head. There's something I need to tell her and it's burning me up inside but every time I open my mouth the words don't seem to come.

"Ah, this is the one," she says and taps the top of my head. I look up at her, her full lips, her dark, luscious hair that flows and frames her face, her soft smile, her endless brown eyes.

"There's a truth to every story, Bryony," she says as she flattens the pages with the palm of her hand and prepares to read.

"Bryony?"

I turn to find Dad standing in the study. He squints at me through barely opened eyes.

"What are you doing?"

"I couldn't sleep. Mum's going to read to me." I find my voice has returned.

He walks to me and cradles me in his arms. I don't hug him back, I don't do much at all but I suddenly understand why he is doing it.

"She's gone, Bry," he says. "You have to understand, she's dead."

He's right. The chair is empty and the book is still on the shelf. We're on our own. But he's not right. He's wrong. The tales say that in olden times wishing was having and I have wished every day to have her back. And now she is back.

My mum is back.

CHAPTER TWO

What's possible? What's real?

I can't stop thinking about her.

My forehead rattles against the car window as Dad drives me to school. He's tapping the steering wheel, nodding his head to Absolute Rock FM, and I'm watching Ironbridge dribble past in a smudge of grey. My eyes are heavy but my thoughts return again and again to last night. I keep hearing the sound of those pages turning, I keep seeing her sitting in the study armchair, I keep hearing her voice, reading me a Grimm tale just like she used to when I was younger. I keep hearing those beautiful tales . . .

Light, shimmering and translucent, fills my entire vision and I squint as the grey buildings vanish into thin air. I look up to see a glass castle, towering up into the sky, its turrets so high that the tips of the flagpoles reach up and touch the clear, morning blue. The words 'Blueberry Shopping Centre' glow along its glass walls which glint with the light from the shops inside and I see castle guards marching solitary steps through its avenues and halls. Soon it will fill with people but for now it is empty and enchanted and everyone is asleep, dozing by the fountains and in the pizzerias and taco bars. What's real? What's possible?

Everything is possible.

"Bloody thing!"

I jump as Dad thumps the radio with the side of his fist as Eric Clapton's guitar riff distorts and fades out. The enchanted castle disappears, and Absolute Rock FM immediately tunes back in. "Ah that's better. Works every time," he says with a smile.

He continues to tap the steering wheel and I can tell he is building up to something, and then it comes.

"Listen, Bry. I'm going to book an appointment with Dr Tillman."

I knew it. I turn away and stare out of the window.

“Come on, Bry. Please, work with me on this. I just want you to talk. I don’t care who you talk to, talk to me, talk to Dr Tillman, just talk to someone. I hardly remember what your voice sounds like.”

But words are powerful, dangerous things. The last words I ever said to Mum were terrible, awful things. When words are spoken out loud what you mean and what you feel and what you say can get all garbled up. So I prefer to keep them in my head where things make sense, where they can be hidden away. Where I can hide away.

Dad glances at me but I keep my eyes firmly on the streets scrolling past the car window.

“Listen, in life, if you have a problem, you need to be brave and you need to confront it head on and then remove it by whatever means necessary. Otherwise you’ll never get better.”

But I’m not ill. Why don’t they understand? Mum was there yesterday, she was really there. Just because people can’t see something it doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist, that it’s not real. People say we don’t have castles in Ironbridge but we do. I pass one every day. It’s just that they are made of concrete and glass, not stone and iron. We have castles and we even have a wolf.

That’s why Dad is driving me to school. Someone with a knife tore up another young girl just west of Arbor Yard. The second in four months. The police think they are linked and the papers are using words like ‘ferocious’.

“Well, you’re seeing him on Thursday after school. Okay?” Dad says as we pull up outside the brown brick walls of St Hilda’s. I pause, nod, and then slip out into the pre-bell rush. I think I hear him say, “I love you,” just too late as I slam the door.

Maths. Thank goodness I don’t have to do this ever again. Mr Moorland is inflicting such a grilling on Eva Stonton that her suffering makes me cringe and I have to turn my eyes away to the window, down towards the playground below, where they rest upon a lone figure wandering across the asphalt. But when I look closer I realise there’s something not quite right. It’s a woman wearing nothing but a nightie. My heart stops still.

Mum.

I stretch my neck, trying to see more. She's pacing up and down barefoot, all on her own in the playground, and I want to laugh out loud. I try to catch John Humpton's attention, he's nearest the window, I want to point her out to him but he's buried in his schoolbook trying not to make eye contact with Mr Moorland. Then she sees me. She's looking right up at me and she's waving.

Mum.

She's waving me down but I can't. Mum, I can't come now. I try shaking my head to explain but she just keeps waving.

"Bryony, why don't you lend Eva a hand with this one."

My head darts up. I see Eva slump back in her chair with relief that she has been relieved from her torture.

"You seem like someone with a confidence and grasp of mathematics. Please, carry on where Eva left off."

My head feels fuggy, like it's burning up; I don't know where I am, I don't want to be here.

I'm lost.

The bell rescues me and I hurl myself out of the classroom and towards the playground. I need to get to her before she leaves, I need to find her.

Outside the final stragglers run inside, leaving me alone. I remember how scary that word sounds, how it feels. Alone. I scan the forecourt and playground where shadows spike and retreat across the ground, pulled back by the rising sun. Then I see her. She's by the bike shed sitting sideways on a bicycle, watching me, smiling. I run towards her and she comes to meet me in the centre of the playground and I'm no longer alone.

We look at each and I want to say so much, I want to ask her so many questions. Doesn't she feel cold in just her nightie? Doesn't it hurt to walk barefoot out here? How did she come back? But when I open my mouth my throat constricts as if I'm about to throw up and I begin to choke.

Mum places a finger on my lips. "It's all right," she says. "Let's sit down."

We walk over to a bench at the side of the school building and sit down. She stares at me, not in a bad way, but as if she's really studying me, as if she's drinking me in.

"You look so much like me, Bry."

I don't think so. Well, if you took Mum and squashed her voluptuous body into a bottle shape, gave her a stoop, jowly cheeks and glasses, then maybe that would be accurate. I do have the same milky skin but I'll never be as beautiful as her.

"Bry, what does every hero in a fairy tale have to do?"

I know the answer to this. But I can't say it. Why can't I say anything?!

"That's right," she says, giving voice to my thoughts. "They have to complete a task. There's a task that you need to do, something that you must find."

My eyes light up and I open my mouth to ask . . .

"What is it? That's what you want to know. It's the truth, Bry. Everyone has a tale to tell, and our family has its own tale. But sometimes tales aren't what they seem. You need to find the truth of this tale."

I see her eyes shift away from mine and focus on something over my shoulder. "I don't have much time."

I turn around and jump back into Mum's arms. A tower of immovable, intense darkness has joined us in the playground. It stands staring, waiting with the patience of time itself; a hood cauls an empty space where a face should be and flows down into a long, dark cloak like running black water. Mum holds me tight. I know him. I have seen him before. He first appeared in the months after Mum died but I had met him before that in the Grimm tales. The figure holds an hour glass in his right hand and in the hour glass flickers a delicate flame.

I stare at Godfather Death for one cold heartbeat, and then Mum rises to her feet and begins to walk towards him. I grab her, clinging tight, but she pushes me away.

"It's okay, Bry. I need you to be brave. I have to go with him for now."

She walks away with Godfather Death, her white nightie next to his black cloak, side by side like bride and groom. But I don't want him to take her, not again, so I run after her as they disappear hand in hand behind the bike sheds but something pulls me back.

"Bryony! What do you think you're playing at? Get back inside!"

I turn to find Miss McCartney towering over me, her wild, brown hair flailing in the breeze, and behind her I see everyone from Art crowding around the windows, staring at me, laughing.

I run. I can hear Miss McCartney's footsteps close behind me but I don't care because I have a task to complete, Mum said so, and maybe this is it. But when I reach the sheds Mum and Godfather Death have disappeared and I feel Miss McCartney place a claw on my shoulder and drag me back.

"Enough! Come with me, now!"

I turn and look up at her face as her eyes dissolve to green and her locks begin to writhe like slimy worms. I scream and shove her away but her grip is too strong.

"That's it. You're in detention."

Schools feel like strange places after hours. I've been in detention about ten minutes and I hate it already. It's partly the emptiness but more than that it's the guilt. I'm not a bad person, I don't get into trouble usually yet here I am under Miss McCartney's intense gaze and all I can think about is what Dad will say.

"If you could have just told us what you were doing outside you might have been home by now," Miss McCartney says.

"She doesn't say much," Jennifer Clegg pipes up. "That's why we call her The Girl With No Feelings. She just stares, completely gormless." Jennifer pulls a blank, wide-eyed expression that I think is supposed to be me then caws with laughter.

"Do you want an extra hour here, Jennifer? No? Then keep your trap shut and do your work."

I can't believe I'm in detention with the likes of Jennifer Clegg and what does she know about feelings? What does she know about the things that I can see? Or Miss McCartney or anyone else?

"Harriet, you can wait for your father in the common room if you want. You don't have to stay in here with these two," Miss McCartney says, looking past me.

I turn around and find Harriet Manning sitting in the corner of the classroom. I hadn't noticed her. To be honest I hadn't really noticed her much in English Lit recently either. Her left arm is bandaged roughly and she rests it on the table as she writes with her right hand. I've seen a certain ferocity in her eyes before but now it's even more evident. She's like a

cat backed into a corner, ready to lash out if anyone comes any closer. She looks around the room as if she owns it, then shrugs, gathers her belongings, and walks out, clanging the desks out of her way.

“Charming,” Miss McCartney says before resuming her marking.

No more words are exchanged and the room plunges into a heavy silence. I feel exposed by the emptiness, there’s no place to hide, hardly a sound to cover me, so I build a tower around my desk brick by brick. It’s Rapunzel’s tower and I leave only one tiny window to allow the light from the classroom outside to enter. I’ll hide inside here until detention is over. But even now I can’t seem to escape as the silence is punctured by the sound of the clock hanging on the classroom wall, its hands ticking a slow beat like a witch’s fingernails tapping on a table. Waiting, waiting . . .

The hour passes slowly but it does pass and as soon as I reach the school gates I take a long, deep breath. My phone dings. Dad. He’s running ten minutes late. I sit down at the foot of the gates and wait in the last of the day’s dwindling rays, letting the late August sun warm my face. It seems to be dipping ever lower recently. A few weeks ago it was high above the houses opposite St Hilda’s, now it’s beginning to kiss their rooftops. But the skies have been prettier. Today some of the clouds are tinged with pink and I imagine what a nice backdrop they would make to a castle on a hill, its flags fluttering in the soft breeze. There’s magic everywhere, I decide.

And if magic exists then why shouldn’t the things I read in books be possible too? Why can’t Mum have found a way back to me? Why can’t the Grimm tales be real too? Why can’t there be dwarfs, simpletons, and princesses?

A shadow passes over me. “Hey, Bryony.”

I look up and squint into the sun as John Hunter walks past and throws me a shy smile.

And princes too. Why can’t there be princes? I haven’t seen John much since he left school. He was a couple of years older than me and went straight to work at his dad’s garage.

“Need some company?”

Another shadow passes across me but this one lingers.

John's brother, Steve, has appeared.

"I can walk you home," Steve says. He's wearing a pair of tacky Ray-Bans straight from an eighties' movie.

"No thanks, my dad is coming."

"It's legit. John and myself have started a neighbourhood escort service since they found that other girl in Arbor Yard."

He smirks as he says the word 'escort' but I'm not sure why.

"No thanks, my dad is coming," I repeat. Why does my voice always sound so bloody dull?

"Shame."

"Steve, she says her dad is coming. Come on," John calls.

Steve catches up with his brother, throwing me a final grin as he goes.

This life is full of simpletons, children and princes. And wolves too. There are always wolves.

CHAPTER THREE

It's been almost a year but as soon as I walk inside his office it feels like yesterday.

"Good morning, Bryony." Dr Tillman stands up, shakes my hand, then indicates the seat in front of his desk. "Please. How are you today?"

He's speaking like we just had a session last week. On the other hand I suppose he can't ask how I've been as I wouldn't be here if life had been going swimmingly.

"Okay," I say.

"Good."

He hasn't changed. His fine fair hair is still thinning, he's wearing the same shirt and suit and making notes with the same pen as far as I can see. His tactics haven't changed either. He circles, asks me about mundane things, Dad, school, hobbies, but I can tell he wants to speak about something else.

"Do you see your friends much after school?"

I look down and shrug.

"Do you hang out with them during school?"

I keep my eyes firmly on the floor.

"Do you see anyone?"

I won't talk about Mum. She's mine. But there is someone I do see, someone who scares me. Maybe Dr Tillman can help me with *him* . . . I look up.

"Yes?"

"Sometimes I see Godfather Death."

Dr Tillman nods as if he knows him well. "Tell me a bit about him. Who is he? What does he look like?"

"He's from a tale by the Brothers Grimm. He doesn't have a face. He just wears a long black cloak and carries a candle in his hand."

"What's the candle for?"

It's not for anything. Each candle represents a life, the tall, new ones for children, the short, melted ones for the aged at the end of their years. Although, sometimes it doesn't always work like that. But I say nothing of this and turn my eyes back to the floor.

He has more questions but I have no more answers.

I'm awake.

What time is it? I can't see anything, it's so dark. It has to be the early hours of the morning but my eyes are wide open; it's as if I've been sleeping for an eternity. Then I feel something. Not something. *Someone* . . .

I turn over to face my bedroom door and find it open. A figure stands there. My eyes adjust to the dark and I make out a woman, watching me. Her face is shrouded in darkness but somehow I know she is looking at me. There's something that you can't put your finger on, something that only a bond, forged over years between your parents, despite what they've done and how you've behaved, something that tells you when you see them in the strangest, darkest part of the night: *I know this person*. This isn't an intruder, and it isn't Cynthia. It's Mum.

My heart picks up a pace, vaulting with light, joyful steps. I slip from my duvet and walk towards her. She is motionless but I can smell her now, feel her warmth. She's here, she's alive.

I turn on the bedroom light and she looks at me with those eyes, like big buckets of love. Then she turns her head in the direction of Dad and Cynthia's bedroom and looks back at me with a naughty smile, placing a finger against her lips.

“Shhh . . .” she whispers and cocks her head for me to follow.

I smile and follow her down the small flight of stairs and then she stops and turns back to me. “Don’t forget the story book.”

Of course. I tiptoe back into my bedroom and grab *The Fairy Tales of The Brothers Grimm*. Then I join her in the study where she turns on the sidelights and settles into the armchair. There’s so much I want to say. I want to tell her that I will protect her from Godfather Death, I will be brave like the boy in *The Youth Who Did Not Know What Fear Was* and I will rescue her. I want to speak about the things that I said to her. But no words come out when I open my mouth and she just smiles and caresses my face.

“Let’s read a story, Bry.”

She opens the book at the start of a tale, as if it were the only tale that we were ever going to read tonight. Then she looks at me and for a second I catch that serious expression that she has when the time for play is over.

Her finger slowly glides across the faded, worn page and comes to rest on the title with a precision and certainty that somehow suggests that at this very moment, this is the most important thing in the world.

The Handless Maiden.

“A certain miller had fallen by degrees into great poverty, until finally he had nothing left but his mill and a large apple tree . . .” she begins to read.

When she finishes the tale she closes the book and looks at me once more with that serious regard.

“There’s a *truth* to every story, Bry. Do you understand?”

And she closes the book and rests her palm on its cover as if she were swearing an oath on a bible.

THIS GRIMM LIFE by Christian Colussi

SYNOPSIS

Bryony Rose, a young girl grieving for her dead mother, starts to see similarities between the fairy tales that her mother used to read her and the lives of people she encounters. When she delves deeper into their lives she discovers the true meaning behind the fairy tales she loves and in the process uncovers a dark secret buried within her own family.

BIOGRAPHY

Christian Colussi has Italian and Caribbean roots and has lived in Denmark although he was born and bred in London. When not writing he spends his time rifling through the kitchen cupboards in the hope of finding a forgotten slice of battenburg.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘Beautiful, lyrical writing – some of those metaphors are absolutely stunning. Bryony, and her mother, are such captivating, haunting characters.’

‘Evocative writing, brimming with emotion. Bryony’s unhappiness threatens to spill over the edges of the page. The initial twist when we discover that her mother is dead is deftly executed and delivers a genuine shock.’

‘Interesting, lyrical writing. An intriguing premise, thoughtful and nicely drawn characters. Persuasive voice with emotional depth.’

Contact: christian@colussi.co.uk

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SHADOW INCLUSIONS

By Imogen White

CHAPTER ONE

Sackville Road, Hove 1907

“ROSE MUDDLE! Miss Templeforth has requested your company in the library.”

Rose fell off the stool she was standing on, sending it clattering across the scullery. Standing quickly, she saw the butler glaring at her from the kitchen door.

“Me?” she stammered, lifting her hand to her chest. “In the library?” The colour drained from her face. “I ain’t supposed to go in the library.”

“Well, if my name isn’t Rose and yours is, then she must be referring to you. Now get over here!” he spat self-importantly.

She made towards him, sweeping her mousy-blond hair behind her ears, checking her frilled lace headpiece was still in place.

She presented herself in front of him, straight-backed in her black dress and white apron, trying to hold every one of her twelve years to a regimented attention.

Grabbing her arm he pulled her off balance, and leaned in close. “Once that last girl goes, it will be your turn; perhaps she is reconsidering her act of charity having you here,” he smirked.

His breath smelt rotten and his conical baldhead, speckled with liver spots, glimmered under the light above.

Egghead! Rose thought, her slate-coloured eyes glaring at him defiantly.

The butler’s eyes narrowed as though he detected her unspoken insult.

He increased his grip on her arm and looked about to speak, when Miss Templeforth's bell rang out for him from the library upstairs.

With a sharp upwards glance he reluctantly let go of Rose's arm, flattened down the stray hairs that stood up like static from his egg-shaped head and beetled away up the wooden staircase that led to the lobby above, shouting back, "Your turn next, Rose Muddle, after the girl leaves."

Rose waited until his footsteps had silenced before she let her panic take hold.

She darted towards the back door. Her mind was swirling as she tiptoed out into the basement yard. The library, with everything that had been going on in there today, was the last place she wanted to go.

Outside in the narrow brick yard, she hunched up her shoulders against the cold and clapped her arms to warm herself. Above her she could hear the coaches rattling past on Sackville Road. Her eyes darted about. She needed to think quickly, to work out a plan.

Unbeknown to Rose, obscured by the tall brick walls of the basement yard, the occupants of a dark carriage, parked on the roadside directly above, had the house under close surveillance.

Inside that carriage a man, who looked old enough to be dead, twitched the curtains and blinked his good eye into the intruding light until he could clearly see the elegant, three-storey town house they were there to watch.

His companion, a police constable from the Brighton and Hove constabulary, waited silently opposite him in the darkness.

"What news do we have of our foreign visitor?" the old man rasped, as he held up a pendant, like an eye glass, into the dusty channel of light searing through the curtains.

"I have received confirmation that he has travelled from the east, via London, arriving at this house tomorrow, Sir," the policeman said regimentally.

"Indeed," the old man hissed, absorbed now by his pendant, which the light had transformed from a dull brown disc into one of vibrant, luminous orange. He tilted his head from side to side, studying the sequence of mutilated faces forming like bubbling magma within the pendant's body,

each deformed ensemble giving way to the next. Satisfied, he grunted and snatched up the pendant into the ball of his fist.

"And his book travels with him?" he snapped.

"It does, Sir," the policeman confirmed, adding, "and the Amber Cup awaits him at the museum."

Below them, in the yard, Rose Muddle paced about madly, trying to find somewhere to hide.

"Oi, Rose, is that you? What's been happening to all them girls leaving your place, they looking like they seen a ghost or summin'?" a scruffy head said, popping up from the neighbouring yard.

"Jack Billings," Rose said, flustered, "I ain't got time to talk to you now." She fell on all fours in front of the barred entrance to the coal hole, pressing her feet up against the wall either side for leverage; she pulled at the bars with all her might.

Jack peered down at her and giggled. "Rose, what you doing?" he asked, as he watched her on the yard floor tugging away at the unyielding bars.

"Miss Templeforth," Rose paused to yank, "wants to see me in the library next," she exhaled deeply, falling back to rest on her hands, "but I fancy stopping inside there." She pointed into the shadowy hole.

"Them girls," Jack said conspiratorially, "the ones leaving with the collywobbles, them the ones that responded to the advertisement in the *Evening Argus*?"

"Advertisement?" Rose stopped suddenly. "What advertisement?" she said curiously, climbing onto an upturned pail to stare down at Jack's dirt-smudged face looking up from the boarding house yard next door.

"Yeah, look, I got it here." Jack smiled, pleased to have gained her attention. He pulled out a crumpled piece of paper from his shabby pocket and passed it up to Rose.

Rose straightened out the newspaper article against the wall in front of her and read it aloud:

Inheritance Search for the Templeforth Estate

Due to her impending death, Miss Lucile Campanula Templeforth has been forced

*to take the unusual step of requesting that all females from her maternal line should attend an interview, to establish an heir for her family estate. The candidates must be no older than thirteen years of age. Interviews will take place on the afternoon of Wednesday 20th October at her residence, **Thirteen Sackville Road, Hove, from 12 noon.** The chosen heir will inherit the entire family estate. The name of the successful girl will be publicly announced at the reading of Miss Lucile's last will and testament.*

"Well I never!" Rose exclaimed, passing the clipping back. "But that don't explain why they've ALL been leaving in such a fearful state . . ."

A scream from above cut her short.

Rose exchanged a panicked look with Jack before edging up the narrow stone steps that led from the yard to the iron gated railings separating her from the pavement.

At the top of the grand steps above, she saw the main front door swinging open and thwacking the portico, sending the fist-shaped knocker into convulsions. There in its open frame was the feeble outline of a young girl.

Rose crouched as the child zigzagged down the steps, and then swayed dizzily between the pair of wrought iron lions that flanked the entrance.

The girl was smartly dressed with a starched white frock tied in the middle with a blue sash. But, like the rest of them that day, her face was wretched with fear, delirious, her eyes rolling in their sockets and her black ringlets looking as though she had slept bivouac.

The girl looked each way up the road before, with a jolt of recognition, she made her way unsteadily towards a waiting carriage whose door swung open, allowing the girl to crawl inside before slamming shut.

Rose watched on as the coachman cracked his whip, sending the carriage jerking into motion and U-turning sharply in the road to head towards the intersection with Church Road.

Straining on tiptoe, she watched the back of the carriage rattle away. A vague haze of recollection washed over her as she noticed the matt motif contrasting against the polished luggage hold: a black emblem of a blazing sun.

Rose's innards churned; it was her turn next. She fumbled with the

latch on the gate, intent on escaping, but her fingers were too numb from cold and panic.

“ROSE MUDDLE. It is time,” the butler’s voice boomed gleefully from the kitchen doorway below.

Rose’s heart missed a beat.

“Sir, I were just . . . urm . . . I heard another scream and I . . .” she spluttered, rushing down the steps. Her eyes shifted low before looking up to gauge his face – which was a stony shade of eggshell.

“Move it!” His spittle flew at her as she scurried past.

Inside he pursued her up the wooden staircase and along the corridor until she reached the imposing lobby, where Rose stopped outside the oversized library door.

Mounted animal heads and stuffed birds in glass domes stared at her from the lobby walls, as the grandfather clock clinically ticked away her final seconds.

Rose yelped as the butler manhandled her to one side to open the library door wide.

“Rose Muddle, as you requested, Ma’am.”

Rose looked helplessly up at him. Hoping for a glimmer of moral support, but there was none. Instead his thin lips crept into a cruel smirk that twitched in one corner. He bent towards her so only she could hear. “Maybe you’re heading back to the workhouse,” he hissed.

Her face faltered as fear welled up inside her. *Surely she won’t send me back?* Then other thoughts bombarded her. *What happened to all those girls in here earlier to make them leave so horrorstruck? Who was her mysterious employer who remained shut away in the library – what would she look like?* One thing she could be certain of, one way or another, all of these fearful questions were about to be answered.

Rose timidly entered the dimly lit room – the forbidden room – her fear heightening with each step, her stomach doing somersaults and her heart jiggering like a bee trapped in a pill pot.

CHAPTER TWO: THE LIBRARY

The ticking of the clock in the lobby was snuffed out, as the butler silently drew the library door shut behind her. Rose stiffened and looked out across the impressive room, her nose wrinkling against its musty odour.

The dim flickering light within had a brooding intensity.

Shadows of the exotic animal skulls that hung between the towering bookcases loomed and distorted in the firelight, forming hideous phantoms that seemed to bear down on her.

"Do come and sit with us a while, Rose," a disembodied voice of a lady wafted across the room.

Rose's stomach lurched as her eyes followed the direction of the voice to a winged armchair, positioned by the fire, facing away from where Rose was standing.

"Yes, Ma'am," Rose heard her own quivering voice reply.

Rose's darting eyes met those of the grand portrait of a woman mounted above the stone mantelpiece, smiling down mockingly from behind her open fan. Rose swallowed, noticing how the eyes followed her.

Every step dragged, her mind fizzling, until she found herself edging around the armchair, feeling like a Christmas goose ready for the chop.

Steadying herself she took her first look at the chair's occupant, her mysterious employer.

The firelight picked out a motionless body, dwarfed by the massive chair. A corpse-like face with hollowed cheeks and skin like parchment. A vision of grey and white: high-necked nightdress, grey plaits to her waist, a thick blanket the same colour as her hair, covering her from midway down. The only colour on her was an orange pendant suspended on a gold chain.

The woman's pinched lips parted and took a rasping breath.

Every sinew of Rose's being wanted to run, to escape; she looked around desperately for an exit, when a movement in her peripheral vision made her gasp.

Turning away from the cadaverous apparition, she watched a figure emerge from the shadows.

A pang of recognition left Rose feeling light-headed as Enna Lee, the fortune teller from St Ann's Wells Gardens, the same woman who had collected her from the workhouse all those months ago, now strode confidently into view.

Why is she here? Is she intending to take me back? Has the butler known this all along?

Confusion and fear washed over Rose as she locked eyes with those of

the gypsy's. Those searching eyes that always seemed to know too much. *It was her all right*, she was even wearing the same maroon shawl as before, fringed with golden discs, and her swathes of thick black hair hung heavily around her handsome face.

"Hello, Rose dear, do sit down," the gypsy said warmly, indicating to a stool positioned near the armchair.

Sitting down awkwardly she watched as the gypsy gently tucked in the grey blanket around Miss Templeforth's withered body, before holding a flask to her lips which she sipped with difficulty.

She poured more of the milky-red liquid into a glass and placed it on the table beside her. The gypsy's fingers glinted as the firelight danced across her gaudy rings.

When finished the gypsy sat on a chair next to Rose and winked, her face falling into an easy smile.

Rose turned automatically to Miss Templeforth, who was drawing a wheezing breath that rattled from deep within her bony frame. Croakily she spoke.

"Enna," Miss Templeforth began, gesturing to the gypsy, "was keen to discover how you are finding domestic life here, at number thirteen, these past six months? It must be quite a change from the workhouse? I fear that I've had little chance to speak with you, because of my deteriorating health."

Rose was staggered by how animated the old woman had suddenly become, and wondered what that liquid was.

"Hum hum. Well, Ma'am . . . and Miss Lee of course," she paused anxiously, "the truth is, I am so thankful for the kindness you have shown me, giving me this chance and—"

"Very good," Miss Templeforth interrupted, taking another deep breath, eager to move the conversation on. "The visitors today responded to my advertisement in the *Evening Argus* requesting girls from my maternal line to present themselves here. As I am sure you know, I am soon to die." Miss Templeforth paused to take another sip of fortifying liquid, leaving the last statement dangling like an elephant from the ceiling.

Rose looked down and said nothing.

"The advert unearthed every charlatan and gold digger from Peacehaven to Portslade. They got a whiff of the money you see. Even those with genuine links to the family have proved to be entirely unworthy, weak spirited or worse," Miss Templeforth continued, waving her long knotted fingers about as she spoke.

Rose shifted in her seat, uncertain why she was being told all this when Miss Templeforth stilled and turned to her.

"We wanted to speak to you about values. Sometimes a person's most treasured things have no material value in this world whatsoever. What do YOU value, Rose?" Miss Templeforth's face hardened, and she held up her lorgnette to gauge Rose's reaction more closely.

"Well, Ma'am," she began, flustered, noticing how the glasses made the old lady's eyes look freakishly large, "I don't own much to value. That isn't to say I don't value much what I own, it is to say that I don't own much. I value the people who are kind to me, I value this job of course." Rose tried to say the right things.

"Indeed," Miss Templeforth said dryly, exchanging another glance with the gypsy. "Well, I would like to show you something of personal value to me," she said, reaching up to unfasten the chain around her neck and passing the large orange pendant to Rose.

The air around Rose seemed to charge with chilled anticipation. She paused and shot an uncertain look at the gypsy, who nodded, her blue eyes boring through her, encouraging her to take the pendant. Then Rose looked to Miss Templeforth, who agitated the chain and glared, her eyes still owl-like behind the lorgnette lenses.

Rose's mind raced like kite string as she replayed that day's events: *the girls that had come running out of there all morning screaming, Jack's words about ghosts*. The figure of Mrs Gritt, the Workhouse Governess, formed like a spectre in her mind. *I ain't going back to her and I ain't scared of no ghosts*.

Rose took the pendant. As her fingers made contact with it she became inexplicably absorbed by it. She failed to notice how the fire suddenly gushed into a mighty flame or the low rumbling sound like thunder that accompanied it.

A sensation had taken over Rose that was not easy to explain. It was unlike anything else she had ever experienced. She had an overwhelming

sense of weightlessness like when her tummy got left behind on a swing and she felt ever so small and ever so big all at the same time.

It was as though she understood everything in such great detail without having to make sense of any of it . . . her hand smoothed the pendant. None of it felt troublesome. It felt like the most natural feeling in the world. *It felt . . . right.*

Calmly, she held it up to the light of the fire and watched the almost imperceptible movements shift and shimmer within its body. Rose was certain her mind was playing tricks on her, but she could swear she could make out faces, swelling up and disappearing within it.

“Rose?” It was the gypsy’s voice. “What can you see?”

The sound of gypsy’s voice sharply drew Rose back to awareness.

“Whatever is it?” she said, passing it back.

As she broke contact with the pendant, Rose noticed that Miss Templeforth was staring at her in a most peculiar way. Her mouth was opening and closing like a fish, unable to speak, leaving the gypsy to reply.

“It’s made of amber, the petrified resin of trees that lived millions of years ago. Sometimes ancient insects or plant matter from all those lifetimes ago get caught up in the sap and are preserved. Inclusions they are called. Some believe that stranger things can also be preserved,” the gypsy said, fixing Rose in her mysterious gaze.

“Amber? I never held anything so old, Ma’am.” Rose’s eyes were still following the object as Miss Templeforth hung it back around her neck.

“Who are you, Rose Muddle?” Miss Templeforth spluttered, finally finding her voice.

Rose looked confused. The gypsy picked up the old lady’s thread.

“I think what Miss Templeforth is wondering is: what you know of your parents?”

“I’m workhouse born and bred. Me ma died when I was born and me Pa was a seaman, left aboard a schooner to the Baltics and never came back.”

“Have you ever seen the Amber Cup in the museum in Brighton?” Miss Templeforth asked, leaning forward.

“No,” Rose shot a look between the two women, “I am ashamed to admit I ain’t never been to any museum, Ma’am.”

Each question seemed laced with a hidden agenda and Rose had no idea whether or not she had done enough to elude a return trip to the Brighton Workhouse.

“Well, Rose,” Miss Templeforth began in a more formal tone, “we have important guests arriving from India tomorrow and I know you have much to prepare; we shall not take any more of your time.”

That is it?

“So you shan’t be taking me back to the Workhouse then?” Rose looked at them, her mind in tangles.

“You were never in danger of losing your position here, Rose, whatever gave you that impression?” Miss Templeforth said.

Rose’s face broke into a smile that illuminated the whole room. She stood up, and nodded from one to the other. “Thank you, Ma’am, Miss Lee, I shan’t let you down.”

“Enna, you really must call me Enna, and, Rose . . .” the gypsy’s voice was emphatic, “mention none of this to anyone.”

CHAPTER THREE: VISITORS FROM THE EAST

A succession of sharp raps sounded out from the front door.

Is it midday already? Rose panicked.

As if to confirm it, the grandfather clock below began to chime out its longest count of the day. Downstairs Rose could hear the commotion as the butler made urgently for the door. *The guests have arrived.*

Rose lifted her black ankle length dress and apron to her knees and hurried down the sweeping staircase which she had spent all that morning polishing, jumping the last three steps in one huge leap and landing with a clap in a crouched position on the tiled floor.

The butler turned sharply with a scowl etched on his sweating brow, and Rose mouthed, “Sorry, Sir.”

The butler shook his head and turned back to the door, pulling out a folded hanky and dabbing his temples before straightening his collar and flattening down his hair.

Rose quickly positioned herself, still trying to catch her breath.

She watched as the butler stood straight-backed against the opened door, his head slightly bowed, his arm outstretched to his left side offering a

respectful welcome. *Every inch the professional*, Rose thought begrudgingly.

A tall figure strode confidently past him into the lobby; he was wearing a cream silk turban, set with a shining ruby. He had deep-set features amid a black beard with a well coiffured moustache finished to waxed twists. In one hand he clasped a gilded booklet intricately embossed, and Rose noted with interest that his other hand was missing completely; in its place was a metal hook.

Rose dipped her head and bobbed a curtsey, but he didn't notice her, he just swooped past, his silk tunic shifting noiselessly about him. Rose could barely believe her eyes. He looked exactly like he'd stepped straight out of a book she'd once seen, she thought as she stared admiringly.

All the while, the doorway was bustling with activity, as ornately carved wooden trunks were brought in by the coach hands, and stacked up one after another. The breeze from the open door carried a faint and unfamiliar scent, something not at all unpleasant; it had a sweet, smoky aroma. Rose closed her eyes and breathed it in deeply.

She opened them again, and was surprised to see a boy of about her age standing in the doorway. Clearly, this was no ordinary boy: he wore an embroidered golden coat that reached the floor and on his feet were matching slippers that turned up at the ends.

Beneath his turban she could see a dark brooding complexion, intelligent and alert green eyes with dark lashes. Rose was so enthralled by the appearance of such elaborate and exotic guests that she had not realised how much she was staring.

An almighty din from the doorway jolted her back to awareness.

Before Rose could understand what was happening, a small monkey wearing a fez and a waistcoat trimmed in gold was hurtling towards her. It stopped in front of her, arched its back and hissed before patrolling the ground between her and the new arrivals. Its tail upright, and ending in a curl. Knee high and agile, he kept her firmly in his sights.

Rose gasped.

In response, the creature began scampering towards her on its hind legs while waving its miniature human-like hands above its head manically, snarling and extending its jaw to reveal a frightful set of oversized teeth. Rose shrieked, lifting her hands to shield her face.

“Monkey!” The boy stepped forward, pulling the creature away by the scruff of its waistcoat.

She watched as the animal fell back to all fours, lightly scurrying across the room, to cower by the Indian man – who scowled towards Rose as he bent down to rub the creature’s chin, making a series of cooing noises.

The butler coughed to regain a level of composure to the situation and all eyes turned towards him.

“Gentlemen, this way please, Miss Templeforth is expecting you.”

The boy left Rose with a blank glance, as the butler gently knocked on the library door before making his grand introduction.

“Ma’am, I have great pleasure to announce the arrival of Ruistan Sujab Mestiwan, nephew to the Maharajah of Jaipur, his tutor and guardian, Mr Gupta, and their . . . um . . . monkey?”

Rose snuck in behind them and stood by the doorway.

SHADOW INCLUSIONS by Imogen White

SYNOPSIS

Rose Muddle is unexpectedly catapulted into a perilous mystery, which places her squarely at its centre. Can Rose, Rui – the nephew of the Maharajah of Jaipur – and a monkey, overcome the sinister Brotherhood of the Black Sun who are hell-bent on using both pendants to release the hideous shadowy inclusions locked within the ancient Amber Cup? When Rose's pendant is stolen and people start getting murdered, things get pretty scary.

BIOGRAPHY

Imogen's interest in local history around her hometown of Hove inspired her to create a series of novels for children. These mystery capers take place at different chronological points throughout Hove's history. The central object throughout is a Bronze Age Amber Cup, displayed in the local museum.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A middle-grade *Ruby in the Smoke* or *Great and Terrible Beauty*, it has the mystery, the atmosphere, the plucky girl narrator and a wonderful sense of place.'

'This has a lovely sense of time and place, and a real confidence to the writing. I loved the historic background but with magical hinting. The synopsis promises a fun adventure.'

'The period setting is nicely evoked, with some good detail.'

Contact: imogen@help-hand.com

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THE STONE CUTTER

By Tioka Tokedira

CHAPTER ONE

Villa Maurigon

Sospel, FRANCE 06380

October

Emma grips the edges. The stones of the villa wall crumble under her fingertips. Her nails claw and her scrawny arms tremble as she reaches higher, feeling for something solid. A foot slips, pebbles cascade, she grunts, and then . . . a small laugh escapes. She tingles as she makes her next move. Everything else may be out of her control, but *this* she can handle. Emma pulls herself over the rusted gutter then onto the roof and lets the tiles cool her sweating back as the citrine sun falls below the mountains. She could be downstairs on the sofa, flipping through old magazines, but no. The twinge she gets in her gut sometimes has been telling her it's time to move her things. If Richard ever found them, he'd shatter the memories she cares about most.

So, Emma sneaks around the loose tiles to the chimney. Tugging her jeans, she watches her step, but she also watches the road that disappears under trees and in the valley, like she's been doing for three days. Richard, more or less her guardian, and the others, the closest thing she has to a family, should be home by now.

When she was a kid, she asked what was beyond the gate, on the other side of those hills. Richard didn't like that question – he doesn't like most questions. But he drove her to Cannes and bought her ice

cream on the beach. Then he told her to pretend she was lost so he could lift a diamond necklace from some lady. Even then Emma knew her gemstones, and the woman's ring was nicer – *flawless clarity over flashy carat, always*.

Richard's also not fond of complaints. She got a busted lip for that one.

Luckily, he doesn't like roofs either. Emma tugs the switchblade out of her back pocket. The button releases the thin, sharp steel and she eases the tip between the mortar and a chimney stone. She draws the block of granite free, then a biscuit tin.

If the job went well, there's probably nothing to worry about. But the crew's been gone for too long. And Emma's twinge never lies.

As she opens the tin, the mistral winds tug at her wild, dark hair. The trees in the woods bend and the leaves whisper. The autumn air passes through her T-shirt to her bones, and Emma shivers as she reaches for the velvet pouch nestled in the box. It fills her palm in size and weight, like having someone's hand placed in hers.

Then a glint on the road steals her attention.

The hairpin turns through the valley scare off most drivers. That's long before the tarmac gives way to dirt and the rutted turnoff that leads straight, more or less, to the villa gate. This car isn't slowing. This is Richard and their crew, barreling over the hills from Monte Carlo. Richard is coming home.

Emma fits the pouch in her pocket and frees the strands of hair caught in her necklace. Timothée made the chain at some metalwork school before he quit. He gave it to her last year for her fifteenth birthday. Richard says it looks like cheap pieces of wire, but sometimes little things help you feel safer, braver.

Emma checks the road again. Maybe she's got five minutes. She flings the tin into the weeds before wriggling down the drainpipe and running around the back of the house. Then she skids.

The verandah looks like a *gilane* camp with all the stuff she's left lying around. She was bored, all right? These guys raised her to know the rules – you *never* steal from your own crew, but borrowing's OK . . . usually.

Emma grabs her quilt from the table and makes a sack as she gathers

Timothée's weights from under a bench. She closes the fluttering pages of George's books and plucks her socks out of his model skull, *with removable calvarium*, adding books, socks, and head to the pile.

Tim and George won't mind, but crap, Paulette. Her clothes. The gold dress is sprawled on the lounge chair, like a drunk party girl. The lipstick stain is set for good. Then there's the one stiletto wedged between two wood planks. Emma winces as she tugs it free, scraping the patent leather. Paulette is going to kill her.

With the car rumbling up the dirt road, Emma ties the ends of the quilt. Tim's room is the closest. She doesn't bother going inside, but hefts open his window and shoves the whole mess through. He'll cover for her. He always does.

The iron doors of the gate grind before they give as Richard pushes them open. The sight of him makes Emma want to climb back on the roof. The Mistral stirs and he slicks down his hair. Like that will hide the gray patches. He walks back to the Citroën and revs the engine, spitting gravel along the overgrown path.

Emma hurries to the shed to help unload the gear, her oversized sneakers flapping as she crosses the grass. They aren't really her shoes, they belong to Timothée, but he dumped them in her room when he'd outgrown them—

Timothée should have opened the gate.

Her gold eyes flash in the last light of the day. A shard of fear, cold and jagged, pierces her and Emma can't move. Timothée should've hopped out of the car before it stopped, muscled the bars until the doors swung open, and waved as the crew drove by.

Tim should've opened the gate. Long strands of her hair writhe in the wind as Emma touches her necklace.

Three days by herself is making her think crazy. A crew takes care of each other. Paulette looks after Tim like he's her kid brother. George looks after both of them. And fuck Richard.

Richard parks the car under a fig tree. The C6 is classy gray with spoked wheels and dark windows – except for the one in the back that's been shattered. Bullet holes run along the passenger side. Emma stares at their rat-tat-tat pattern and her heart starts racing.

Please let them be OK. She runs to the car. Her hand shakes as she grips the door handle.

Paulette is leaning against the headrest, cat-eye sunglasses perched on her nose. Tim is slouched across the back seat. He winks at Emma. Blood covers his teeth and when he coughs, pink foam dribbles from his mouth. George isn't here. Instead, a sweaty, bald guy in a dark-blue uniform is lying under Tim's feet.

Emma gasps. "You brought a cop here? Why would you bring a friggin' pig home? Paulette, where's George?"

"Stop asking her questions," Richard says, getting out of the car.

Emma glares at him, the planes of his face rippled by sharp bones that have been broken, healed and broken again. Then the wind blows through the open doors and her nose flares at the metallic, soiled smell.

Pain smells like that. Memories and nightmares blaze through her head faster than she can stop them. Faster than she can string together the words: *what happened*.

Richard slams his door. They stare at each other. Whatever happened during these past days, the deep shadows carved under his eyes do not stir her sympathy.

She reaches for Paulette's hand. That's when Emma notices the ruby polish, normally layered to a high gloss, is chipped around the edges. The part not worn off is covered in blood. Emma follows the rivulets up the lace cuff, the sleeve of the jacket, to the collar, where a bullet has shredded the fabric.

Tim says, "Stay cool, Emma. Paulette's just tired. And Richard will take me to the hospital after we finish this guard. They'll fix me and I'll run off before anyone calls the cops."

Richard doesn't take anyone to the hospital. Not even that time her appendix was going to explode and George begged him.

Emma starts shivering. She lifts Paulette's sunglasses. Lifeless eyes stare at the high, blue, Riviera sky.

Emma stumbles right into Richard, who's crept behind her. "This is real shit," he says.

Paulette is gone. Tim can't help. She's afraid to know where George is. She wants to scream but a hole tunnels deep inside Emma and takes all of her air. And Richard is hovering.

Paulette would be shaking her about now, until Emma's teeth rattled:
Show him what he wants to see, a docile girl with a tame smile.

The jacket to Richard's three-piece suit flaps in the wind. His waistband bulges around a gun and Emma twitches but keeps her expression blank. "I'll get George's bag. There's got to be some medicine in there to help Tim. Then I can get a blanket and take care of Paulette."

"Just take care of Paulette."

"But—"

"I said . . ."

Emma backs away. "OK."

Running to the house, she figures she has a couple of minutes before Richard's paranoia kicks in and he follows her. She tears up the steps and yanks the satin duvet off Paulette's bed. Balling it up, she runs back downstairs. To George's room.

She doesn't risk turning on the light. The leather bag sits on his desk, between canisters with skull and crossbones and a row of books. She learned to draw using the anatomy guide. George taught her to spell with the medical dictionary. Emma takes a clip from her hair and picks the lock on the doctor's bag. Pulling out one vial after the other, she squints at the labels until she finds the one she wants. She rips a needle from a strip of five then puts the bag back in place, the way George would before shooting his veins full of Liquid Forget.

Emma runs her hand over his cardigan on the chair. She breathes in the smell of shaving cream before putting on the sweater. Emma tucks the vial and needle in a pocket then she heads back to the car with the duvet. She can do this. George would. Tim would do it for her.

Richard and the guard are gone. There's screaming coming from the shed and Emma doesn't want to think about why.

"Tim?" She touches his cheek. It feels like cold clay.

His eyes open, but it takes them a second to focus. "Hi, Green Bean."

She loosens his tie and undoes the buttons at his neck. "What happened? Where's George?"

"Doc? I don't know. He and Paulette went in the store doing their classy thing. The salesladies were fighting to show their best stuff. Diamonds, big as eggs." Timothée coughs and blood oozes between his lips.

A cold hand reaches inside her and grips her heart, squeezing. It hurts. It makes her angry, *and ashamed*. This isn't about her. Emma wipes Tim's mouth with the pink satin and tosses the duvet on the ground. "You can tell me later. Rest for your trip to the hospital."

"Green Bean, you know Richard isn't taking me to the hospital." Tim's eyes close and he starts coughing. "Where . . . is he?"

Emma glances behind her at the shed. "It's OK. I'm here. I've got one of George's shots."

"It's like, the cops were —" he gasps for air — "waiting. Gunfire everywhere—" This time Tim can't stop coughing. His body rattles.

"Tim? Tim! I don't know what Richard is going to do."

Tim's body goes stiff. "It hurts bad, Green Bean."

The guard's screams turn into sobs. Emma starts to cover her ears, then stops herself. The vial in the pocket of her sweater, she takes it out and shakes it. She rips the wrapper from the syringe with her teeth. Her hands tremble as she plunges the needle into the bottle.

"Maybe I'm supposed to dilute this or something." She glances at Tim's face, twisted in pain. "I don't know how much I'm supposed to give you, OK? I might be doing this wrong." *George, where are you?*

"Doesn't . . . matter." Tim gasps for air. "Thanks . . . for doing this."

Their eyes meet. "I don't want you to leave me," she says. Emma rarely gets what she wants. She pulls the plunger and sucks up every drop of the colorless liquid.

Tim's gaze loses focus. His voice is a whisper. "Emma, your mother—"

"*Shh!*" The gravel cracks somewhere behind her with Richard's footsteps. She shields her hands as she bunches Tim's sleeve then slides the needle in his vein. *I'm sorry*. She shoots the entire five milliliters into his system.

He sighs.

"Emma," Richard says. "What are you doing?"

She slips the vial and needle back in her pocket. She touches the muscles Tim had been so proud of then kisses him goodbye. "Nothing. I think he's worse."

Richard shoves her away from the car and drags Tim's limp body out of the backseat, heaving it over his shoulder. "Thought I told you to take care of Paulette."

Emma tries to hide her tears as he walks toward the shed. Her gold eyes burn bright. She feels for her knife, the steel cold against her hot fingers.

Richard whips around. His skin pulls tight over the line of veins running from his temples. “You want to say something?”

Emma blinks. He’d slice her throat – larynx first, so she can’t scream, then esophagus, so she can’t breathe. She edges toward the duvet and spreads it on the ground near Paulette.

Richard whistles a lullaby as he closes the door of the shed.

The garden, fragrant during the day, is even more perfumed at night. The smell makes Emma’s stomach clench. The moon is low enough to catch in the fig tree as she digs behind the last row, where the rosebushes grow thickest.

The mound of dirt next to her is high, but not high enough. Emma rubs sweat from her eyes. She takes off George’s sweater and hangs it on a low branch. She bunches her hair in a fist and lets the breeze cool her neck. Then she jumps into the narrow grave.

She digs deeper, flinging clumps over her head until she’s standing in a hole as long as Paulette was tall and deep enough to keep the smell from attracting animals.

Richard’s rough voice breaks through the night. “That’s a fine resting place for Paulette.”

Emma grips the shovel, sending flames across her blistered hand. “I’m sure she’s thrilled.”

He glances at the bundle by his feet. The duvet covering Paulette is stained with blood that looks black in the moonlight. Richard lights a cigarette and flicks the match at Emma. Then he kicks the body into the grave.

Emma screams. She scrambles to get out of the way. Cold flesh rubs against hers and lifeless limbs fall on her, pinning her to the ground.

She claws her way free and clings, breathless, to the side of the grave.

Richard stands above her. “You’ve lived in my house your whole life and I haven’t once found your sense of humor any good. You think I wanted this? That I don’t know what the other crews are going to say? You know stones, Emma. That’s all. Me, I know I’ve got to get us out of this mess.” He walks off toward the villa.

Emma presses her dirt-stained hands against her eyes. She wants to scream so bad her head hurts. Instead, she wraps her arms around herself and holds tight.

Now the damn shovel is stuck under Paulette. “You could have picked somewhere else to fall!”

Paulette’s face is twisted toward Emma, with the sunglasses and wig sitting crookedly. Her eyes are open and her mouth hangs open, too, like she’s about to say something smart right back.

Emma bangs her head against the dirt wall. “God, Paulette. I’m sorry. I’m sorry you didn’t meet that rich guy you were hoping for. I’m sorry for always messing with your makeup—” Emma starts to hiccup.

She straightens Paulette’s skirt and tries to ease the shovel free but stops mid-tug. Something is caught in the wig. Something that sparkles in the moonlight. Emma brushes strands of fake hair aside and there are more flashes.

She grabs the wig.

Dangling from the mesh cap is a four-tiered, diamond chandelier earring. There’s a small pocket sewn next to it and Emma slides out a brooch: a brilliant-cut sapphire, at least fifteen carats, surrounded by more diamonds. She holds the jewels so tight they cut her skin. There must be two hundred thousand euros worth of stones and settings.

A twig breaks and Emma hides her hands behind her. Leaves rustle. She slips the jewels in her pocket and grabs the knife.

CHAPTER TWO: BURIED ALIVE

Dirt crumbles into the grave and Emma scrambles to the farthest corner, trapped. The hand that reaches for her isn’t Richard’s. It’s strong and steady. Not George’s either. He’s anything but steady.

No one except the crew comes here, willingly. No one, alive, knows where the villa is.

Epinephrine kicks through Emma and her heart races. “Who’s there?” she screams. “What are you doing here? What do you want?” She slashes blindly with her knife.

A soft growl – *or laugh?* – is the only answer.

She’s covered in sweat. Her stomach pulses like she’s going to be sick.

Her voice cracks. “Are you a cop?” Anything, a ghost even, would be better than that.

“Kid, stop yelling.” The stranger leans over the edge of the grave. He’s wearing a knit hat and stays in the shadows, but his eyes reflect the moonlight. With flawless clarity. Emma was not expecting that. Her twinge is telling her this guy is dangerous, but . . .

He’s on his knees and reaches for her again. His T-shirt pulls across his chest and the muscles along his bare arms flex as he inches closer. “Grab hold so I can pull you out.”

Emma backs away. “You can’t be here. You should go. Now!”

“You plan on staying down there till that nice man comes back? I saw his work in the shed. There’s enough blood and spare body parts to—”

Emma’s stomach contracts. Bile fills her mouth. She clamps her arm over her lips but vomit shoots across the grave.

“Holy Mary. I’m sorry. Are you OK?”

She’s shaking. She’s got enough jewels to buy a life somewhere far from Richard, only she can’t stop crying, and she’s too scared to think.

The stranger moves closer. His fingers brush across her hair, and Emma reacts by instinct. She stabs his hand.

His yell is muffled. He stumbles and swears. Emma yanks the shovel from under Paulette and shoves it in the dirt. She springs, leaping onto the handle. Pushes off the wall and lands, crouched, across the grave from him.

She pants, the knife gripped in her fist.

“What is wrong with you?” He rips the bottom of his shirt and wraps a strip of fabric around the gash. “I’m here to help.”

He’s tall like Tim, but younger, closer to Emma’s age. She stands, her shoulders straight. “What makes you think I need your help?”

Dirt clings to her skin. Her clothes are stained with blood. She’s trembling, but she keeps the knife pointed at him.

He looks her over and takes a slow breath. “Kid, if you live like this and don’t know you’re in trouble, there’s something seriously wrong with you.”

“Stop calling me kid!” Emma glances at the seven rosebushes on top of mounds of dirt. Graves, all of them. She dug the last one. “What do you want?”

“To get you away from here.”

She doesn't have to look, she can feel the gate wrapped around the villa. The rusted pikes cinching her space, like one of those lingerie things that Paulette likes – liked – to wear when she was meeting a mark. "You're lying."

"The Doc said if we help you, maybe you could help us find someone."

"George?" The knife wavers. "He's alive – wait . . . Us? You're from a crew?"

A light at the back door of the house comes to life. Richard, standing on the veranda, cradles a shotgun. "Emma, what are you doing?"

The stranger eases deeper into the shadows. She moves into the light, putting distance between them, more for her sake than his. "Talking to ghosts. We're wondering what you expect me to do with the bodies in the shed."

"Leave them for now and get in here."

The stranger whispers, "Don't go. Tell him you want to finish out here. Then we'll run."

Emma's shoulders hike up by her ears, trying to block him out so she can think.

That other grave she dug, he tried to run.

For the first time in hours, she thinks about the velvet pouch hidden in her pocket. The hard edges of the box inside bite into her hip, but the other thing does no harm. How could it? A postcard sent to her by a dead boy.

Maybe, with the jewels, it would be different for her. Emma wipes her muddy hands on her jeans. "Richard, I can't leave Paulette like this. Animals will—"

He points the gun at Emma and jerks it up, like he's taken a shot. "Leave her." Richard goes back in the house, leaving the light on.

The stranger, he looks like the models in Paulette's magazines, the ones who watch from the pages like they want to tell you something. Whatever he has to say means only trouble for Emma.

"Go," she says.

"Come with me. Help me find who I'm looking for, and I'll help you."

She shakes her head. "Richard will kill you, and me, but he'll make me bury your body first."

He laughs. “Later tonight then—”

“No. Go already.”

“Come with me,” he whispers.

“Richard likes hunting runners. He . . . it’s messy.” She wraps herself in George’s sweater and walks toward the house.

Of all the ghosts in the garden, the dead boy, the one who tried to run, scares Emma the most.

THE STONE CUTTER by Tioka Tokedira

SYNOPSIS

Emma only knows how to be a criminal. Trained as a stonecutter by a master diamond thief, she's spent her life hiding in a mountain villa, fearing for the safe return of her crew from one heist to the next. When everyone but her mentor, cruelly possessive Richard, is killed in a robbery, Emma realizes this is her chance to run before his next scheme goes wrong. But Richard doesn't let anyone he loves escape.

BIOGRAPHY

The only thing Tioka Tokedira loves more than reading stories with daring characters who keep her turning the pages late into the night is writing them. She has worked as a teacher and journalist and is currently an acquisitions reader for Hachette Jeunesse.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Compelling, exciting opening that feels fresh and different. I immediately want to read more.'

'This is a fast paced and gritty submission, with a real underlying tension that makes it a page turner. And, although this is third person, it has the emotional resonance of a first person narrative.'

'Fantastic tension that is sustained from the start of the extract to the end. Quick, deft characterisation and, of course, a skin-crawling psychopath.'

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HONORARY MENTIONS

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

ILLUSTRATORS

Heather Chapman

Maika G. Montava

Elizabet Vukovic

WRITERS

MELANIE'S BLADE by Farina Ackerman

THE COMING OF SAMUEL'S SHADOW by Emma Bayley

TO CATCH A CADDIS FLY by Kathryn Leigh Berry

SNOW EGG by Rachel Davison

TRACKED by Rose Margaret Deniz

GHOSTS UNDERFOOT by Allison Frieberthausen

THE FIRST PERSON PRESENT by Mary Hopper

THE PERIGEE MOONLINGS by Catherine Jacob

MAN UP MANFRED CAT! By Georgina Kirk

THE TWAIN by Catherine Miller

OUT THERE by Karen Moore

BRIGHT SMOKE by Gita Ralleigh

MY POCKET ALIENS by Joanne Romand

REDSEA by David Thomas

THE ADVENTURES OF ALEX BLIXEM by Jane Baird Warren



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