

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES

from SCBWI British Isles and Europe

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# undiscovered voices

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A PROJECT OF SCBWI BRITISH ISLES



# What will you discover?

12 UNAGENTED AND UNPUBLISHED WRITERS  
9 UNAGENTED AND UNPUBLISHED ILLUSTRATORS

From the four previous anthologies, thirty-two of the selected authors and illustrators have received publishing contracts for more than one hundred and twenty books published around the world, winning and receiving nominations for too many awards to list. With your help these new *Undiscovered Voices* won't stay undiscovered for long.

## UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2016 INCLUDES:

OUT OF THE BLUE by Sophie Cameron  
SPYDERS: FLASH & THE CAGEY BEES by Heather Newton  
REQUIEM by Patti Buff  
THE UNWILLING GODDESS by Relly Annett-Baker  
STEEL TANYA by Anna Bowles  
SECRET MAGIC: THE THREAD FAIRY ADVENTURES by Kerry Cassidy  
NUTS by Simon James Green  
THE EVOLUTION OF YOU AND ME by Rose Margaret Deniz  
GIRL CHURNS UP TROUBLE by Susan Brownrigg  
CLOPWYCK RIVER by Georgia Bowers  
CHINATOWN CAT by Emma Dowson  
THE HUNT IS ON by Catherine Miller

## WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY:

Andrea Ipaktchi • Esther Garcia Peces • Mary Hays • Portia Rosenberg  
John Morgan • Lucy Farfort • Bing Wang • Katie Weymouth • Deborah Partington



# UNDISCOVERED VOICES

The fifth anthology of unpublished  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 SALLY GARDNER, HONORARY CHAIR

I wonder what would have happened in today's world to this young man who had a headful of stories and very little education. Between the ages of nine and eleven he spent about a year at William Giles's School in Chatham, Kent, and from thirteen to fifteen he attended Wellington House Academy in London. Otherwise, he was self-educated. He wanted to be a political reporter and work for *The Times* newspaper, he wanted to publish his stories. Had he been born in this age, I doubt if he would have made it through the doors of *The Times* without being crushed in the stampede of university graduates. Due to his chronic lack of qualifications the world would have lost one of its greatest writers, Charles Dickens. Perhaps his salvation would have been to have had a story published in *Undiscovered Voices*.

Imagination is the first requisite to becoming a writer. It helps if you can spell, it also helps if you understand grammar. But neither of these abilities makes you a great writer. Let me put it another way: everyone can sing – albeit badly in some cases. Some people are only appreciated by showerheads and bath taps while others pump out a good tune in the car where the song is drowned out by traffic noise. But then there are those who sing and when they do, people stop to listen. Sing it again. Sing it again. That is what writing is about: it's a voice you want to hear, an original voice telling a heartfelt story.

Someone asked me what I would do if I didn't write. I think I would be sectioned and quietly forgotten. Writing is the way I make sense of a nonsensical world and every day I practise at my keypad in the hope that my words sing out.

Being a writer is not a guarantee of financial success, but that's not what this game is all about. If you're in it for that, my advice is get out fast. You are a writer because there's nothing else you want to be. Because you have a headful of stories that need to be told.

This is a great place for your voice to be heard. The more diverse and different the voices are, the richer this world will be.

Some of my books have been recorded and I have found that the voice of an actor often enriches my work, bringing something new and exciting to it. Good illustrations have the same effect.

When I was an illustrator, I was never satisfied with my drawings. In my head they always looked different and I always felt they could have been done a hundred times better by someone else.

Things have changed so much; technology has moved in and made the life of an illustrator easier and at the same time harder. In the end, regardless of all the tricks one can do on a computer, it is the authentic drawing that appeals. Years ago I met Shirley Hughes and she asked me if I could draw figures. I replied that I could, that I'd been to art school and spent two years doing life class. She said, rather sadly, that she thought not enough students attended life class or understood the importance of it. I agree with Shirley and believe no matter what style you develop as an illustrator, the understanding of the human form is essential.

An illustrator has to be a mirror for the author and at the same time bring out what is not written. When I work with David Roberts I know there are certain things I do not need to describe because his drawings will do that work for me. A clever illustrator finds the spaces between the lines.

I sincerely hope that we are witnessing the beginning of a renaissance in illustration – not just in children's books but adult books as well. For me there is nothing more divine than seeing a block of text in a book broken up by an image. But the art of being a great illustrator is to know what images to leave out and what images to include. An illustration should be an engine that drives the story forward, making the reader want to turn the page.

All of you whose stories and illustrations are included in this anthology have succeeded in making the judges want to turn the page. Congratulations. Keep writing, keep drawing. Keep dreaming.

**Sally Gardner**

# FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

Welcome to *Undiscovered Voices 2016*, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' (SCBWI) fifth 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 global children's writing organisation. Membership benefits include professional development and networking opportunities, marketing information, events, publications, online marketing opportunities, awards and grants.

This year is SCBWI British Isles region's twentieth birthday – and we have a lot to celebrate. Having started with just a handful of members and quarterly meetings, SCBWI BI now offers more than thirty events, plus meet-ups and critique groups around the region, catering to more than 850 members. Its programming includes retreats, masterclasses, a fabulous blog newsletter, a two-day annual conference, plus professional development, marketing and networking opportunities to support and inspire published and unpublished writers and illustrators as they develop their careers. Our fun, welcoming community of passionate individuals is committed to creating innovative initiatives for members today and in the future.

We are really proud and excited to have *Undiscovered Voices* as one of our flagship programmes for helping new authors and illustrators to get discovered by editors, art directors, agents and publishers. The road to being published is a tough creative journey, requiring perseverance, talent and often a bit of luck. We hope that *Undiscovered Voices* can be that lucky matchmaking charm for some of our members.

The first four *Undiscovered Voices* anthologies have an amazing track record: 32 of the selected authors and illustrators have received publishing

contracts for more than 120 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, the American Library Association Best Book for Young Readers, Borders Book of the Month, Waterstone's Children's Book Prize, Crystal Kite Award and the Branford Boase First Novel award.

Congratulations to all the longlisted and shortlisted authors and illustrators! We are excited to see what the 2016 *Undiscovered Voices* will achieve.

The SCBWI would like to thank the anthology's hardworking, 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.britishisles.scbwi.org](http://www.britishisles.scbwi.org)

# FROM WORKING PARTNERS

Working Partners is thrilled to sponsor the fifth *Undiscovered Voices* anthology, nearly ten years after Sara Grant and Sara O'Connor first approached us with the idea for a competition to find and encourage new voices in children's literature. We are very proud to be able to say that we've played a small part in each of the 120 books published by the illustrators and writers from the *Undiscovered Voices* anthologies, including several who are represented by our own Greenhouse Literary Agency.

A writing or illustration career can seem like an impossible dream, when all you have is an idea and raw talent, and getting the attention of publishers in a crowded marketplace can be nearly impossible. That's why we're so happy that *Undiscovered Voices* has made itself a reputation as an anthology full of exciting new talent, where the industry's top agents and editors know they might find their next big discovery.

Once again, this is all down to the hard work and inspiration of SCBWI, Sara Grant and the *Undiscovered Voices* team. They deserve our praise and gratitude for all their hard work on this year's anthology. We hope to keep sponsoring the competition and help new writers and illustrators into the spotlight for many more years.

Congratulations to all of you who are included in the anthology, and to everyone on the longlist. Good luck with your future careers, and here's hoping we hear more wonderful success stories in the months and years to come.

**Chris Snowdon**

Managing Director

Working Partners

[www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk](http://www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk)

# SPECIAL THANKS FROM THE CO-CREATORS

Nearly ten 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 four previous anthologies, thirty-two of the selected authors and illustrators have received publishing contracts for more than 120 books published around the world, winning and receiving nominations for too many awards to list.

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 their generosity. Continued thanks to Chris Snowdon and Charles Nettleton, and everyone at Working Partners for their support for writers – both published and soon-to-be-discovered.
- We are also thrilled to have **Sally Gardner** as our honorary author and illustrator chair. She has been incredibly generous with her time, talent and wisdom.
- A huge thanks to our UK and EU planning committees, which have spent thousands of hours planning and plotting with no compensation – except the satisfaction of helping fellow writers and illustrators: **Rosie Best, Catherine Coe, Jenny Glencross, Sandra Nickel, Anne-Marie Perks, Loretta Schauer, Benjamin Scott, Tioka Tokedira and Mina Witteman.**

- 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.

### UK JUDGING PANEL

**Jon Appleton**, Hodder

**Ali Ardington**, Stripes Publishing

**Ed Burns**, Advocate Art Agency

**Barry Cunningham**, Chicken House

**Sheri Gee**, Folio Society

**Jodie Hodges**, United Agents

**Rachel Mann**, Simon and Schuster

**Polly Nolan**, The Greenhouse Literary Agency

**Anna Power**, Johnson & Alcock

**Kate Shaw**, The Viney Agency

**Will Steele**, Faber and Faber

**Caroline Walsh**, David Higham Associates

### EUROPEAN JUDGING PANEL

**Jill Santopolo**, Philomel Books, an imprint of Penguin Young Readers Group

**Nathalie Hallam**, Ed Victor Ltd Literary Agency

- And last but not least, thanks to our lovely designer Becky Chilcott who has been with us from the very beginning!

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 a moment or scene from one of five well-known children's stories. Each story was given a twist in theme or setting to inspire a unique and creative response. The illustration prompts are listed below:

- *Jack and the Tower Block*
- *Robyn Hood – Pirate Queen of the Andromeda Nebula*
- *Alice of Wonderland Road – Remarkable Tales of a Runaway*
- *Hansel and Gretel and the Great Witch Rescue*
- *(Cinder) Ella Grubb and the School for Princesses*

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. Included with each illustration are a biography and contact information for the illustrator as well as comments from the judges noting why the illustration was selected.

# 'ELLA WANTS TO GO TO THE FAIR'

by Andrea Ipaktchi

Illustrating *(Cinder) Ella Grubb*  
and *the School for Princesses*

## ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

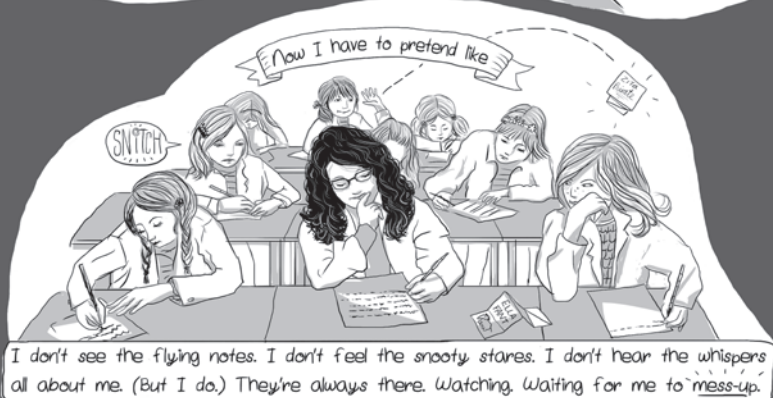
Andrea Ipaktchi is an American author-illustrator who works in both digital and traditional materials. Her love of comics and comedy has led to her regular performances as an onstage illustrator for an improvised musical-comedy show. She holds a BFA in illustration from Parsons School. She lives it up in Paris.

## JUDGES' COMMENTS

'This contains well-observed, figurative drawing, good gestures and expressions. It is an innovative twist on the story prompt and we could see this kind of work in a girls' magazine.'

Contact: [andrea.ipaktchi@gmail.com](mailto:andrea.ipaktchi@gmail.com)

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Teams only? NO!!! who will want me- a 'snitch' on their team? But Zoe- that big cheater will go and maybe even win.



# ‘ALICE’S FANTASTIC RUNAWAY’

by Esther Garcia Peces

Illustrating *Alice of Wonderland Road* –  
*Remarkable Tales of a Runaway*

## ILLUSTRATOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Esther is a student of Bachelor in Fine Arts in the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She is from Spain and she loves children book illustration the most. She would love her tales such as *Fears*, *Hugo’s Adventures* and *Imagine* to be published some day.

## JUDGES’ COMMENTS

‘There is good clear composition here and great movement through the image. The bunny character clinging to the motorbike is fun and appealing.’

Contact: [egpeces@gmail.com](mailto:egpeces@gmail.com)

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# ‘THE FAST WAY UP’

by Mary Hays

Illustrating *Jack and the Tower Block*

## ILLUSTRATOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Mary Hays has a degree in Fine Art, Printmaking and recently completed an MA in Children’s Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Art. She particularly enjoys finding ways to visually express feelings and ideas present, but perhaps latent, in stories written for older children (and adults).

## JUDGES’ COMMENTS

‘This shows great textural work (love the wallpaper!) and good tonal contrasts to create drama and focus. The composition means that the audience can put themselves in the picture.’

Contact: [bluewren@virginmedia.com](mailto:bluewren@virginmedia.com)

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# ‘BRING YOUR PET TO SCHOOL DAY’

by Portia Rosenberg

Illustrating *(Cinder) Ella Grubb*  
and *the School for Princesses*

## ILLUSTRATOR’S BIOGRAPHY

Portia was born in Manchester, studied Illustration at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge and still lives there. She loves drawing, and loves depicting character and liveliness; faces are consistently the focus of her work. She feels equally interested in both serious and humorous subjects.

## JUDGES’ COMMENTS

‘We enjoyed the characterisation and the expressions in this. There are lots of interesting details and a good overall composition.’

Contact: [portia@portiarosenberg.com](mailto:portia@portiarosenberg.com)

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# ‘THE GIANT WAS FURIOUS WITH JACK’

by John Morgan

*Illustrating Jack and the Tower Block*

## ILLUSTRATOR’S BIOGRAPHY

As a child, John Morgan discovered a love of writing and drawing – mixing words and pictures to make stories. As a Keeper of Art and teacher, he studied the history of picture books. Following an MA in Writing for Children, he is developing his own illustrations and picture book ideas.

## JUDGES’ COMMENTS

‘This illustration has good commercial appeal and is very accessible for a younger audience. There is a lot to look at and the secondary characters are fun and expressive.’

Contact: [mail@morgan118.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:mail@morgan118.fsnet.co.uk)

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# ‘THE PRINCESSES’ CRUEL PRANK’

by Lucy Farfort

Illustrating *(Cinder) Ella Grubb*  
and *the School for Princesses*

## ILLUSTRATOR’S BIOGRAPHY

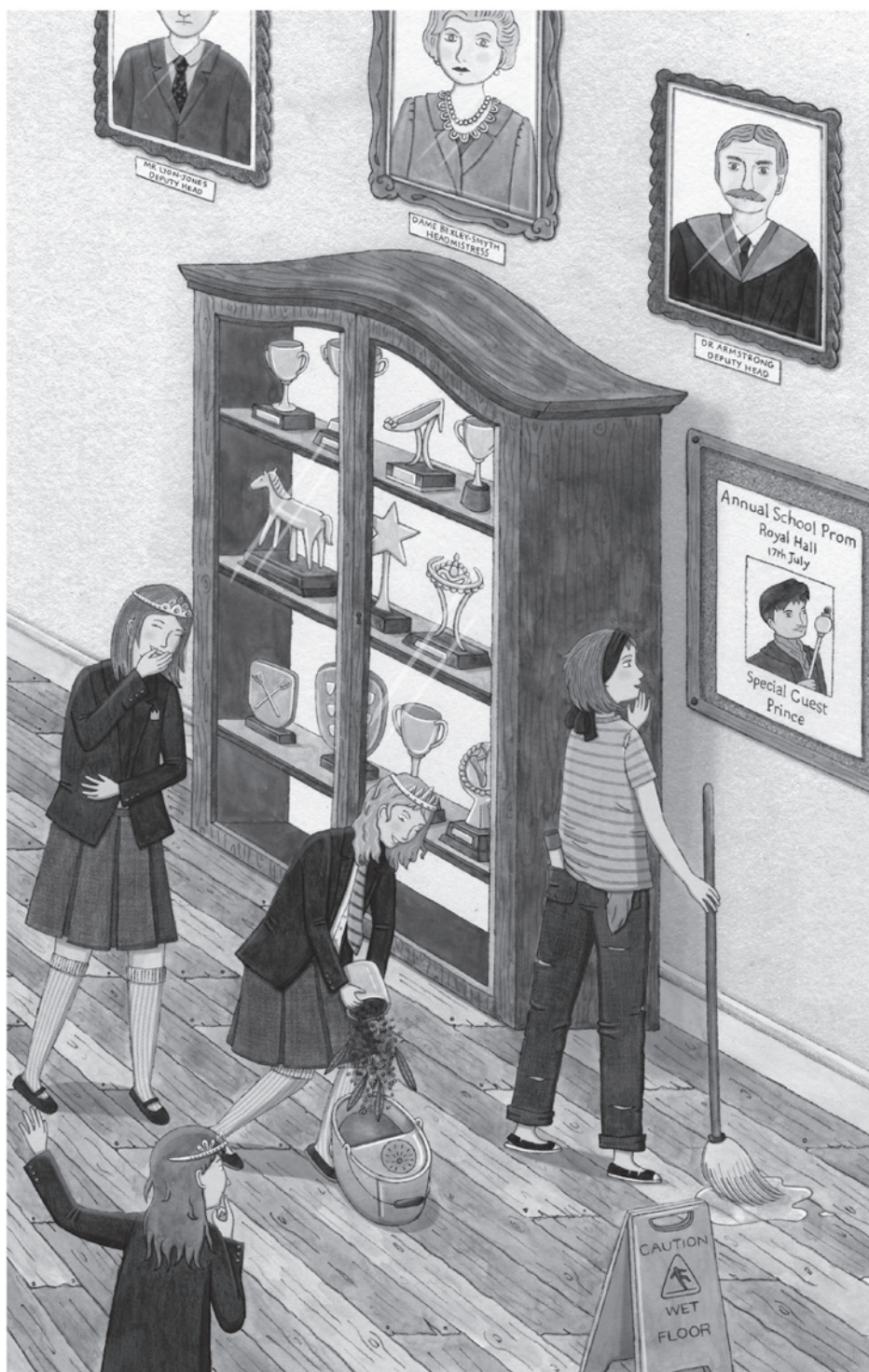
Lucy enjoys working in a variety of media, and mixing traditional with digital techniques to create highly textural images. Her love of the wild outdoors, gnarled old trees and the sea, have a big influence on her work. Her ultimate goal is to write and illustrate picture books.

## JUDGES’ COMMENTS

‘This illustration has a clear narrative, and the composition works well tonally on the page. There are some nice details and textures here.’

Contact: [lucyfarfort@yahoo.com](mailto:lucyfarfort@yahoo.com)

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# ‘OUT OF THE PAN’

by Bing Wang

Illustrating *Hansel and Gretel*  
and the Great Witch Rescue

## ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Bing Wang was born in Shanghai and raised in NYC by a family of artists. She loves art, books and languages and has over 20 years' experience as an illustrator and comic strip artist. She currently lives in Holland with her husband and daughter who also can't stop drawing.

## JUDGES' COMMENTS

'We like the clear line and composition of this, and there is plenty of energy and movement to the figures. It shows sound drawing skills, with good reference to vintage/retro illustration styles.'

Contact: [blingsfables33@gmail.com](mailto:blingsfables33@gmail.com)

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# ‘JACK INVESTIGATES’

by Katie Weymouth

Illustrating *Jack and the Tower Block*

## ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

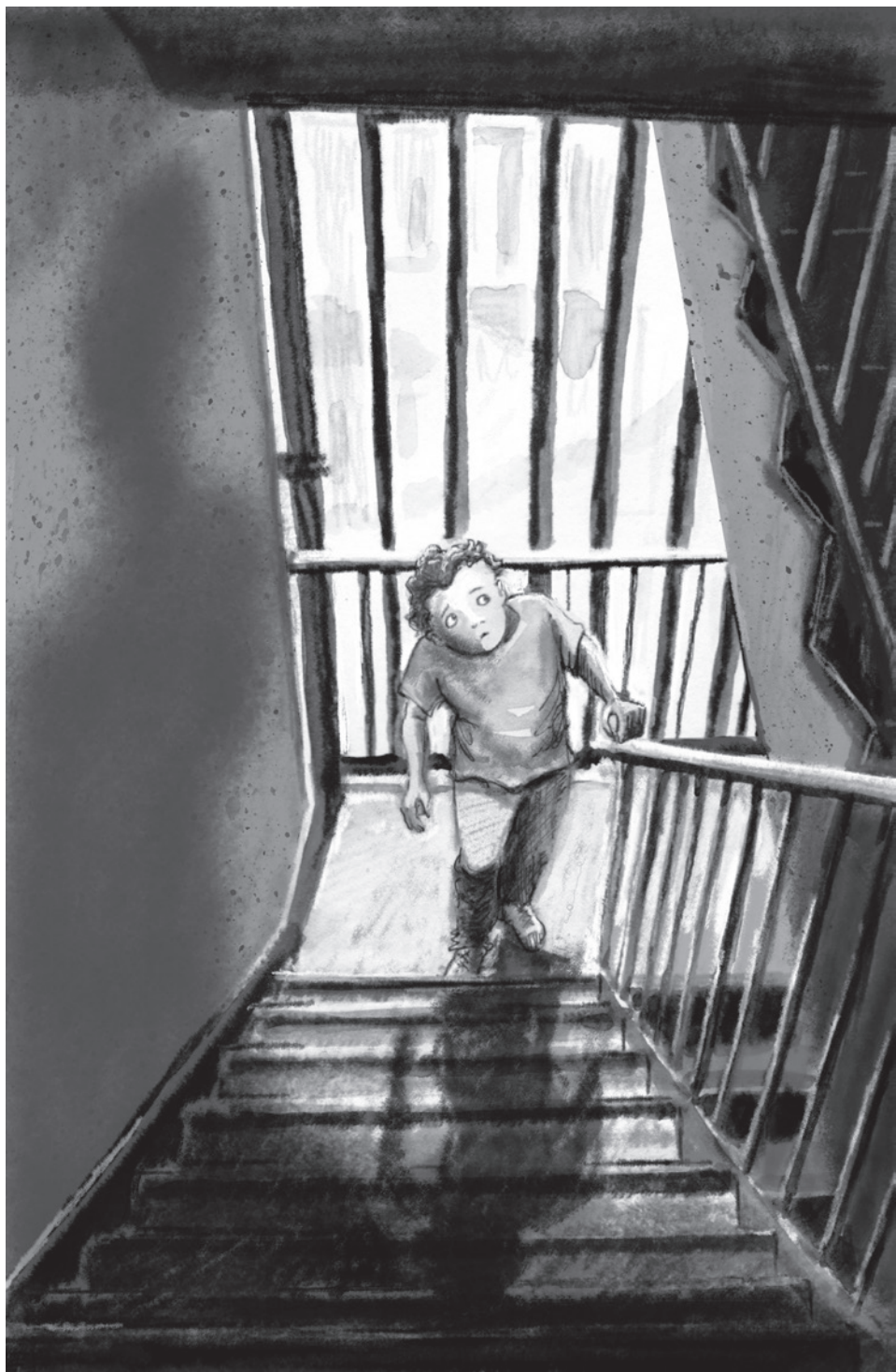
Katie is a Liverpool-based illustrator who works in both traditional and digital media. She graduated from Liverpool John Moores University in 2001 with a B.A. Hons in Graphic Arts. She is currently exhibiting and selling her work in Liverpool whilst working on her numerous picture book ideas.

## JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘We love the drama and sense of suspense in this image. There is good use of light and shadow, texture and tonal qualities which focus on the character and the narrative element of the illustration.’

Contact: [katiweymouth@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:katiweymouth@hotmail.co.uk)

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# ‘THE RACE TO GET DRY’

by Deborah Partington

Illustrating *Alice of Wonderland Road* –  
*Remarkable Tales of a Runaway*

## ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

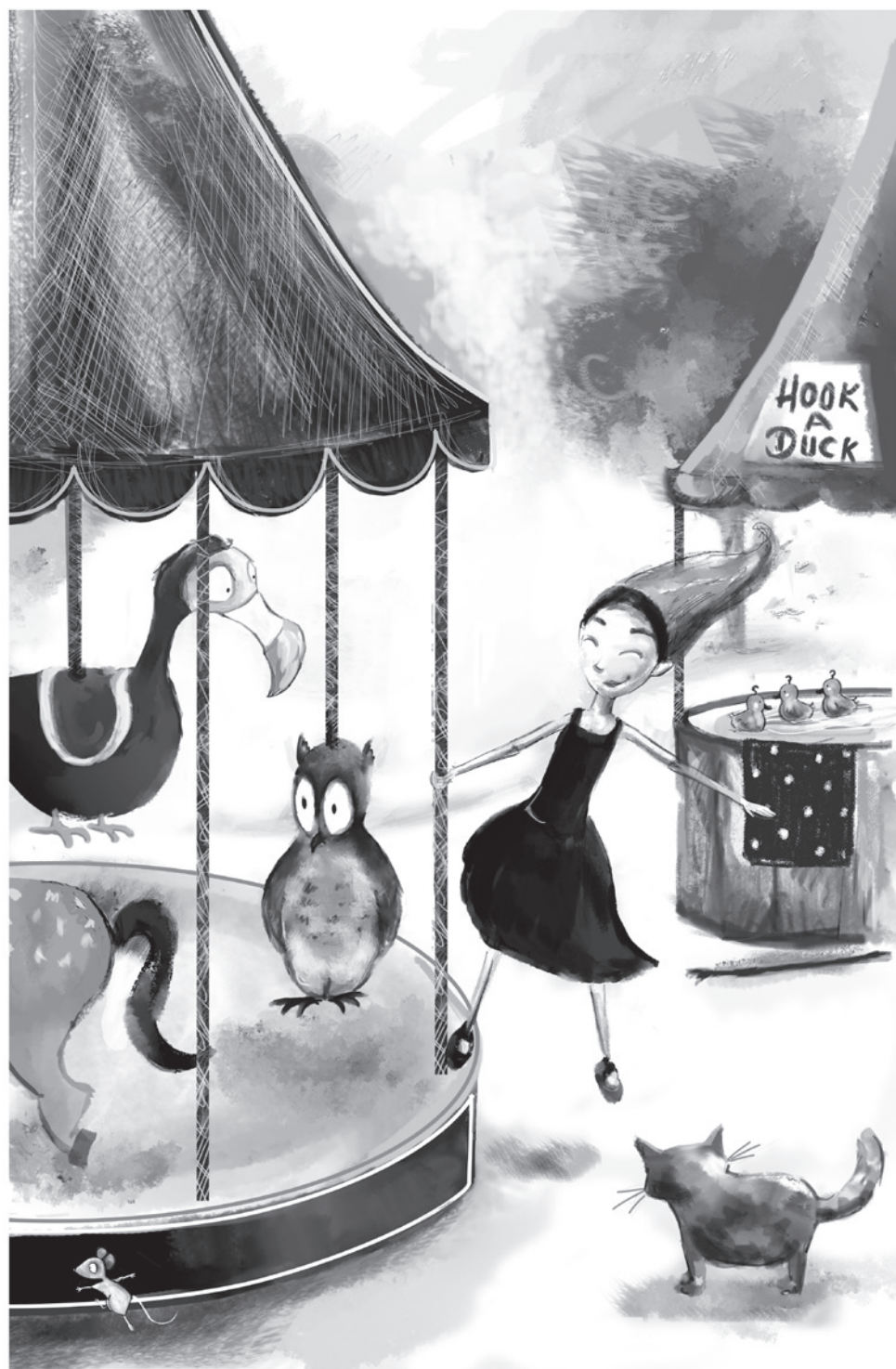
Deborah studied general illustration at the North East Wales Institute but a love of stories led her to the wonderful world of children's illustration. She is happiest with her tin of watercolours, paint brush in hand and freshly stretched paper, drawing as many different animals as she can.

## JUDGES' COMMENTS

‘This contains nice, whimsical characters with commercial appeal. The overall feel of the illustration would appeal to parents as a safe book for children. We enjoyed the use of texture on the roof.’

Contact: [deborah.illustration@gmail.com](mailto:deborah.illustration@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 more than 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!

# OUT OF THE BLUE

By Sophie Cameron

## One

Another Being falls as we're driving into Edinburgh. Not here – that would be lucky, and luck doesn't run in the Mackenzie family.

'Number eighty-five!' Rani shouts. 'Just landed two minutes ago!'

She leans between the front seats, waving her phone like a newsboy hawking the evening paper. On the screen, a slim, copper-coloured woman lies slumped over a pile of broken wood and burst watermelons. Golden blood trickles out from under the debris, tracing shimmering lines in the dusty earth.

'Where is that?' I ask. Perry, our West Highland Terrier, raises her head off my lap for a look, then gives a disinterested ruff and goes back to bird-watching through the car window.

'Malaysia again,' Rani says. 'Some market near Kuala Lumpur.'

At least the Falls have improved my sister's geography; she was still calling it 'Koala Lumper' last month. She taps the screen, and a pixelated video stutters into action. The Being is only visible for a second before the crowd swoops. Tourists form a heaving scrum around the body; a woman emerges red-faced and grinning, her cupped hands dripping with gold. My stomach churns. I've seen dozens of clips like this – everybody has, by now – but they still make me want to throw up.

Dad's head swings between the video and the rain-spattered windscreen. 'Is it badly damaged? Masculine or feminine?'

I roll my eyes. '*She's* a woman, if that's what you mean,' I say. 'And she's not just "damaged", she's dead. No one could survive a fall that far.'

In the extensive list of Things Dad Does to Piss Me Off, the way he talks about the Beings definitely makes the top ten: always ‘it’, not he or she, and ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ to describe how they look – as if they were a style of jeans, or a German noun. The papers do the same. It’s their way of making them seem less human.

Behind us, Rani keeps tapping through photos on Wingpin or 247being or one of the other hundred or so apps she’s downloaded.

‘This one looks young.’ She nudges her glasses up her nose. ‘Like, seventeen or eighteen.’

‘You’re judging by human standards, though, pet,’ Dad says. ‘We don’t know how time affects their bodies yet. It’s possible that a Being who looks twenty in our terms could be a hundred, maybe even a thousand years old.’

He launches into yet another speech about yet another theory and yet again, I don’t give a crap. Ever since the first Being fell seven months ago, our house has been like the Michael Mackenzie Centre for Really Boring Theological Research. I can’t even remember the last time he asked if Rani had lunch money or if I’d done my homework; he’s too busy cutting articles out of newspapers, sticking pins and Post-its onto maps, scouring forums for new theories . . . He makes my friend Emma’s Ryan Gosling obsession look totally balanced and rational, and she once built a shrine in the art room cupboard.

Rani nods and ‘mmms’ and ‘uh-huhs’ as Dad witters on. I’m pretty sure that even she, eleven-times winner of Daddy’s Girl of the Year, can’t *actually* be interested in the levels of linoleic acid in the Beings’ fingernails, but she puts on a good act. I stick my earphones in and gaze out of the window, nodding along to imaginary music. (My iPod ran out of battery just before Berwick Upon Tweed, but I’ve learned it’s easier to pretend I can’t hear Dad’s ramblings.)

Outside, the drizzly city streets pass by in a blur. Seagulls swoop across the pale grey sky, on the hunt for chips. Perry whines and scratches at the door.

‘Almost there, Per,’ I murmur, stroking her back. ‘Just ten more minutes.’

I know how she feels. Today’s the first day of the summer holidays. Ten hours in a stuffy Renault Clio isn’t exactly the way I wanted to spend it, either. I was supposed to go to Tomasz Kowalik’s barbecue tonight.

I should be eating burnt hamburgers and getting tipsy on Smirnoff Ices right about now. I should be watching Medhi try to flirt with Jennie Zhang, and bickering with Ryan over what's on the playlist, and holding Emma's hair back when she inevitably throws up in the bushes. That was the sort of stuff I had planned for the summer – just me and my friends being our weird, stupid, awesome selves.

And then Dad had to go and ruin it all.

I should have known something was up when he made us blueberry pancakes last weekend. He hadn't done that in years, not since way before Mum died. Just as I'd finished drenching mine in maple syrup, he gave a nervous cough and said, 'So, how would you two feel about spending the summer in Scotland this year?'

Rani and I almost inhaled our forks.

'To Gran's house?' I spluttered. 'For the *whole* summer?' Gran's great, but she lives in the middle of the Highlands, has only sheep for neighbours and seems to think Wi-Fi is a type of Middle Eastern food. I can barely cope with six hours there, let alone six weeks.

'No, no.' He was trying to sound casual, but I could tell from his hesitation that I wasn't going to like what he had to say. 'To Edinburgh. I think . . . I think I could catch a Being there.'

My pancakes went cold as I listened, open-mouthed, to Dad's plan. He'd done some 'research' (i.e. chatting with other Wingdings on CherubIM) and, based on the fact that south-east Scotland has had the highest number of Falls in the world, had 'come to the conclusion' (made a wild guess) that another one was due to land in Edinburgh 'within the next few weeks' (at some point in the future, or possibly never – he'd figure out the details later).

'Think about it, girls,' he said. 'We'd finally be able to find out where they're coming from, and why they're falling.'

I put up a fight. Dad pretended to listen, but when I finally ran out of reasons why this was the worst idea since chocolate teapots, he just smiled and ruffled my hair. (I *hate* people touching my hair. It's been seven months since I cut it, but I'm still working out how to avoid looking like Sid Vicious with bed head.)

'I know it's a long shot, Jaya,' he said, 'but I need to do this.'

Rainwater splashes the windows as the car glides through a puddle. My phone buzzes with a WhatsApp from Emma. *Look what sad sausages we are without you!* Attached is a photo of her and Ryan pretending to cry, their frowns hidden behind curved hotdogs. Above them, the sky is a streak of brilliant blue. They might as well be a thousand miles away.

Before I can reply, Rani interrupts with another update. My sister is on constant Being-watch. She could tell you when and where each one fell, what he or she looked like, sometimes even how much their blood and feathers sold for. Personally, I think there's something kind of creepy about an eleven-year-old trawling the internet for news of dead bodies, but Dad seems to find it useful.

'Listen to this,' she says. *'Today's news means that seven Beings have now landed in Malaysia. The only other country to have witnessed as many Falls is Scotland, also with seven; Russia has seen five, and Algeria four.'*

I twist in my seat to face Dad. 'What if you got it wrong? What if the next one falls over there? I mean, they've had just as many, so it's just as likely, right? Maybe we should be on our way to Kuala Lumpur right now.'

'Malaysia's a lot bigger than Scotland, Jaya,' he says. 'Plus, the Falls over there have been scattered all around the country, whereas here they've had seven within thirty miles of the city. There's no comparison. If I'm going to catch one anywhere, it'll be in Edinburgh.'

Rani pokes my shoulder. 'Anyway, would you rather we went to Malaysia? I'm pretty sure they don't have E4 there.'

Dad laughs. I grit my teeth, trying to still the anger bubbling up inside me. He's so stupid. This whole plan is so stupid. You can't catch a Being. You just can't. They fall at insane speeds. They've smashed through buildings, turned highways into craters . . . one caused a mini tidal wave when she landed in the South Pacific, and another accidentally killed a woman when he fell in a town square in Armenia. It's not a bloody *Loony Tunes* cartoon: you can't just stick a trampoline or a bouncy castle out and spring them back to safety.

There's no way of telling when the next one will turn up, either. So far, eighty-four (eighty-five, now, with this latest one in Malaysia) have fallen around the world. Brazil, Malawi, Romania, Tonga . . . they've landed all over the place. Sometimes three will tumble down in one day, and

sometimes weeks will go by before another appears. Science and religious institutions are pouring billions into working out a pattern, but so far no one seems to have come close. It's not like Dad, former Sales & Marketing Manager for Tomlinson Cigarettes, is going to be the one to crack the code.

The car turns onto a brightly lit street of shops and restaurants. Outside House of Fraser, a bagpipe player with tin foil wings is playing something that sounds vaguely like 'Angels' by Robbie Williams. Dad sings along under his breath, drumming his fingers on the steering wheel. The excitement crackles off him like static. A dash of pity simmers my anger. He really thinks he can do this. He *actually* thinks he's going to catch an angel.

Well, he's wrong. If you ask me, there's no code to crack. The Falls are just random.

Meaningless.

## Two

It was our 9/11, our Princess Diana, our JFK. You'd always remember where you were when you heard about Being No. 1.

He landed on a street corner in Shanghai. 10.46 p.m., 7<sup>th</sup> December. An Italian tourist caught the whole thing on camera. He'd only meant to take a photo of his wife, but he pressed the wrong button and ended up creating the most-watched video on the internet. (Forty-six billion views, last time Rani checked.) Though I've tried to avoid it, I've seen the clip so many times I can close my eyes and replay it in my mind, frame by frame.

First, a spot of silver appears in the smog orange sky. It grows bigger and bigger, plummeting earthwards faster than the eyes can follow. Voices start to shout in Mandarin, Italian, English: it's a shooting star, a meteor, a tumbling sun come to crush us all! But then the light twists and elongates, and two streaks of silver spread across the sky. Wings.

Broken wings.

If you pause the video at 2:31, you can see the man's face. There's none of the noble peace you might expect from an angel: he's young, and he looks scared to death. He spins towards the skyscrapers, wings beating hopelessly. Even when he's only a heartbeat from the ground, you're sure he'll somehow take off, back towards the heavens – but then, with an earth-shattering blast, he plunges into the pavement.

Tyres squeal, horns blast, a cloud of dust mushrooms into the air. The chaos begins.

For days, it was all anyone could talk about. We swapped stories like football stickers, each hoping to find the shiniest. Medhi was playing Xbox when one of his gamer buddies sent him a link. Rani saw it playing on the LCD screens at the train station on her way home from tap dancing. Dad was watching the eight o'clock news, no doubt washed down with his fifth G & T of the evening.

Mum didn't see it. She'd been dead for ten days by then.

I was at Emma's house. She was cutting all my hair off.

That's what I remember most about that day. Not her brother hammering on the bathroom door, shouting about something we absolutely had to see, or watching that first blurry clip on his phone – I was sure it was a hoax, anyway. What I remember best are Emma's fingers bumping against my ears, and the sound of the scissors snipping at my fringe, and the quiver in her voice as she asked me for the hundredth time if I was *sure* I wanted to do this.

'Oh my god, Emma, *yes*.' I tugged on the hem of her T-shirt. 'Come on. It's just hair.'

'All right, all right. Fine.' She kept pawing at her own long, blonde hair. 'Just don't blame me if you're handing over eighty quid in Toni & Guy tomorrow, OK?'

I remember the tightness in my throat as she made the first few cuts. I remember the locks slipping past my knees, curving like strokes of ink on the bathroom tiles. It was my childhood, that hair. It was bedtimes and bath times, messy French plaits and too-tight cornrows that summer we went to the Bahamas. It was Mum's hands: washing and combing and tying, winding the tresses around her fingers or stroking it as she read me a story. It was the sleek black veil of her hair, too, and Rani's, and our grandmother's when she was younger. That hair was my history, and now it was gone.

I didn't regret it. But it didn't feel as good as I'd hoped it would.

Emma was right, as it happened: it turned out years spent scalping your Barbies didn't make you a good hairdresser. I walked home with a NYC cap on my head and a nervous flutter in my belly. Mum would have

found it hilarious (I could almost hear her cackle: ‘What have you done to yourself? You look like the neglected love child of Noel Fielding and Edward Scissorhands!’) but Dad was a different story.

He came running into the corridor as I pushed open the door to our flat. My heart was pounding. I sheepishly pulled the cap off, but he didn’t even blink.

‘Did you hear what happened? In China? Did you see the news?’

His eyes were red, like they had been for most of the past ten days – a combination of gin and tears – but this time there was something different. They were bright. Hopeful.

It took him two hours and twelve minutes to notice the mess on my head. Being Fever had already kicked in.

‘This is unbelievable!’

Dad pulls the window open and peers out. It turns out that the flat he’s rented – a cramped two-bed in the city’s Old Town – is just down the road from St Giles Cathedral, where Being No. 8 fell. If you lean through the living room window and twist your neck to the right, you can see the mesh of scaffolding hiding the gap where the angel crashed through the roof. The way Dad’s acting, you’d think we had a view of Machu frickin’ Picchu.

‘Amazing! It’s *right there!*’ He grins, ignoring the scowl on my face, or the fact that Rani has pulled her T-shirt over her nose to block out the stench of weed and bleach. ‘If this doesn’t help my research, I don’t know what will.’

Shona MacEachran, our landlady, gives a wide mulberry smile. She’s tall, fifty-something and looks just like an aubergine: skinny on top, curvy on the bottom, purple all over. I got a bit of a fright when I saw her waiting for us downstairs. I’d thought her attire was a cult thing – who wears violet kaftans and dyes their hair indigo out of choice? But then she shook my hand and told me there were ‘aggressive red tones in my aura’, so I figure she’s probably just a bit of a hippy.

‘Aye, there’s a very positive energy in this part of the city,’ she says, in her lilting Scottish accent. ‘I’m sure you’ll find the flat inspiring, too. It’s small, but the chi flows very well.’

I hold back a snort. Good chi or not, the place is a bit of a dump. The kitchen is Barbie-sized, the bathroom walls are cloudy with damp, and the

living room carpet looks like somebody's gone all Jackson Pollock with a bottle of red wine. Even Perry is unimpressed. She squirms on the shabby orange sofa, trying and failing to find a comfy spot, then gives a disgruntled bark and pads off to the hallway.

'It's perfect,' Dad says. 'Reminds me of my student days!'

Shona's eyebrows – also purple – rise politely. 'Oh, did you go to uni here?'

'Aye, quite a while ago now, mind . . . '

I leave them to set the record for World's Most Boring Small Talk and go to check out the room that Rani and I will be sharing. My heart sinks when I see it: cucumber-green walls, grey metal bunk beds, three dried-up ferns in one corner. It looks like a prison in a forest, only much less interesting.

'Bagsy top bunk!'

Rani scrambles up the ladder and dives onto the mattress, tossing her spindly legs into the air. I feel a sudden pang for my room back in London. The wardrobe is still covered in half-scratched Bratz stickers from when I was little, and I've gone off most of the bands in my posters, but at least it's mine. How am I supposed to get any privacy when I have to share this shoebox with my little sister?

'Guess what?' Rani flips onto her front. 'They think No. 85 could be the sister of the Being who fell in Greenland in April. Look, they're like twins!'

She holds out the phone to show me, but I swat it away and go to the window. Another thing I love about my room: it's one of the few places in the world where I can escape the news, photos, adverts, non-stop mindless 24/7 chatter about the Beings. Not much chance of that here.

'No. 85 also landed at the same longitude as the Being in Laos.' Rani taps on another link, ignoring the fact that I'm ignoring her. 'Isn't that interesting?'

I bump my head against the windowpane. Raindrops race down the glass, sketching ghostly rivers over my vision.

'Fascinating, Ran,' I mutter. 'Utterly fascinating.'

It poured last time we came to Edinburgh, too. That was two years ago, during the August festivals. Never one to be put off by a 'bit of drizzle', Mum dragged us up and down the Royal Mile watching all the street artists: a cappella groups and contortionists and hip-hop dancers, acrobats

and fire-eaters and a tightrope-walking violinist, all scattering flyers like wedding confetti. My hair went frizzy and Perry smelled like compost and Rani kept moaning about her wet trainers, but it was sort of fun. 'A city of spirit and spectacle,' as Mum said. (She was always saying stuff like that. Dad used to call her 'my poetess', then laugh when she'd go off on a rant about the term being sexist.)

Now, Edinburgh is full of fake angels. Performers dressed head to toe in gold are dotted around the street, re-enacting the Falls in stilted clockwork dances. Two little girls skip past Starbucks, plastic halos bobbing over their heads. Tour guides lead groups of Wingdings – angel chasers like Dad – to and from the cathedral. The city has changed. The spectacle goes on, but the spirit has flown.

The raindrops slide off the glass and fall to the ground. The whole world has changed. At least the weather is consistent.

'Jaya!' Rani shouts suddenly. 'Jaya, look!'

I spin around. 'What, Rani? What now?'

She points through the second window. 'It's them.'

I follow her stare – and my heart drops. Across the street, twenty, thirty, forty people are emerging onto the rooftops of the flats opposite ours. It's them. The Standing Fallen.

They look just like the chapter back home. A mix of ages and races, all dressed in stained shirts, ragged jumpers, jeans far too ripped to be fashionable. Most of the men have uncut beards; the women's hair lies long and lank around greasy faces. They slither a little as they creep over the wet tiles, but they don't look scared. Beneath the dirt, their faces are cold and blank.

One of them, a short, squat man holding a loudspeaker, tiptoes across the ridge. He hops nimbly onto the chimney as the others inch towards the roof's edge, forming a line behind the rain gutter. Down on the street, someone starts to scream.

'Jaya!' Rani grips the edge of the bunk bed. 'They have *kids* with them!'

My mouth goes dry. She's right: there's boy of around twelve up there, and a younger girl, maybe six or seven. The girl is clasping an old man's hand, her eyes squeezed shut. The boy is staring at the crowd gathering seven storeys below. His legs are shaking so much, I'm sure he'll slip.

‘Get Dad,’ I croak. ‘Tell him to call the police.’

Rani slides down and runs out of the room. The man by the chimneys switches his loudspeaker on. It gives a sickening squeal, but he doesn’t flinch.

‘Sinners.’ His voice is loud but calm, more a statement than an accusation. ‘For nearly eight months, God’s angels have fallen from heaven. Not for two millennia has the Creator sent so clear a sign of his wrath – but does Man repent? Does he scourge his soul of spite and greed, devote himself to the Lord? No. He picks like a vulture at the bodies of angels, hungry for nothing but blood and gold.’

I know this speech off by heart. The Standing Fallen in Stoke Newington climbed onto the roof of our school every few weeks. The first time it happened, everyone rushed out of class to watch as three filthy students were dragged away by Mrs Knowles and the janitor. The audience shrank each time they returned, but the cult kept growing. Last time they appeared, seventy-three of them were looking down at us.

The man pauses. It’s hard to tell how old he is. His beard hides one half of his face, and the other is coated in a thick layer of dirt.

‘We represent no one church, no one religion,’ he says. ‘We represent *sin*. We represent the evils of greed and godlessness, the unwavering arrogance of the human race. No good awaits Man on Earth now. Our only chance at redemption is to degrade our bodies as we have degraded God’s planet, to sacrifice our lives as so many have been sacrificed in the ruthless race for progress . . . to prove ourselves worthy of the spaces freed in heaven.’

Somewhere in the distance, a siren begins to wail. The little girl is crying. The speaker carries on, unfazed.

‘We are the Standing Fallen.’ His voice swells with pride, though I’m sure it’s not supposed to. ‘As the Nephilim tumble, we take to the rooftops. We climb to remind you of the precipice upon which you teeter. We stand to remind you of how far you, too, will fall.’

In perfect unison, the followers place one foot on the rain gutter. My head spins. They won’t go through with it. The Standing Fallen have put on displays like this on Seoul skyscrapers and Caracas tower blocks; they even made it to the second floor of the Eiffel Tower back in April. They’ve tiptoed over cliffs and swung from scaffolding, but they never actually jump.

I know all that, but it doesn't stop the sinking feeling in my stomach, or  
the pulse pounding in my ears –

Or the weightlessness in my legs –

The haze of rusty red in my eyes –

The last thing I see, before the storm in my mind pulls me under, is the  
boy on the roof bow his head and begin to pray.

## OUT OF THE BLUE by Sophie Cameron

### SYNOPSIS

Ten days after Jaya Mackenzie's mum dies, angels start falling from the sky. Her dad becomes determined to catch one alive – something Jaya thinks is impossible, until she herself witnesses one of these mysterious 'Beings' fall and, miraculously, survive. With the help of Allie, an 'anti-angel exploitation activist' with cystic fibrosis, Jaya must protect the Being from cults, scientists, and even her own family, all while juggling her grief and guilt about her mum's death.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Originally from the Highlands, Sophie Cameron studied French & Comparative Literature before completing a postgraduate certificate in Creative Writing, focusing on YA fiction. She now lives in Edinburgh, where she works as a marketing officer and spends her free time writing, running and trying to learn Japanese.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I was struck by the very unusual premise of the story – that winged people are falling from the sky. Loved that the author immediately got into the interesting ethical issues that this raises for her characters. My other favourite thing about this entry was the depth of the storyline – the recently bereaved family and how each of them are differently affected by that.'

'A very original premise pulled off skilfully. I thought the contrast between a hysterical population (and father) trying to catch themselves an angel, and a girl quietly trying to come to terms with the loss of her mother was brilliant.'

'The voice of Jaya is utterly convincing and appealing and the concept of beings falling to earth is immediately fresh and gripping. I wanted to know straight away: what are they? What does it mean? I willingly suspended disbelief.'

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# SPYDERS: FLASH & THE CAGEY BEES

By Heather Newton

## **Chapter 1 – Out of the Action**

Mr Webb tapped one of his eight stubby legs on his large, messy desk.

“Do you know why I called you into my office, Flash?” asked Mr Webb.

“Yes, sir,” replied Flash, looking at the floor. It was never good when you got called into the office of the head of MI8.

“I’ve heard your last mission was not a success,” said Mr Webb, taking a slurp of his hot caterpillarcino.

“No, sir,” replied Flash.

“You were supposed to work with your partner, Agent Walker, to protect certain documents. Documents of great importance to the British Secret Service.”

Flash was hanging from a thread on the ceiling in front of Mr Webb’s desk. He felt like a fly about to go head-to-head with a windscreen. This wasn’t going to end well . . .

“And your mission failed,” continued Mr Webb, straightening his tie with one of his legs, “because you ran off and left your partner on his own.”

“But, sir,” said Flash, squirming like a worm in a half-eaten apple. “It wasn’t like that, I . . .”

Webb stared at Flash from the swivel stool he was sitting on in the middle of his big circular desk. He tapped all eight of his legs on the desk around him. Flash thought it best to shut up. Webb was a small spider with a shiny round body and short, brown legs but he made up for it by having a very big voice.

“Spyders work in pairs for a reason. Maybe if you had stuck together instead of running off, the documents wouldn’t have been stolen by the Cagey Bees.”

“But I thought Agent Walker was right behind me,” pleaded Flash. It wasn’t *his* fault he was the fastest Spyder in MI8, thought Flash. It wasn’t easy working in a pair when no one else could keep up with him. It’d be better for everyone if they’d just let him work on his own.

“Enough!” boomed Mr Webb, thumping a leg on his desk. “The humans in the British Secret Service rely on the Spyders in MI8 to play a key role in defending the nation. By now those Cagey Bees will have taken the documents back to The Hive, the most dangerous criminal gang in the UK. British state secrets are now in the hands of the enemy! What am I going to tell the Prime Minister? This is an embarrassment to the whole of MI8.”

Flash hung there in silence, his legs dangling down towards the floor. When you put it like that, well . . . maybe he had messed things up a bit.

Mr Webb wiped his forehead with a short, hairy leg. He was mostly bald aside from two wiry tufts of hair either side of his head that matched his moustache.

“Listen up, Flash,” said Webb, pointing a leg at him and narrowing all eight of his eyes. “I’m not putting you on another mission until you’ve proved you’ve learned something from this mess. Until I know I can rely on you to work in a team and not run off on your own, you’ll be working in the library.”

Flash’s mouth dropped open.

“The library?!” asked Flash, almost falling off his thread. “But I’m a Spyder! I’m trained for action! What use am I in the library?”

“It’s my job to make sure MI8 has reliable Spyders out in the action. Spyders like Agent Crawlle – he’s a real team player, dependable, level-headed.”

Flash couldn’t help rolling his eyes. Big-headed was more like it. Crawlle was an absolute creep . . . but Mr Webb was his biggest fan. Webb slurped down the rest of his drink and threw the empty paper cup at the bin. He missed.

“Sir, if I could just—”

“This conversation is over,” said Mr Webb, wiping caterpillar froth off his moustache with one of his legs and swivelling his stool away from Flash. “Report for duty in the library. Your new partner from today is Agent Spindle.”

Flash bit through his thread and dropped to the floor.

“Yes, sir,” he mumbled, as he scuttled towards the door and out of Mr Webb’s office.

He closed the door behind him and found himself looking straight at Miss Silk. She was sitting at a desk like Mr Webb’s, typing with two legs, opening mail with another two, holding the phone in her fifth leg and sorting paperwork with the final three. What a spider! She looked up and smiled.

“Hello, Agent Flash,” said Silk, putting down the paperwork so she could push her glasses up. “How’s your day going?”

Flash’s heart fluttered like an overexcited butterfly on a sunny day.

“Er – well – a bit – um . . . ” started Flash, wondering why he always sounded like such an idiot when he tried to talk to her. Silk was Mr Webb’s personal assistant. She had long, hairy legs and cream-and-beige-striped colouring. She was the most beautiful spider Flash had ever seen. Today she was wearing a smart purple scarf tied in a knot around her neck. Flash suddenly remembered he was mid-sentence.

“It’s a bit, uh . . . well, terrible actually.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Silk, before she was interrupted by a loud buzzer. “Ah, have to dash, Mr Webb needs me. Cheerio!” Silk smoothed her purple scarf, jumped down from her stool and scuttled into Mr Webb’s office.

Flash sighed and set off towards the library.

It was pretty brilliant to work in London in the Secret Intelligence Services building with the humans in MI6, thought Flash as he left the secret eighth floor and crawled through a metal air vent into one of the humans’ ventilation shafts. The Spyder library was up in the loft of the S.I.S. building, and this ventilation shaft would take him straight there. The human areas were all human-sized, of course, and the Spyder areas were all spider-sized. Although they had their own spider-sized offices, computer systems, cafeteria

and everything else, the humans' ventilation shafts were perfect for a Spyder to use to get around the building. Only the most senior humans in MI6 knew that MI8 existed, of course. Everybody else had no idea about the secret eighth floor in the building, the headquarters of MI8, the central hub of all Spyder activity.

"Hey there," said a slimy voice in the ventilation shaft up above him.

Flash looked up as Crawlle sauntered down into view, his hair slicked back and his giant gold WebGun hanging next to his glittery SpySpecs on his utility belt . . . what a show-off.

"Hey, Crawlle," mumbled Flash. "How's it going?"

"Simply terrific, old pal," crooned Crawlle, creeping closer. "Did you hear about my latest mission? I totally smashed it. Caught six Cagey Bees practically single-legged. Of course it was nothing, really, but the *News of the Web* are simply insisting they put me on the front cover. Almost every civilised spider in the country reads it, so I can't say no, but as I'll tell them in my interview, I'm really not in it for the glory."

Flash forced a smile. "Yeah . . . great."

"But I do look good in photos, so I really can't blame them for wanting to put me on the cover. A little treat for the ladies, eh? Miss Silk especially . . ."

Crawlle grinned. He was a large spider who spent a lot of time in the gym. He had short black hair all over and a grey stripe running down the length of his back. Compared to Flash, who was a pretty average-looking, scruffy brown spider, Crawlle *was* pretty photogenic . . . but he didn't have to *tell* everyone.

"Did I hear on the old grapevine that you ran into a spot of bother on your last mission, eh, buddy?" asked Crawlle.

"Well . . ." started Flash, trailing off as Crawlle shot him a very wide, very white, very dangerous grin that showed off his two very sharp fangs.

"Anyone can be fast, but we can't all be heroes, eh, Flash?" said Crawlle. "But don't worry – I'll be around to save the country if you're out of the picture."

Flash bristled like he'd stuck his head in a plug socket.

"Who says I'm out of the picture? Actually, I'm on my way right now to start my next mission. Top secret, y'know, *that* sort of mission."

“What, upstairs?” scoffed Crawlle. “A secret mission, upstairs? Upstairs is for Spyders who are on the way out. The eighth floor is where it’s at.”

“Not in this case,” replied Flash, giving a smile he hoped came across as confident and mysterious. “But I can’t reveal any more. Top secret.”

“Whatever, old chap,” replied Crawlle, picking a piece of the French Flies he’d had for lunch out of his sharp, white teeth. “I’ll sign a copy of the *News of the Web* for you.”

*Thanks*, thought Flash, climbing past Crawlle, up towards the library. *I’ll sign you a copy of my bum.*

It *was* pretty brilliant to work in the S.I.S. building with MI6, thought Flash, but it was much less brilliant now he was heading up to the loft, away from the action, the danger, the real work of defending the nation against the latest threat. Flash sighed. He hated that Crawlle was right.

## **FLASH’S NOTEBOOK**

***Fact File: Crawlle – the NUMBER-ONE  
most annoying Spyder ever***

*Giant gold WebGun – way bigger than it needs to be . . . I mean, come on.*

*Far too much gel in his hair – seriously, if a fly landed on his head,  
it’d be stuck there forever.*

*All the stupid things he says – like you’d give your last leg to talk  
about how great he is . . . yawn.*

*Glittery SpySpecs – and he likes to wear them in sunglasses mode . . .  
when it’s not even sunny!*

*Buff and he knows it – spends ages in the gym . . . doesn’t he have  
anything better to do, like save the country?*

*Smarmy smile – with probably the sharpest, whitest fangs I’ve ever  
seen. He must have a very good dentist.*

*Mr Webb’s favourite – not that I’m jealous or anything*

## Chapter 2 – Something Suspicious

Even though the books were all spider-sized, the library was still huge, full of shelves upon shelves of books and files. It smelled like the feather duster Flash had once had an unpleasant experience with.

“Hello?” asked Flash quietly, but there was only a faint rustle somewhere in reply. “Hello?”

Specks of dust floated around in the air and everything was silent. There were no other Spyderys in the library.

“Hello, Agent Flash,” said a voice that was suddenly very close behind him.

Flash nearly jumped out of his skin, and spun around to see a tall, grey, elderly looking Spyder hanging upside down on a thread from the ceiling.

“So you’re the fastest Spyder in MI8,” said the upside-down Spyder, lowering himself carefully onto the floor. “I don’t think we’ve met. I understand we’ll be working together in the library. I’m Agent Spindle. I’m sure it’ll be a pleasure.”

“Maybe,” muttered Flash. What good was being fast when you worked in a library? It wasn’t like the books were going to make a run for it.

Agent Spindle crawled one leg at a time towards the library reception desk. Not only did Spindle look like he could do with eating a few more bugburgers, but he was *slow* as well. So slow. A caterpillar could turn into a butterfly faster than Spindle could get to that desk, Flash thought, poking a large book with one of his brown, scruffy legs.

“So what do we do up here, anyway?” he asked.

Spindle smiled. “Well, I’ve been short-legged for a while, so the jobs have stacked up a bit. Your first task will be to put these books back on the shelves.”

Flash stared at an enormous pile of books. He gulped.

“That pile?”

“Yes,” replied Spindle.

“But . . . this will take hours. I’ll be here all night!” cried Flash.

“Well, you can either get started now or we can talk about it for a few hours first in the hope that the books will grow legs and put themselves back on the shelves. Which would you prefer?”

“Very funny,” mumbled Flash, picking up the first book: *Cracking Cagey Bee Code*. This job sucked already. Maybe upstairs really *was* for Spyderys

who were on the way out, thought Flash, unable to get Crawlle's words out of his head.

But if that was the case . . . what was Crawlle doing up here earlier?

Flash lifted a leg and pressed the first button on his eight-function SpyWatch. He sighed. His SpyWatch could do eight brilliant things and all he needed in this job was to know the time. What a waste. It was 11.32 p.m. Flash was finally down to the last book: *Explosives & Bombs: What Every Spyder Needs to Know*. Flash groaned out loud. His legs were sore, his back hurt and he was so hungry he could eat a horsefly. Spindle had left hours ago. *Typical*, he thought as he found the right bookcase. *The very top shelf*.

Flash pulled his WebGun off his belt, fiddled with the settings and shot a thread of silk up to the top shelf. He climbed wearily up the thread and put the book back in position. *Finally*, he thought. *Finally finished*.

*Click.*

Flash heard the library door open quietly. Someone else must be in the library – but what could they want at half eleven at night?

“Yes,” said a voice, in a half-whisper. “I’m ready to meet.”

Flash felt a shiver run down the hairs on his legs. He peered out over the ledge of the top shelf to see who was speaking, but no one was there. He pressed the fourth button on his SpyWatch to activate his Bugdar, the secret radar-like scanning device invented by MI8 to show whether there were any Cagey Bees or other enemies nearby. He set it to scan the room. A dot came up on the screen, a dot in the next row of bookcases, a dot that shouldn't be there. A black dot, meaning it was another Spyder. But who was it?

“No, of course no one's listening . . .” whispered the voice. “Go on . . .”

*Still just the one voice*, thought Flash. *Must be a phone call. A secret phone call.* Silently he pointed his WebGun at the opposite bookcase and shot a thread across the gap. The thread stuck. He anchored the other end of the thread to the shelf he was standing on and darted across the drop, hanging upside down between the two tall bookcases.

“But it's raining, old chap,” said the voice. “Let's just meet here, eh? I've already told you no one's listening.”

Flash reached the other bookcase and peered out over the edge . . .

He saw a grey stripe running down the back of a large spider with short, thick black hair. It was Crawlle.

“All right, all right, stop buzzing at me. Under the second arch . . . Heading north-west . . . Midnight . . . I’ll be there,” said Crawlle, ending the call on his SpyWatch and scuttling back towards the library door.

Buzzing? Ready to meet? This sounded suspicious. Flash knew what he had to do. He hooked up some silk, abseiled down the bookcase, and crept silently out of the door.

Flash scurried along in the shadows as he followed Crawlle down the cold metal ventilation shaft back towards the eighth floor. What on earth could Crawlle be up to, having secret conversations late at night in the library, arranging meetings at midnight? Something wasn’t right, thought Flash . . . Someone had to find out what Crawlle was up to, and that someone had to be him. Crawlle was quite far ahead, but Flash didn’t want to get any closer. Too close and Crawlle would spot him, too far and Flash would lose sight of Crawlle and miss the midnight meeting.

“Keep your head down,” Flash whispered to himself.

Crawlle suddenly stopped and turned to look behind him. Flash froze. Had he been heard? Seen? Would Crawlle scan the tunnel and find Flash on his Bugdar? But Crawlle just ran a leg through his slicked-back hair. Then he scuttled into a side tunnel and disappeared out of view.

“Oh bugs,” muttered Flash, leaping up and speeding after Crawlle as fast as he could. He tumbled into the side tunnel, but he was too late. Crawlle was nowhere to be seen. Suddenly a clanking, whirring noise filled the tunnel. Flash hunched down in a ball. A rush of air swept past him and up ahead something large and metallic clanked and screeched downwards, rattling his world like an earthquake. Then, as quickly as it came, the noise was gone.

“What the gnat was that?” asked Flash, uncurling his legs and leaping up.

The tunnel suddenly stopped in front of a dark, open space. Flash peered over the edge but it was too dark to see. He unclipped his SpySpecs from his belt and slipped them on, selecting the night-vision setting. Through the eight lenses he could see thick, black cables hanging down and glinting in the dim light. It was the humans’ lift shaft and the rumbling in the distance below must have been a passing lift.

Flash's heart dropped like a wingless ladybird. Crawlle could be anywhere by now. Even if Flash knew where he was heading, if Crawlle had hitched a ride on that lift he'd be miles ahead. Flash slumped down against the cold metal floor.

"Think," he said to himself. What had he heard on the phone call? He knew the meeting was at midnight . . . Flash looked at his SpyWatch. It was 11.45 p.m.

*"Raining . . ."* Crawlle hadn't wanted to go to the meeting place because it was raining. So it must be outside, but that didn't narrow it down enough. He could be on the roof, or on a windowsill on any floor of the whole S.I.S. building. He could be out on the streets, anywhere in London.

*"Under the second arch . . ."* A building, maybe? A doorway? But there were loads of buildings with arches! He'd never find the right one in time.

Flash racked his brain. He felt like an ant hunting through a pantry for a single grain of sugar. Were there any other clues? Suddenly it came.

*"Heading north-west!"* But buildings didn't head anywhere. It must be a road. A road with . . . arches?

"Surely not," said Flash out loud. "Not in this weather. Not the second arch of Vauxhall Bridge . . ."

Flash's stomach wriggled as if he'd eaten a caterpillar that wasn't quite dead. He just knew the midnight meeting must be on Vauxhall Bridge, but getting there would be a really dangerous journey. Flash unclipped his WebGun from his utility belt and looked down the lift shaft. The drop was at least twenty human storeys high. It wasn't the normal or easiest way out of the building . . . Obviously Crawlle didn't want anyone to see what he was up to. *Here goes*, thought Flash, as he shot a thread to stick to the edge of the ventilation shaft and gave it a tug to check it held tight. He jumped backwards off the ledge.

## **FLASH'S NOTEBOOK**

***Fact File: SpyWatch – my ABSOLUTE FAVOURITE  
Spyder gadget***

*Eight-function SpyWatch*

*Function 1: Er . . . a watch. OK, so it's not the most interesting setting, but a good Spyder needs to know the time, right?*

*Function 2: Mobile phone. Always handy . . . or should I say "leggy"?*

*Function 3: Internet. For serious research as well as watching funny videos on BugTube.*

*Function 4: Bugdar. Press this button if you want to scan your location and spot any enemies . . . or other Spyderys. It's pretty cool.*

*Function 5: Two-way radio. No signal? No problem! All SpyWatches have two-way radio so you can communicate wherever you are.*

*Function 6: Voice Transponder. So Spyderys can make their voices louder and clearer when they need to speak to humans.*

*Function 7: Smokescreen. The all-time best button . . . press this to deploy a cloud of smoke whenever you need to get away!*

*Function 8: Emergency SOS. Only for emergencies . . . this button alerts the rest of MIB if you're in trouble and need rescuing.*

## SPYDERS: FLASH & THE CAGEY BEES by Heather Newton

### SYNOPSIS

MI8, the top-secret branch of the British Secret Service that's run entirely by spiders, is needed more than ever when the enemy Cagey Bees plot to blow up the Houses of Parliament. Flash, the fastest Spyder in the whole of MI8, has been partnered with the old, slow Spindle. The unlikely pair must work together to stop the bomb – but Flash races off on his own . . . and straight into trouble.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

As an Innovation Consultant, new ideas are Heather's bread and butter, but her real passion is telling stories that make people smile. A member of Lou Kuenzler's Writing for Children Workshop at City Lit, Heather's writing has been reviewed as "witty and inventive" (*British Theatre Guide*) and "hilariously funny" (*Broadwaybaby*).

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Such a wonderfully original concept. Flash is a great central character and I thought it was really easy to get behind him. I particularly liked the notebook interruptions which further revealed him to us.'

'I loved the James Bond spoof starring Spyder! Lots of fun and hits the target age group perfectly with the humour. Good characterisation. This kind of thing is much harder than it looks.'

'Great to see a strong entry in the young fiction area.'

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# REQUIEM

By Patti Buff

The streets of Manhattan look different from inside this chauffeur-driven, lavishly detailed Audi. See, when you're homeless, the streets are your universe and prison. Home and enemy in one. Everything you do – eat, shit, sleep, cry, have sex, fight, and even die – you do on the streets. But sitting here inside this aluminium-framed bubble I don't recognize a thing of the old hood.

My boss, Philippe Cathari, slides across the slick backseat until we're touching, causing a small jolt of fear I do my best not to show. Mega-rich, slippery-smart and more than a little bit crazy, he's intimidating as hell, but he's tons better than the other *Les Cathari*. At least he knows my name. He places a small, sealed vial into my hand. "For you," he says.

My pulse begins to throb. From anybody else, I might mistake it for a bottle of perfume or mouthwash. But Philippe is an 800-year-old alchemist, making this bottle a hell of a lot more interesting. "Is it . . . ?" My voice cracks and I try again. "Is this the Elixir of Life?"

Philippe bursts out laughing and I burn with shame. Even Trigger sniggers from the driver's seat. I rub the scar on my collarbone. Of course I'm not becoming immortal tonight. In all the years they've been around, the Cathari have never shared the Elixir with anyone. But now they're looking for a few worthy people to increase their ranks. And I've had too many close calls with death not to take them up on their offer. I dig the cork out and sniff. I gag at the burnt hair scent and hold it as far away as I can. This is even worse than Wimpy's socks. "What is it?"

Philippe sweeps his shoulder-length hair back, exposing his receding

hairline and only clue he's older than the twenty-five years he pretends to be. "It's to keep you from getting drunk. No matter how much you drink."

I twirl the bottle in the light of a passing street lamp, but the green glass keeps all its secrets hidden. "You could make a mint off this."

He nudges me, edging me to drink. "That, my dear Rix, would defeat its purpose." His light French accent makes *purpose* sound like *per-pose*.

I sniff again. Yup, just as disgusting as the first time. "And you're sure this works?"

His patience slips away like his smile. "Drink."

I push away my dread, plug my nose and gulp whatever it is down. My mouth and throat freeze on contact. Biting pain spreads to my chest, the air in my lungs contracts into frozen clumps making it impossible to scream. I convulse and slip off the seat, while Philippe sits and stares and does nothing as I turn into a human ice block. Then, as quickly as it started, I unfreeze; air rasps into my lungs and my heart sputters wildly, relieved to be still pumping. Once I stop shaking, I lift myself back into the seat with as much dignity as I can scrape together.

Philippe pulls out his phone. "Guillaume will be pleased. He wasn't sure it would work."

"How can you tell if it worked or not?"

"You're not dead," he says with all the feeling of someone reading out a shopping list. I gape, words pooling unformed in my mouth. Philippe laughs and swings an arm around me. "Like you Americans are so fond of saying, I'm just shitting you. Guillaume was almost completely positive you would survive."

My head flops from side to side as his laughs shake me and I sink my nails into my palms to calm myself. That's the problem with immortals. They forget life needs to be kept in bubble wrap at all times.

"We're here," Philippe says. He leans towards Trig. "Let us out in front of the club then wait for us around the block." Trig's shoulders tighten. There goes his plan of partying with us tonight. I snicker and stare his pale grey eyes down in the rear-view mirror. This is my night to shine and it's killing him.

Philippe leans over me and looks out my window at the building. "Shall we practise again before we go up?"

I hand him the envelope I just nicked from his inside coat pocket. “Naw, I’m good.”

His eyes widen and a slow smile shows me a dimple I didn’t know he had. “Yes, you are.” Pride warms me up better than ten shots of tequila ever could.

A valet opens my door and I step outside. Game time. Philippe takes my arm, ushers me confidently past a security guard whose scowl makes the back of my neck prickle. Where’s the club? There’s no music, no people, nothing but an empty hallway. My confusion ends when Philippe presses for the elevator. Of course. In New York, the higher things are the more valuable they become.

Two ladies join us as we wait. After batting their lashes at Philippe, they send cutting looks my way and remark on how all the good clubs in Manhattan are being overrun by the trash of the other boroughs. I don’t react; though I do imitate the way they stand and copy their Upper East Side accents in my head. I stare at myself in the mirror the doors make. If Geoff were alive I doubt he’d even recognize me. It’s not just the skinny jeans and the nearly transparent blouse I’m wearing without a bra. Since being with the Cathari, I’ve developed curves and even lost those dark circles underneath my eyes, thanks to regular meals and a bedroom door that locks.

Philippe leans towards me. “More lipstick.” I blush and quickly apply some, ignoring the other girls’ pointed stares.

Pumping bass blasts us when we reach the top floor. This is more like it. Large crowd, loud music. Perfect place to commit a crime. The line getting into the club reaches the elevators and the ladies with us waste no time melding into the end of it. I expect to do the same when Philippe turns the corner and goes up a flight of stairs. We’re going up even higher? The top of the stairs is morgue-quiet, the line shorter and guarded by two huge bouncers plus an anorexic-thin woman behind a podium. I immediately start to worry. There’s no way I’m getting past them.

Philippe takes my arm and sails us towards the podium and straight for disaster. They’re going to take one look at me and kick my ass back to the sidewalk. Sure enough, the meanest of the bouncers plants his feet at the sight of me. He knows I don’t belong here. I may be cleaned up

and even dressed right thanks to the Cathari, but none of that is going to change the fact I'm four years from being legal. Advice Geoff once gave me comes to mind. *Don't pretend you belong. Believe it and everyone else will too.* Granted, he'd meant sneaking into bathrooms to wash ourselves, but it's the same principle.

The lady at the podium raises her head. As she looks from me to Philippe her expression changes from disgust to slimy subservience in milliseconds. "Philippe," she purrs with a thick French accent. She jostles me to the side and kisses Philippe on both cheeks. They laugh and flirt in French while the two bouncers glare at me like I've left a huge dump on their lawn. Ms Frenchie wraps her arm in Philippe's and leads him into the club. Leaving me to deal with getting past these bouncers on my own. I straighten my shoulders, tilt up my chin and manage to take two steps until wide shoulders and a flat nose block my way.

"I'm going to need to see some ID, Miss."

Shit. I hem and haw a bit, shooting daggers at Philippe's back, when he turns around. I expect him to complain and make a fuss, after all, I'm here for him, but he doesn't say a word. He merely raises an eyebrow at Frenchie who jumps into action. "My deepest apologies, Philippe. He's new," she says, chopping the air to pieces as she motions for the bouncer to let me pass. "It will never happen again."

I slink past the bouncer. Our eyes meet and what's left of his nose flares as I pass, but he doesn't say a word. He's only trying to do his job, but in this world power trumps everything else.

Philippe disentangles himself from Frenchie and takes my arm. She quickly hides her disappointment with a desperate and pathetic smile. "Shall I take you to your regular table?"

"You've done enough, thank you," Philippe says in that clipped manner he's got that lets everyone know he actually means the opposite. I repeat the way he said *thank you* over and over in my head. Power doesn't only have its own vocabulary, but its own inflection. Which I imagine comes from having never heard the word 'no' for the last eight centuries.

The hallway opens up to a huge room with floor to ceiling windows overlooking Manhattan on one side and the Hudson River and New Jersey on the other. I lose my composure and gawk like a tourist. "Holy shit."

Philippe smiles at my indiscretion. “Keep working as well as you have been and you’ll be able to afford a panorama like this for your very own.”

I stop myself from asking when that will happen and soak in Manhattan’s skyline, including a picture-perfect view of the Empire State Building. Once I join the Cathari, I’ll have views like this in every city of the world. And, best part – I’ll have the time to savour them all.

A piano plays and a singer starts talking about her house burning down as a kid. I take in the subdued vibe of the room and all the open space around me. I’ve seen morgues with more nightlife than this. And the few dozen that are here keep scanning the room to see if there’s anybody more interesting than the people they’re with. Meaning, this is about the worst place to try to commit a crime. But I’ve got no choice; I have to see this through. There are no second chances with the Cathari. “Who’s my mark?”

Philippe nods towards a blond man in his late twenties in a curved booth near the piano. I start to relax. At least he’s not too ancient. That would be awkward. I watch him lecture a waitress about his drink, who then rushes it back to the bar and shares some clipped words with the bartender who drops everything to make my mark a new drink. That new drink is rushed back to my mark who sips and nods his approval, creating a wave of relief that spreads from waitress to bartender. Impressive. This might actually be fun.

Philippe looks at his Rolex. “You have thirty minutes until his contact arrives.”

I swing around. “That’s it?”

“To someone with your talents, that should be plenty.”

I don’t have any talents. At least none that will get me past that guy’s alpha male vibe.

Philippe sees my doubt, pulls me back down the hallway and hovers over me, or would if I weren’t taller than him. “When you came to us, you were a needy, pitiful creature crying over a dead boyfriend who didn’t know where her next meal was coming from. Use that.”

“What? How pathetic I was?”

“Your vulnerability. Men like taking care of vulnerable women. Especially men like him who feel more important than they actually are.”

A trickle of an idea comes to me and I stick out my hand. "I need some money."

"For what?"

"A bottle of champagne."

Understanding twinkles in his eyes and he hands me a credit card. "Order the d'Ambonnay and say it just like that. The d'Ambonnay. The bartender will know what you mean." He looks me over from head to toe then nods his approval. "Meet me in the disco downstairs when you're done."

I don't bother asking what I should do if I fail. To the Cathari failure is for the weak. The unworthy. And I can't afford to be either. I swing past my target on my way up to the bar, where I wait until the bartender graces me with his attention. His eyes widen as I order, and I'm forced to pay for it first, like I'm not good for it or something, but when it comes time to sign the bill I see why. \$2,600! That kind of money for a bottle of bubbly might be nothing to a Cathari, but that was two months' rent in my world. That piece of info I'm stealing tonight must be extremely valuable. I stare at the green bottle the bartender presents for approval and nod even though I have no clue if 1996 was a good year or not. He makes to open the bottle but I catch him in time.

"Need to wait for my friends. And I'll need five glasses," I say. I gather up the bottle and the glasses as best I can in one hand and with my phone in other I wander the room. Those not completely engrossed by the music give me strange looks, including my target, as I walk past with a lost look on my face. Lucky for me, he's sitting in the perfect spot for me to pretend I'm waiting for people so I stop nearby and sigh.

I catch him watching me as I spin around at every loud noise or when someone enters the bar. I give him my best pathetic smile then ignore him. All the while juggling the glasses, bottle and phone. I start to sweat. How much time have I already wasted? Ten minutes? Fifteen? I'm about to approach him myself when he leans forward during a break in the music.

"That's one impressive bottle you've got there. Celebrating something special?"

Bingo. "My birthday," I say, not looking at him. "With my supposed friends, but looks like they got held up."

“You don’t look old enough to be twenty-one yet.”

I twist towards him in shock horror and drop a glass that shatters all over my sandals. He dashes forward and places a hand underneath the bottle I pretend to lose my grip on as I struggle with the other glasses. I drop another one just for good measure and earn a *shush* from a woman nearby.

“Careful now,” he says, taking the bottle and remaining glasses out of my hands and placing them on his table. “Don’t want to waste this.”

“It’s already going to waste,” I say with a pout. “None of my friends showed up, I blew my entire month’s budget and I don’t even know how to get the damn thing open.”

His narrow face doubles in width as he grins and his bright blue eyes sparkle. “Well, I can help you with that if you’d like.”

I take a quick look around the room then turn back to him with a sigh. “Might as well.” I point to the bench. “Do you mind? I think a piece of glass is stuck in my sandal.” He nods. I settle into the love seat and slip out of my sandal, giving him a provocative glance down my blouse. He coughs uncomfortably before taking the bottle and gently, even elegantly, opens it without losing one drop.

“May I?” he asks as he holds the bottle over a glass.

“Only if you pour one for yourself, too.” His eyes twinkle and he pours himself a taste. “You can take more than that.” He raises an eyebrow as I pull the bottle out of his hands and fill up his glass. “I insist.” He gives up and joins me in the cosy booth. Champagne bubbles shimmer in the air as I raise my glass. “To my birthday,” I say, looking him straight in the eye.

“To your birthday.”

We clink glasses and even though the bubbles tickle my nose something bad, I chug the whole thing down in one go, appreciating a faint hint of apricot. He stares at me with amusement as I fill up my glass and hold the bottle out for him. “Come on. Catch up.”

“You’re crazy,” he says, but his smile tells me I’m heading down the right track as he slams his drink. And he doesn’t protest as I fill his glass a second time.

We slam the second glass then grin at each other like kids. I rearrange myself on the narrow bench so I’m facing him, lean halfway towards him

and gesture for him to lean in closer. As he does, his suit coat flaps open exposing the envelope I'm here to steal. My heart thrums and my fingers twitch with impatience. Easy now; make him trust you first. In a place this small I can't risk him causing a scene. I lean my head towards him until we make quite the little conspiratorial couple. "I've got a little secret to tell you." I blink a few times and hiccup, a calm facade covering up the squall I am on the inside. "I'm not really twenty-one. But don't tell anyone."

"I knew it! You best stick close to me tonight. Just to be on the safe side." His eyes gleam as he snuggles in closer to me so that our thighs are touching. I play the part and lean for the bottle just the right way as to expose a breast. His gaze lowers predictably. Men are so easy to control. A peek here, a stroke of the ego there, and they turn into spineless clumps of hormones. I fill up both of our glasses; we toast and down them in one go. Luckily, he's already had a few drinks and the champagne brings him right to the cusp of tipsiness. Besides an itchy nose from the bubbles, I don't feel a thing.

I pour the last of the bottle into his glass and try not to think about the money we just wasted. I lean in closer then pull back. A twinge of longing pops into his eyes. I give him a huge smile. "God! Here we are celebrating my birthday and I don't even know your name."

"It's Samuel, but my friends call me Sam."

"Well, Sam, I'm Anja. It's a pleasure to meet you and to celebrate my birthday with you." The piano stops and the crowd applauds loudly, so I use the time to snuggle back into the seat close enough our shoulders touch. "So," I say, tilting my head to look him in the face, "you come here often?" I wink to show the joke and his smile widens. He starts talking just as the piano plays the opening chords of "As Time Goes By" and my stomach clenches. Immediately, Sam and the bar disappear and I'm back with Geoff in that rundown, mouldy movie theatre. He'd surprised me with movie tickets to see *Casablanca* and for two hours I wasn't just another runaway on the streets, a piece of trash to be kicked around. For those two hours I was the old me again. The girl who cries during all the sappy parts and gets nervous holding a boy's hand. The girl who still had a mom, a home, and a chance at life. By the end of the movie I was in love, with the movie, the song, and especially the boy who'd managed to scrape together

money for the best present I'd received in years. And I never got the chance to find out how.

An arm around my shoulders slams me back into the present. Sam says something about cheering me up, but I can't focus on what he's saying. I'm such an idiot! I've been given one chance to prove myself and I let a stupid song sidetrack me. How much time did I waste? My phone shakes as I check: five minutes left. I take a deep breath. I can do this. What I need is a distraction. While Sam hails a waitress for new drinks, I glance around for something, anything I can use within the next five minutes. Then it comes to me. It's not perfect, but it's my last chance to salvage this mission. I touch his arm. "You know what would be perfect?"

His face brightens. "What's that?"

I point to the three couples slow dancing next to the piano. "A birthday dance."

Aversion grows in his eyes. "I just ordered drinks." I blast my megawatt smile, the seconds counting down in my head. "And I'm a terrible dancer," he adds.

I playfully slap his chest. "You liar. I'm sure you know exactly how to spin a woman off her feet. Please?"

And . . . his resistance fades. He stumbles to his feet only to slop back down when the waitress brings our drinks. I want to scream, but slam back my drink instead. Too bad Guillaume's elixir works so well, because that martini would have calmed me down perfectly. But no liquid courage for me. Tonight, I'm on my own.

Sam takes a sip. "You can do better than that," I say to goad him on. He grimaces but shoots his drink back like a good boy. I yank him to his feet and after making sure my purse is wide open on my left side we move to the dance floor. He knocks into an empty table as we dance. He's finally drunk. Time to pop the bank. I stumble into him with the intention of slipping my hand into his breast pocket, but he catches me and straightens me out.

"Careful," he says, with no slurring, no unsteadiness, no hint of being drunk. "You sure you're OK to dance?"

"Of course." I smile to hide my dismay. I don't have time for another round of drinks. I pull him closer until our bodies touch and tilt my head

up to whisper in his ear. “I’ve always found dancing to be a type of foreplay, haven’t you?”

He answers by swinging me around with gusto. At last. We dance, I stumble, I press my right hand to the back of his head to distract him from my left hand slipping into his coat. I ease the envelope out and drop it into my purse. Riskier than at the table, but I’m out of options and time. Sam catches me off guard with another spin and I stumble for real, nearly losing hold of my purse.

“Whoops.” I lean over and pretend to catch my breath. “Maybe I should take that break. I’ll meet you back at the table.”

His smile is so genuine I almost start to feel bad for him until he squeezes my ass. “I’ll be waiting.”

Yes, you will – all night long, too. I weave my way towards the bathrooms and the exit, my heart hammering, my body aching to run. Unlike Times Square, there’s no crowd to disappear in. Up here, I’m a beacon, visible to the entire world. Soon as I’m in the hallway, I swing out my phone and am in the middle of speed-texting Philippe when I run into someone’s wide chest. “Watch it,” a young man with a square face and equally square nose growls as he pushes me aside.

“Watch it yourself, asshole.” What is it with flat-nosed guys getting in my way tonight? I finish my text and breeze towards the stairs. Every nerve in my body is electrified, sensitive to every impulse, every sound and movement around me. It’s like I’m alive times a hundred. This is what the Cathari should bottle and sell – this razor-sharp perception you get when your entire life sways between ultimate success and utter failure.

## **REQUIEM by Patti Buff**

### **SYNOPSIS**

The Cathari family has the power to make Rix, a seventeen-year-old former street kid, immortal. To win their blessing she'll do just about anything they ask. But when they kidnap her supposed-to-be-dead boyfriend, she finds herself in the middle of a centuries old feud, her allegiance torn between the love of her life who abandoned her and the Cathari who can give her everything she needs.

### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

The tenth out of eleven kids in a family who took in hundreds of foster kids, Patti Buff found solitude in reading at a young age and hasn't stopped. She lives in disgustingly beautiful Bavaria with her husband and two teenagers.

### **JUDGES' COMMENTS**

'I found this to be an extremely confident and fresh take on the paranormal YA genre. The writing is assured and the narrator-protagonist, Rix, is convincing and well drawn. I appreciated 800-year-old Philippe and wanted to know more about his kind and about the elixir of life. I think the Manhattan milieu will appeal to teen readers and it might cross over to adult readers too.'

'This was an engaging evocation of a glamorous but amoral world and a character you like despite her wrongdoing. Tension is sustained throughout.'

'It's a very vibrant and involving story about a girl being given a second chance in life, which I assume she comes to regret. I found the glamorous immortals brilliantly sinister.'

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# THE UNWILLING GODDESS

By Relly Annett-Baker

## CHAPTER ONE – CLEMENTINE QUICK

This time it wasn't the sacrificial chickens that disturbed Clementine. It was the tone-deaf chanting.

She lay on her stomach in the scratchy, scorched grass of the backyard, some distance from Abuelita's house, trying to read a passage from her Spanish textbook. *I shouldn't be surprised*, she thought with a sigh of resignation. She knew her grandmother was busy with this kind of stuff each evening, all through October.

For a second or two, a breeze rippled through the garden catching the sign hung the other side of the fence and she could hear it swing on groaning hinges for the briefest moment:

SEÑORITA MARGUERITE SANCHEZ,  
PROPHETESS OF CHIACUTL.  
COMMUNICANTS FOR THE DEAD  
HELD THURS, SUN AND BY APPT

Communicating with the dead was what had distracted her from reading. The chanting was travelling through the open windows from her grandmother's dining room. She wasn't sure really why the dead were so keen on chanting, or bumping off poultry for that matter, but it always seemed a big part of the ritual. Just earlier Abuelita told her that because of Dia de Los Muertos next week, she had additional séances 'by appointment' for those wishing to speak to the dead and make arrangements for the festival.

‘Tonight, I have some people coming over for the rituals for Los Muertos,’ she’d said.

‘Chicken for dinner, then?’ Clementine rolled her eyes. *Who seriously believes in this talking-to-the-dead stuff?*

‘Clementine!’ Her grandmother had looked stricken at her impudence, before breaking into a sly grin. ‘No. We have chicken the day after the sacrifices. I thought this time we’d have it grilled with corn.’ Clementine’s favourite. Abuelita then pulled her down for a hug and a smattering kisses, as she did several times a day, despite Clementine’s half-hearted protests. And, secretly, she loved these moments as much as her grandmother.

*Just six more days until I’m back in England*, she thought with a sigh. Back in her dorm room, where the windows rattled with the force of the Atlantic Ocean, and no one knew how to make tamales.

Another off-key hum. She thought about her dad, as the grass tickled her belly. Was he into chanting and a side order of mystic chicken wings where he was now? The thought made her smile for the briefest moment. *Are you with Mama?* She rolled over and lay flat on her back, textbook tossed to the side. Six months. For once, she let the tears run down her face, moving only when they began to pool in her ears.

Clementine tried to remember her mama and dad together in Mexico, when they had all lived together when she was still a small girl, but little of her memories made sense. Marigolds, blonde plaits, cinnamon. Her English father’s smile. Her Mexican mother’s kisses. She could recall clearest the clasp on the locket that Abuelita still wore now, a large triangle of the yellowest gold with odd inscriptions on it. Playing with it on the floor under her grandmother’s dressing table was one of Clementine’s earliest memories. It was strangely malleable, with a large oval dimple on one side that Clementine would rub with her eyes shut, like she might release a genie, before opening it up. Click, and snap. Click, and snap.

Clementine now blinked away the rare tears she had allowed herself, and wondered how long until the séance was over. The chanting had given way to Abuelita talking in a low voice. Clementine didn’t bother trying to make out what she said. Somewhere across the city, a clock rang for midnight. She glanced at her watch. 11.55 p.m. Another bell rang out, somewhere else. Then a minute passed and another rang.

Clementine remembered her grandmother telling her about the local tradition of ringing bells a minute apart leading up to the hour. The story went that many years ago, two priests of rival neighbourhood churches got into a furious row as each believed their bell chime was the finest. They kept setting their clocks a minute fast to ensure their bell chime was the first to ring. A furious war of attrition followed with each setting their clocks earlier and earlier, until the mayor finally snapped, after the town was called to attend a morning prayer almost a whole hour early at 4.05 a.m. He stopped the churches from changing their clocks, and each had to muffle their bells for a year. As a reminder, now each hour was marked for five minutes either side of the hour with a separate bell from each different church or tower. Only the town hall clock was set for exactly the correct time.

Clementine's response to this story was simply to comment that people were stupid about the stupidest things, and pick up her book again. Her grandmother had laughed. 'It's true. But now you know which bell to listen for to know the time here.'

'I have a watch.' Clementine had replied, shrugging. But she liked all these stories of local life in Mexico City. She felt more at home here than in England, though still clueless about all the local customs like with the clocks. She belonged with Abuelita. Even if she'd rather belong in a house where her grandmother wasn't apparently conjuring up the spirits of the dead.

She lay for another couple of minutes in the still heat, listlessly dozing as the range of bells gave a languid peal, before getting up. It was too dark now to read, even with the light from the solar lanterns in the garden. She decided to get a glass of juice. She hoped she could get into the kitchen through the side door without disturbing anyone at the dining table.

She opened the door quietly and walked on padded feet down the two wooden steps, through the hallway and into the kitchen. Abuelita was saying her goodbyes to her guests, who were preparing to leave.

'Si, it is so good that we could speak to your husband after so long, Evaline . . . Yes, let us do that again next time . . . Yes, Jorge. Sunday is the next one. No, I do not think I can call your terrier, Señorita.'

Clementine paid little attention to this. Instead, she stood in front of

the open refrigerator door, gulping down juice from the carton. It was dark, and if she peered beyond the sheen of refrigerated light on the window she could just make out the stars above the smog and lights of Mexico City.

She rubbed the tear-tracks on her face and took a deep breath.

The front door opened and closed a few times. Abuelita gave her final greetings, and then sighed as she put the door on the chain and turned the three locks beneath. Click. Click. Click.

It was quiet and dark. Clementine was about to speak up to let Abuelita know she was there but before she could make a sound she heard someone else speak, someone she had never heard before. The voice was quite distinctive. Clementine had the strange idea that it wasn't human before giving herself a little shake.

'Señorita.' It was a low rumbling voice. Clementine could hear it clearly even though she was in the other room. 'Prophetess of Chiacutl.' *It must be someone who doesn't know Abuelita well.* She only went by that name on her cards, and on that stupid creaking sign outside. *But why did she lock the door if someone was still here?*

'What an honour it is to be called by you.' That was Abuelita's voice but, contrary to her words, she didn't sound very honoured at all. Suspicious, more like.

'The pleasure is all mine. I see these days you are performing parlour tricks?' There was a pause but Abuelita made no reply. 'But then we have all fallen on hard times.'

'Not you, though,' said Abuelita, softly.

The voice laughed now, a rumbling threat like the start of a thunderstorm. 'Ha, yes. As you say. Not me.'

'Why have you come?'

'Because I am giving you a final opportunity to use your talents for the bigger cause.'

'No.'

'You'll be on the losing side.'

'There are no sides, only gods and monsters. I know what I'd be if I helped you.'

'If I need you, I shall take you by force.'

Clementine froze, the hum of the open door forgotten, the carton

only loosely in her grip. She looked around in the dull blue light cast by the fridge for something, anything she could use as a weapon, to take out whoever was on the other side of the door.

Abuelita said nothing.

‘Or maybe I’ll take something else precious to you.’

‘No!’ Abuelita suddenly sounded desperate. ‘You know as well as I do what was written. Do you really want to start that chain of events?’

The voice laughed again. ‘You have to admit, the odds will still be stacked in my favour.’

‘You do not know that.’ Abuelita’s voice was quiet, wary now.

A mocking laugh. ‘Barely thirteen revolutions of the fifth sun?’

‘You can’t!’ Abuelita’s voice again.

‘Join me.’

Abuelita said nothing for a moment. When she spoke her voice was hard and sharp, like it strained her to speak. ‘No. No, I have faith in other higher powers. You will lose.’

There was a knock at the door. Clementine found she couldn’t recall why she was in the kitchen. Knock, knock again. *I must have come down to answer the door.* Clementine dutifully went to answer.

Click. Click. Click. She undid the locks and pulled at the door.

‘No!’ said Abuelita, from somewhere behind her. ‘Clementina—’

There was no one there, so Clementine stepped beyond the threshold to see who might have knocked.

And then there was a man, barely illuminated by the light from behind her. She saw he was pointing a gun at her.

The man looked at her for the briefest of moments, a searching look on his face, as if he was looking for some acknowledgement to a question only he knew the answer to. Then he said, ‘It begins.’

The last thing she heard seemed to last for seconds and seconds, the click of the magazine, the pull of the trigger, and the rebound of the bullet that crackled through the air. There were two bullets. One entered her chest, with a sickening splinter of bones and a giving of sinew, which threw her onto her knees. She listed. Her senses dimmed almost immediately. She was left with the fleeting impression of a ferrous bitterness in her throat and all that remained were sounds from within.

A final hiss of a lung, which hung in her ribcage like a parachute silk caught on a tree.

Somewhere within herself she felt her forehead sting, a crisp sharp sensation, and instinct made her last movement on earth to touch where the second bullet had grazed her temple. There was a last intake of air that simply caught in her throat, a frozen stone of breath and blood.

She wanted to scream at Abuelita to get away; he would kill her too . . . but she made no sound. Instead the wind spoke for her, and blew the leaves from the trees across the entrance way and across her body, which was now below her with her face frozen in an expression of defiance even now, when all mortal defiance had bled from her.

People across the street were running towards Abuelita's doorstep where Clementine lay. Abuelita herself was bent low over Clementine's body and talking to it, tears streaming down her face. She touched her golden locket, tumbling from the chain, now smeared with Clementine's blood.

'Abuelita, I'm here. I'm here behind you!'

Despite the late hour there was a commotion, and people on phones, someone taking Clementine's pulse which had already faded away from Clementine's body. No one seemed to really notice Abuelita turn towards where Clementine was standing, not quite looking at her and calling out.

'Abuelita! Don't leave me. Let's—'

But Abuelita was already speaking, not to where Clementine was stood, but where Clementine's body was sprawled on the pavement below.

'Clementina, Clementina. I did not want it to happen like this. Give your tributes to the exiled goddess Xochiquetzal. Tell her you are mine and defy Mictl . . . '

And before her grandmother had finished, people were gathering Abuelita up in an embrace, crying together, and someone was covering Clementine's chest and face with a jacket, and the earthly world faded to the black of the night sky above.

## CHAPTER TWO – CLEMENTINE DEAD

After what might have been minutes or eons, Clementine felt herself take a shuddering breath, as if she were coming up for air from a deep cold

stream. The surrounding dark glinted with pins of light that hurt to look at. Pressed in her hand was Abuelita's locket of gold but now it had a ruby eye, and three turquoise hands. Ahead of her was a bridge of pixelated light. Images of her throughout her life were playing on video screens like a rainbow – jerky, stretched and moving from scene to scene at random.

She realised she was in a pool of purple-black waters, and hauled herself out. The moment she emerged she was dry and she could see down through the pool to her body lying on the pavement below. She put her hand back into the water to reach back and it immediately turned to glass at her touch. She stared at the dancing video panels across the bridge and back at her other self under the glass a thousand fathoms below.

Clementine realised then she was properly, actually dead. There was no return. No one was going to resuscitate her. No magic kiss from a prince. She had been killed on the steps of her grandmother's house, at thirteen. She dropped flat onto the glass and cried bitter, streaming tears of anger.

*This is so unfair. What the hell did I do?*

Cloudy memories of Abuelita and a disembodied voice crowded her consciousness.

Someone wanted Abuelita.

*Did he kill her too? No. No, he left after he shot her.*

*Did he think I was Abuelita? No, he got a good look at me.*

*Was I killed as a warning to Abuelita?*

And something else. Something about a goddess.

None of it would come straight in her head.

It was wrong. All of it. And now she was dead.

She slammed a fist down in anger. The locket fell from her grasp and clinked onto the glass below. Though the room was black, illuminated only by the dancing pixels beyond, they caught the ruby in the locket and it lit up like fire.

Clementine wiped away her tears and stared. She recognised the ruby eye, held by three pairs of turquoise hands. It was the symbol of an ancient Mexican goddess. Abuelita had them all over her house. Swallowing down a leaden lump of painful remembrance, she traced the ruby with her finger. What had Abuelita said? *'Pay tributes to the exiled goddess someone-or-the-other.'* Maybe the goddess knew why she was killed? She wished her dad were here.

Clementine sat up and stared at the rainbow bridge ahead. Who knew there was an afterlife? And yet, here she was. Dead . . . and yet not gone. She stood up and tried to check herself over but each time she tried to concentrate on a part of herself, she seemed to fade and dance like the video screens. The only thing she could truly perceive was the golden locket. There was only one thing to do. Go find that goddess and ask her to help Abuelita.

Clementine walked towards the bridge.

Gingerly she put a foot on it, wondering if it was an actual, physical thing.

The video screens continued to dance and flicker. Clementine as a little girl, bronzed sun-whipped skin and no front teeth, in her garden. Clementine fighting with the neighbourhood boy that snatched her friend's doll. Clementine at eleven in her new school blazer she wore like a felt straitjacket, her black hair forced into a plait it rebelled against. Clementine huddled alone in the school trunk room, hiding her tears after her dad's funeral.

Clementine walked onto the bridge.

As she began to climb the bridge twisted and changed shape around her. She realised with a jolt of fear each plate slipped away as she lifted her weight off it. Clementine looked around her. Below her was pins of starlight and above her was a distant swirl of galaxies but each time she looked directly at any, they faded away. There was nothing to do but walk on.

The videos continued to dance and change under her feet. Clementine in shorts clutching her Santa Muerto doll. Clementine's mother putting a garland of flowers around Clementine's neck and kissing each eyelid of her liquid, brown eyes. Clementine spinning in an enormous leather chair that swallowed her up, in her father's office at the hospital.

Clementine walked over the bridge.

And then there was the door. It was an opening of burning silver white light, which seemed to be cut into the fabric of time and the universe itself. Clementine reached it, almost unable to look at it any more because of how it hurt her eyes, but she still hesitated before stepping through.

*But, if there really is an afterlife, maybe I could see Dad again?*

She took one last look behind her, at the stars, where the bridge had been, with its bright dancing screens that had sunk slowly away until the only plate left was the one she was stood on.

‘Goodbye, Abuelita,’ she whispered. ‘I love you.’

Clementine walked off the bridge.

She was swallowed up by the liquid, silver light.

### CHAPTER THREE – THE CONCIERGE

‘Miss Quick?’

‘Hmm?’ Clementine’s eyes began to focus as she realised she was now on a seat under a window. Dull light pooled on the stone flagstones, dust dancing, but she felt cold. This was like Abuelita’s house in winter. In front of her was a . . . She squinted again, trying to force her eyes to adjust to the gloom. It was a skeleton, in a bellboy’s uniform, complete with a pot of tea on a tray. He seemed a little unsure of himself, and was peering closely at her though he clearly had empty sockets.

He pulled himself a little straighter and began to speak:

‘Miss Quick. I, um, understand your death may have come as something of a shock. I have instructions that you should drink this tea before we move onto the . . .’

‘Wait. Hang on. I mean . . . Where am I? I was in Ciudad de México . . .’ Clementine peered into the gloom again, still unable to recognise any of the features of her surroundings, ‘. . . and clearly I’m not now.’

‘Errr. Well.’ The skeleton fiddled a little with his tray and then he smiled in what would have been a reassuring way, if he’d had a face. Instead, he just pressed his molars together, reminding Clementine of a dentist’s waiting room and its smell of pink mouthwash.

‘Miss Quick, welcome to our Orientation Centre here at Mictlan Enterprise! My name is Orson and I’m your concierge for your stay here. You must be tired after your journey. Though I suppose there were not too many problems for your cross—’

Clementine couldn’t help cutting in. ‘My stay here? I’m not staying. I have to find my dad. Help my Abuelita. There was this man with a gun and—’

‘Ah, yes.’ Orson looked at her with what she assumed was sympathy,

from his tilted skull. ‘I read in the file about your death. And I promise I will do my very best to reunite you with your family as soon as I am able. But that will take a short while and in the meantime —’ he seemed to be working the conversation back onto a track that he felt comfortable with — ‘let me be the first to welcome you here, to your new home town.’

*OK, I’ll bite. For now.* ‘Home town? But where exactly am I?’

Orson gestured around him with his hand. ‘Why the Underworld, Miss Quick. A place of leisure and comfort for all.’ Clementine found herself goggling, mouth agape.

‘The Underworld? An actual Underworld — like in stories?’

“‘Where all souls find eternal entertainment.’ That’s our company motto!’ Orson said, brightly.

‘The Underworld. But . . . ’ Another thought wrestled for control of Clementine’s brain. “‘Where all souls find eternal entertainment’”? Not “eternal rest”? Or, I don’t know, “recuperation before moving on again”?’

‘No, no,’ the skeleton replied, moving to pour out the tea and press a cup into Clementine’s hand. ‘Company research found—’

But before he could continue Clementine let out a yelp as she looked down at her hands holding the cup.

‘Oh, gosh, sorry!’ Orson moved to take the cup from her. ‘Was it too hot? I sometimes make it too hot. Sorry!’

‘No! It’s . . . I’m a skeleton.’ Clementine stared down at her ribcage and through that to her feet. It made her feel slightly sick. She turned over her hands one at time, flexing her fingers, and looked at the ivory bones that now made up her form.

‘Oh, yes. About that.’ Orson smiled a bit sheepishly. ‘I was just getting to that bit in the orientation . . . This bit of the Underworld is between the Land of the Living and the Land of the Dead. In the Land of the Living we appear in our earthly form. That is, well, skeletal.’ Orson nodded his head like that settled the matter but Clementine just stared.

‘Oh, well, never mind. You’ll be able to catch up on all the details later. Anyway, drink that tea. It’s “good for the soul”.’ He gave a nervous laugh. ‘That’s another Mictlan Enterprise catchphrase. And . . . ’ He leaned forward conspiratorially and continued in a low voice, ‘It’s tricky to carry a pot up nine floors, balanced on a small tray, when you’re a skeleton. This

is only the second time I've managed to bring up a whole mugful and I've been working as a concierge for six months.'

Clementine sat back weakly in her chair and began to sip the warm liquid. It was sweet but curiously without any other flavour. Questions spun in her head, too tangled to become fully formed enough to ask out loud.

Orson stayed quiet and simply watched her. Clearly they weren't going anywhere without her finishing this sugar tea. Clementine drained the cup, feeling the liquid somehow dissipating around her non-existent form, and looked at him.

'So, what next?' she said. 'I really want to find my da—'

'Now it's time for the orientation proper. Please follow me . . . '

Orson pressed an inlaid stone button that Clementine hadn't noticed before and doors to an elevator opened. She felt herself raise an eyebrow, despite knowing it couldn't be seen.

'I thought you had to carry that tray up nine flights of stairs?'

'I did. Our lifts only go down,' Orson replied, giving her a small nod to follow him.

'Oh.' *How can a lift only go down?*

Clementine followed the concierge into the lift, though walking felt slightly stiff and unnatural at the moment, and watched as he pressed the button for floor 9. The lift glided downwards and opened with a *bing* as they reached their destination. Orson stepped out with Clementine close behind. She looked up, and gasped.

## THE UNWILLING GODDESS by Relly Annett-Baker

### SYNOPSIS

Thirteen-year-old Clementine lives in Mexico with her grandmother who claims to speak to the dead. After a bizarre séance, Clementine finds herself in a modern Aztec Underworld. When the bureaucrats won't help her, Clementine breaks out and uncovers the Underworld gods' plan to wreak havoc for the living. She must now fight the God of Death himself, in the only place and time she can. Mexico City, Dia de los Muertos. Just three days away.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Relly Annett-Baker lives with a marvellous menagerie of mammals, including a husband and two beautiful boys. She's worked as a content strategist, writer and speaker all over the world for government, science labs, environmental charities, but her first love is stories.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'The first line is terrific. Interesting exotic background. I like the way Gran is both earthy and mystical.'

'Alice in Wonderland does Day of the Dead! Very atmospheric and poised. The Mexican setting was unusual and I felt this was at the older end of YA.'

'Really unusual modern land of the dead story – totally interesting and unexpected.'

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# STEEL TANYA

By Anna Bowles

*Tanya, Leningrad, March 1937*

Footsteps on the stairs after midnight meant they were coming.

I'd made up my bed beside the dining table as usual, and I was trying to drop off in spite of Papa's snoring when I heard the distant sound. First the big outside door, and then the footsteps. On other nights they'd got to the first or second floor, and stopped. This time they climbed right up to our landing, and kept on getting closer, passing the half-dozen flats nearer the stairs than us.

I knew they couldn't be coming for my family. We were good people. My parents were leading workers. I was an excellent student, headed for university in six months' time, and sure to be granted Communist Party membership as soon as I was old enough.

They could not be coming for us.

## PART 1

### Chapter 1

And they weren't, quite.

I knew for sure when the bell of our communal apartment rang for the third time. There was a note pinned outside saying how many times to ring for the different residents. Two was us, and three was the Zucker family.

Of course they were the ones the police wanted. Hermann Zucker was a Communist Party member, but he was also German. A foreigner.

So everything was fine.

Still, in the moonlight that came around the curtain, I could see Papa

was out of bed and fumbling for the little case he kept packed with food and his spare shirt just in case he was arrested in the night. He sat on the edge of the bed clutching this bag as the bell rang three more times. I saw his shoulders slump a little with relief as it sank in that the police were not here for him.

On the bed beside Papa, Mama was praying, as if that would help.

I crossed the room as quietly as I could, and sat on the chair beside the bed. Mama gripped my knee.

‘It’s all right,’ I murmured. ‘It’s for the Zuckers, not us. Or maybe it’s a mistake. Maybe it’s just drunk hooligans.’

‘It’s the secret police,’ she said.

Papa made a sarcastic noise. ‘And they never get drunk.’

The sound of our voices, even whispering, made everything feel just a little more normal, though I wished my parents would be careful what they said. Papa was a Hero of Labour, who’d received the Order of Lenin medal, but the NKVD didn’t care about things like that if they suspected you of anti-communist activity.

Then someone started to bang on the door, hard.

It wasn’t long before one of the neighbours let the police in. It was Dunya Melnikova, the informer. She must have seen the Zuckers doing something suspicious, and reported them.

As her footsteps retreated, heavy boots tramped into the apartment hall. I thought they’d start banging again, on the door opposite ours, but apparently the Zuckers had got the message, and opened up.

Pavel, their little boy, began to cry.

He was eight, and a bit behind for his age. Just that evening I’d been reading to him and showing him how to tie his scarf properly, to practise for when he could join the Pioneers. Now secret policemen were ransacking his family’s room.

What on earth had his parents done? There must have been something. Were they hiding illegal books? The NKVD always found things like that. Always.

The Zuckers and the police were talking, and there was the sound of furniture being shifted around in a search. Our neighbours spoke too quietly for me to hear them, and the police sounded almost bored as they

ordered the couple to empty out drawers, and the senior officer told his junior to rifle through the blankets.

The noise of Pavel's sobbing cut through everything else.

I looked towards the framed print of Comrade Stalin and Mayor Zhdanov that hung above our dining table, although I could barely see it in the dark. The Party taught us to help the weak. At school, I was fearless, and people followed my lead. So I should lead here.

'Pavel shouldn't see this,' I said in an undertone. 'I'm going to get him. The police will be glad to have him out of the way.'

'Tatiana, no!' Mama snapped.

'Don't attract their attention,' warned Papa.

I hesitated. My parents were worrying unnecessarily, because the police would never arrest a member of the Communist Youth League.

A member of the Communist Youth League shouldn't interfere with them, either.

I went over to the window instead, moved aside my soldering iron and bolt tray, and sat on the sill. The blocks opposite ours were dark and silent. The street below was dimly lit from the lamps on the main road, and I could just see a parked van that said 'BREAD' on the side in white letters.

I knew it was really a prison truck, the kind people called Black Crows. That was a fanciful name, like something out of the fairy-tale book Pavel's mother had given him, all about princes and magic birds and Baba Yaga, the scary witch who lived in an absurd house that walked on chicken's feet. I tried to teach him the periodic table and pass on the stories I'd learned as a child at creche, all about how little Lenin had shared his toys with his comrades, but Pavel always got me to read him bourgeois fairy tales instead.

I thought of how I'd promised to teach him to skate, but had never found time.

'I'll skate across the Baltic!' he'd said, kicking his heels against the legs of my family's dining table.

'The whole sea doesn't freeze, silly,' I'd told him. 'Anyway, if you did that you'd end up in a capitalist country. They roast children.'

Pavel giggled. 'And eat them with dumplings.'

'They don't have dumplings,' I said. 'The capitalist bosses starve the workers, so there's nothing to eat over there! Except children.'

I roared. Pavel was a bit too old for me to chase him, but I'd done it anyway.

Out in the corridor, I heard a child's scream.

Suddenly people were spilling out of the Zuckers' room. Pavel's mother was trying to comfort him: 'It's just a mistake, little Pavel, little Pavlushka. We're innocent. It will all be sorted out. We'll be back soon.'

'You won't!' Pavel cried. 'They'll kill you! They'll shoot Papa!'

'Get off!' an unfamiliar male voice snapped. 'Stupid brat. Can't you control him?'

I gripped the windowsill. I was not afraid of the police. I'd known they wouldn't come for my family, and they hadn't. Investigating foreigners was an important part of their job, and I would let them do it.

There was more commotion, and Pavel's wailing became muffled. I realised the NKVD had opened the door by the coat rack and shoved him into the Lukin sisters' room.

'Yes, stay with Auntie Galina and Auntie Elena!' his mother called after him. 'Just for tonight! We'll be back very soon!'

'NOOO!' Pavel cried.

'Can't I just stay for—' started his mother.

'Don't try any tricks,' said the senior NKVD man, who sounded angry and bored at the same time. 'You're enemies of the people. Appeal to the prosecutor, not me.'

I heard footsteps heading down the apartment corridor, and then outside towards the stairs.

The raid was over.

Pavel was with the Lukins, and as Galina Lukin was a doctor, that made sense. Perhaps I could take him some of his toys and books . . . but when my father went out into the corridor and motioned for me and Mama to follow I saw that the NKVD men had placed a big red seal on the Zuckers' door. There was no way I could get in. I decided I'd get him a book from the library tomorrow, a healthy one instead of the bourgeois deviations he usually read.

As if that would really help with this.

Papa cleared his throat loudly.

'So the Zuckers have turned out to be a harmful element,' he said.

'Yes, it's shocking,' agreed my mother, dully.

They were talking that way because of Dunya the informer. She was hiding in her room, no doubt listening to everything.

‘We must be vigilant against reactionary forces!’ I said.

We went back into our room.

‘Do you really think the Zuckers are spies?’ I asked my parents.

I spoke quietly, but saying anything at all felt dangerous.

Mama looked away. Moonlight lit the side of her face.

‘They say there are spies everywhere,’ she muttered at last. ‘I . . . don’t know.’

‘The communists say a lot of things,’ Papa replied.

I hated it when my parents talked like that, though I knew it wasn’t their fault. Everyone was a communist, or they were if they wanted a future, and I certainly did. But my parents had been born long before the Revolution and hadn’t had the benefit of living in a Party crèche as young children. Papa had been forced to work in a factory from the age of eleven. Mama’s parents had had a bit of money but she only got three years’ schooling because they didn’t believe in educating girls. She’d been married before she met Papa, and her children had starved during the Civil War.

Sitting on our dining table now was a basket with two hunks of bread left over from dinner. I was studying to get on the engineering programme at Leningrad State University. Communism meant education and peace and food.

But enemies were constantly trying to undermine our glorious system, so there were more and more arrests in the night.

‘The NKVD will conduct a fair and proper investigation into the Zuckers’ case,’ I said. ‘If it’s a mistake they’ll simply be questioned and sent home.’

‘Let’s get back to sleep,’ said Papa. ‘I’m on the day shift tomorrow.’

‘It’s all over now,’ said Mama, who sometimes talked to me as if she thought I was still ten.

I lay back down on my ottoman-bed and pulled the covers over my face. Outside, the engine of the Black Crow started up, and I listened as the Zuckers were driven away. After that, there was silence. Papa wasn’t snoring. Even Pavel had stopped crying. Dr Galina Lukin had probably given him an injection to make him sleep.

Was it possible that my neighbours, people I'd lived with for years, were spies?

Yes, it was possible. Dunya was half-crazy, but there must have been real evidence for the police to listen to her. And the Zuckers had gone suspiciously meekly, hardly resisting at all. Hermann Zucker headed the language department in my school, and always went on about how German was the best language in the world. His wife worked in the accounts section at a textile factory, and only last week there had been newspaper articles about how wreckers and saboteurs had infested the cloth industry but were being rooted out by the brave officers of the NKVD. Since the assassination of our beloved Mayor Kirov, the people of Leningrad and our new leadership had redoubled their efforts against the spies and fascists skulking in our midst. Every day new terrorist outrages were reported on the radio – plots to kill workers by sabotaging machinery, or weaken our government by selling secrets to the fascist West. Only rigorous vigilance could keep the first workers' state in the world safe from its enemies.

Yet fear was creeping over the city. My parents whispered to each other in private, and seldom to me. With my friends, I was the one who made sure no one said anything dangerous. You never knew quite who you could trust.

Armed men had burst into our flat. The footsteps and the voices echoed in my head.

Eventually I drifted towards sleep. All this was necessary to protect our people. I would find some way to help Pavel. They hadn't come for my family yet.

## Chapter 2

When I woke up the next morning it was a cold, bright spring day. I had one moment of not thinking anything, and then it all came back.

The Zuckers had been arrested. The Zuckers were enemies of the people.

And if the authorities believed they were, a good communist like me had to believe it too.

'Tanya! Tanyushka, come on.' Mama was standing beside me, shaking my toe, which stuck out of the blankets. 'You don't want to be late for school.'

I squinted at the clock, ignoring the little toy train that Pavel had left perched on top of it. I wasn't late at all, but I knew what Mama was really trying to say: take special care today. We had a joint Communist Party and Communist Youth League meeting, and I would be expected to give a report on our campaign to bring literacy to the peasants in the villages outside Leningrad. That was routine, except that this time everyone would be looking at me out of the corners of their eyes because I happened to live in the same flat as an arrested man.

I'd have to make clear I was not associated with him.

I sat up right away and said, 'Oh yes, I've got an important maths test first thing!'

'I'm sure you've studied hard,' Mama replied.

Of course I had. We lived in one room, so she saw me doing it.

I smiled back at her, and ignored her swollen red eyes.

Papa started muttering to Mama as they got dressed behind the little curtain. I was afraid he'd say something aloud about the Zuckers.

I just wanted to get out of there. At school, surely I'd feel more like myself.

So while Mama was in the kitchen heating porridge and Papa was in the bathroom, I pulled my clothes on quickly. It meant going out hungry, but I'd done that plenty of times as a kid, and I wasn't heading straight for school anyway.

Instead, I picked my way across the ice that had refrozen under the thawed spring slush and made for the home of my best friend, Marksena Radunovsky.

She was called that because her parents were such zealous communists they'd combined 'Marx' and 'Engels' to make her name. Her father was a senior commissar and head of the regional supplies office, which made him a powerful man in a city where there were shortages. It seemed uncommunist, but sometimes I got things via Marksena's family, so it wouldn't have been right to criticise.

My parents' room was down a side road in an old mansion that used to belong to some rich people who'd been kicked out during the Revolution. Now that it was split into dozens of communal flats, it didn't really get looked after and everything was crumbling. But things were different for the Radunovskys. Marksena's big family had a flat to themselves in a smart

new building in the centre of the built-up part of Vassilevsky Island.

I always liked going through the grand doors of the block and ignoring the grumpy old porter, who'd been some kind of servant to aristocrats in pre-revolutionary days and obviously didn't think much of the new order. But he didn't dare actually insult a friend of a commissar's family. There was even an electric lift, which I normally loved riding.

That morning though, I spent my time in the lift thinking about it being stuffed full of NKVD men as it creaked its way up and down the six-storey building in the night. Might the police arrest people even here?

It occurred to me that I was coming to the Radunovskys' flat unusually early, and might give the commissar a scare. Marksena was her father's favourite, so he liked me too, but he wouldn't thank me for that. So as soon as I got to their big double door, I rapped the knocker and rang the bell at the same time as shouting, 'Hey, Marksena!' so everyone would know it was only me and nothing was wrong.

I could hear my friend come flying down the corridor inside, calling something to her mother. The door popped open – she always did things in such a hurry, it made me laugh – and I stumbled in, pulling off one of my boots on the way.

Suddenly I was almost happy. Sun came in at the window of the Radunovskys' kitchen, which they didn't have to share with any other families, and spilled over the coats and bags hanging in the corridor. Marksena took my boots from me, grinned from under her blonde wavy hair and said, 'Tanyushka – you . . . '

She trailed off. I was trying to smile, but she could always tell when I was upset.

I hated all this. My life was supposed to be about friends and rifle practice and dances and May Day parades and studying for university. Not fear and spies and raids, and my best friend looking at me the way she was now.

'It's the Zuckers,' I said. My voice sounded far louder and more upset than I'd planned.

Marksena's little brother and sisters were peering out of their bedroom at me. Her mother and grandmother were in the kitchen.

Everyone heard me. All the adults would understand.

I was suddenly terrified of what they might say. Would they think I was tainted? Would they turn their backs on me?

Marksena never would.

‘My God,’ she muttered. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘What am I going to do?’ I repeated in the same undertone. ‘Go to school as normal, of course. Act like it’s nothing to do with me.’

Marksena, who was always soft-hearted, looked a little shocked. Did she think I had a choice? After a moment, she seemed to realise I didn’t.

‘Of course. You have to look after yourself. Don’t answer any questions. After all, they’re just your neighbours.’

‘Yes. Besides, they’re bourgeois. He teaches foreign languages and she’s an accountant, educated before the Revolution!’ I said. ‘He’s German! Nothing could happen to good Russian factory workers like my parents.’

I wanted to sound confident, but I was failing. Marksena knew that my parents sometimes said odd things. Her own family used outdated religious expressions in the safety of their flat.

‘No, it couldn’t,’ Marksena assured me, then paused. ‘My father would help. I’d *make* him.’

I tried to smile again.

‘Come and have breakfast!’ Marksena urged me, back to her normal, chirpy self. ‘Mama made pancakes.’

Just then, Marksena’s littlest sister came toddling up. She was warm, and creased, and sleepy, and had her favourite ragdoll clutched in a little fist.

Tears welled up in my eyes. I hid them as I bent down to hug the little girl, and fuss with her doll. Then I willed my eyes dry, because I had to.

‘You know I love pancakes,’ I said.

## **STEEL TANYA by Anna Bowles**

### **SYNOPSIS**

In Leningrad during Stalin's Purges, committed communist Tanya, seventeen, dreams of becoming an engineer. Instead, when her parents are arrested she becomes an outcast, expelled from school and then from a factory job. With her beliefs shattered, she takes refuge working in a theatre with an old friend, only to learn that her father has been executed. The city dignitaries are coming to the play, and Tanya is in the lighting rig, with a rifle.

### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

Anna Bowles likes chocolate, cuddly hippos and reading depressing Russian novels in the original language. She's a professional editor, but thinks writing is a lot more fun.

### **JUDGES' COMMENTS**

'Set in Leningrad in 1938 this might have been a scene from a terrifying dystopian YA and I loved that aspect. Tanya is brilliantly convincing as a young teen, raised and brainwashed by the communist state. This is a very well done opening.'

'Very good and informative on historical context without delivering a lesson. Great atmosphere and anguish.'

'Tough and gritty story about perennial decisions about loyalty/government authority and peer pressures – movingly done.'

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# SECRET MAGIC: THE THREAD FAIRY ADVENTURES

By Kerry Cassidy

## Chapter One

“Happy birthday, Gabriella,” Miss Harrogate said, smiling at the class. Gabriella looked at the cake in front of her but didn’t speak. To give the game away now would spell disaster! Her glittering wings shook with excitement.

Every fairy in the class stared at the cake as if it were already casting a spell. The gooey lilac icing looked perfect with the eight pink candles. Someone’s stomach gave a loud rumble. The icing gave a magical shimmer and Gabriella crossed her fingers. *Oh, please let it work!*

With her blonde curls hiding her face, she whispered the magic words to release the spell. *Whoosh!* Lilac glitter shot up out of the icing then zoomed around the room like a firework. It was working!

“Gabriella Winton, what have you done?” Miss Harrogate gasped. “How many times have I told you? No more spells in class!”

Too late now. The glitter sped around the room, touching every pencil on every desk. The glitter disappeared into the pencils. And, for a moment, nothing happened. Gabriella counted in her head – one, two, three . . .

The pencils jumped upright all at the same time, like a choir standing to sing. And then they did sing! The pencils had tiny faces and they opened their mouths wide to chant “Happy Birthday” in squeaky voices. Most of the fairies joined in – even Miss Harrogate. Everyone clapped as the song finished. This was the best birthday ever!

“Very good, Gabriella.” Miss Harrogate smiled kindly at Gabriella. “Now let’s have some cake.” Miss Harrogate turned her back on the pencils and went to cut the cake.

“Well excuse me but we ain’t finished yet!” the tallest pencil (a red one) shouted and the other pencils bounced to gather around him.

“Gabriella, that’s enough. You can stop the spell now,” Miss Harrogate said and started to cut the cake. Gabriella muttered the spell again.

“We ain’t ready to be switched off yet. Oh no! Ready, boys?” The pencils kept bumping into each other as they excitedly started to sing again.

“Gabriella, Gabriella,  
Who’s gonna tell her?  
You think she’s odd, you think she’s strange,  
All of that’s about to change!  
Three hundred years we’ve had to wait.  
Gabriella, you’re awful late!  
Gabriella, Gabriella!”

Gabriella could feel her cheeks start to burn. She wasn’t odd or strange – was she? Some of her classmates sniggered and her face glowed hotter.

“Gabriella, end the spell this minute. We have heard enough,” Miss Harrogate said, putting her hands on her hips.

Gabriella said the spell louder but still nothing happened. “I’ve tried but it isn’t working.” She tried to get closer to the pencils and say the spell again but they bounced away, laughing at her. She looked back at Miss Harrogate. “They won’t stop!”

Miss Harrogate huffed, pulled her wand out of her grey bun and pointed it at the pencils.

“I don’t think so, lady, we got a song just for you!” The red pencil tapped three times to count them in.

“Miss Harrogate, Miss Harrogate,  
Her students think she’s great,  
But such a shame, oh what a fix,  
Her magic gets in such a mix!  
Cat to dog and black to white,  
Miss Harrogate can’t get it right!”

Pencils set off in all directions, bouncing around the room. The red

pencil landed in the cake and flicked icing in the direction of Miss Harrogate! The fairies gasped – how naughty!

“How dare you? Gabriella, stop this spell NOW!” Miss Harrogate shouted. Gabriella blinked back tears. Miss Harrogate had never shouted at her before – in fact Miss Harrogate never shouted at anyone.

“Stop it!” Gabriella screamed as a pencil jabbed her in the ribs. This spell wasn’t going to plan at all. Gabriella grabbed her wand to give the spell more power.

“Singerella pencil power!” She waved the wand at the pencils and they all toppled over with a clatter. It was done – the pencils were just pencils once more. Thank goodness.

The fairies weren’t giggling now, they were staring at Gabriella. Had she gone too far this time? Gabriella exchanged a look with Molly, her best friend in the whole kingdom. Molly was biting her lip and trying not to laugh. She was the smallest fairy in the class but had the biggest smile and the best hair. Dark and shiny smooth, not tangled curls like Gabriella’s own.

Miss Harrogate was wiping icing from her clothes and Gabriella couldn’t tell if she was going to burst into tears or explode.

“I’m sorry, Miss Harrogate. It was just a bit of fun,” Gabriella said.

“Fun? *Fun?*” Miss Harrogate clenched her fists at her sides. “I have never been so insulted by an . . . an object!” Her face was now the same purple as their school uniform dresses. Gabriella decided not to point this out.

“Such a shame, oh what a fix, her magic gets in such a mix,” someone at the back of the class whispered rather loudly. There was a ripple of sniggering. They all knew that Miss Harrogate wasn’t the best at spells (actually she was terrible at spells) but they would never have sung it out loud.

“That is enough! I never want to hear that song again. Do I make myself clear?” Miss Harrogate’s hands were shaking as she picked up the knife to cut the cake. “Collect a piece of cake and you may leave.”

Gabriella collected her bag and went to go with Molly.

“Not you, Gabriella.”

Gabriella sighed and turned back. She could hear her classmates in the

corridor, their volume turned to loud the moment they left the classroom.

Only Molly had waited for her. “It’ll be OK, Gabby. You can’t get into *too* much trouble on your birthday,” she said.

“Do you think so?” Gabriella wasn’t convinced and Molly didn’t look sure.

“Molly, come on! You don’t want to get into trouble.” Nadine was at the door, calling to Molly. She pulled a face at Gabriella whilst Molly wasn’t looking. Nadine had a big bushy ponytail like a squirrel and Gabriella would have liked to yank it hard.

Molly hesitated but then muttered, “I’d better go.”

Nadine gave Gabriella a smug smile as she hooked her arm through Molly’s and led her from the room. The classroom was very quiet all of a sudden. Gabriella fiddled with the silver belt on her uniform dress.

“Gabriella, you have been told so many times about spells in class.” Miss Harrogate shook her head.

“When I tested it they just sang happy birthday.” Gabriella tried to think of excuses but couldn’t think of a good one. “I didn’t mean them to be rude – honestly I didn’t.” *And what were they talking about, waiting three hundred years?* She was only eight! She picked up the red pencil, licked off the icing and popped him into her pocket.

“You never do mean it!” Miss Harrogate said, putting on her cardigan. “Come on – Miss Dazzleday will have to be told.”

Gabriella wasn’t sure but it sounded like Miss Harrogate added, “*Unfortunately.*” Maybe she didn’t want to see headmistress either.

It was only a week since Gabriella had found a great potion for drinking water that turned your tongue blue. Everyone had liked it. Well, nearly everyone. A couple of fairies had drunk a lot of water and got a tummy ache but really that wasn’t *her* fault. Miss Dazzleday hadn’t seen it that way though. She had warned Gabriella that if she saw her in her office again there would be trouble. Gabriella took a deep breath. She was about to find out just how much trouble.

## Chapter Two

Miss Dazzleday was as different from the previous headmistress as chocolate and sprouts – and she was definitely the sprouts! No grey dresses and

kind smiles for Miss Dazzleday. Her red dress matched her nails perfectly and her lips were a thin red line. Even her wings seemed to have a red shimmer today.

“Gabriella Winton. Here you are again. You’d better come in.” She turned on her red high heels and swept to a large chair behind her very large desk. “Have *we* lost control of our class *again*, Miss Harrogate?”

Miss Harrogate spluttered, opening her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. She sat down in the chair opposite the headmistress and brushed at her skirt. Gabriella thought Miss Dazzleday’s eyebrows would disappear into her hair if they went any higher.

“Gabriella, the face of an angel with the mischief of a goblin. Perhaps you can tell me what you have done now?” Miss Dazzleday transferred her glare from Miss Harrogate to Gabriella.

Maybe if she just owned up it wouldn’t be so bad. It was worth a shot. “I did a little spell for my birthday,” Gabriella said, trying to look sorry. “And it went a bit wrong.”

Miss Harrogate cleared her throat. “Gabriella has been told not to play tricks in class again.”

“Well it is for you to stop her! You are in charge of your class, are you not?” Miss Dazzleday looked down her nose at them both.

“Well yes but Gabriella is . . . is . . . different,” Miss Harrogate stammered.

Gabriella shuffled her feet, rubbing at a dirty mark on the rug. She wasn’t enjoying this at all. Miss Harrogate was her favourite teacher and it somehow felt as if they were both in trouble.

“Different?” Miss Dazzleday tapped her nails on the desk. “So tell me how you were *different* today, Gabriella?”

“I made all the pencils sing but they wouldn’t stop.” She shrugged. “It was meant to be funny.”

Miss Dazzleday looked at Gabriella as if she were a stain on her dress. “Miss Harrogate, could you tell me exactly what happened?”

Reluctantly, Miss Harrogate explained about the pencils and their rude song, her face getting redder and redder.

Miss Dazzleday smiled behind her hand. “So you are telling me that a group of pencils accused you of poor magical talents?”

Miss Harrogate stared at the floor. Gabriella felt the red pencil in her pocket and could have snapped him in half for being so rude. Miss Harrogate's hands shook as she folded them in her lap. Then, with a deep breath she looked straight at Miss Harrogate and said, "Yes, that is right."

There was an awkward silence as the two fairies stared at each other. Gabriella stood motionless, not really sure why she felt so uncomfortable. Miss Dazzleday broke the silence.

"Gabriella Winton, there will be no pranks in my school and such behaviour must be punished. You have been warned." She paused to check her red nail varnish, then looked over the top of her fingers at Gabriella. "You will not be *different* – you will be a good fairy!"

"Gabriella's magic is very advanced for her age and I'm quite sure that she never intended for the pencils to be rude," Miss Harrogate said.

"Indeed. Gabriella you will miss flying and dance classes for a week and will sweep the playground. There will be no magic used in school. None. Is that clear?" The Headmistress frowned. Gabriella gave a single nod.

Miss Dazzleday looked at her gold watch. "Now, I have an important meeting with our Chief Historian, so you may go. I do not expect to see you in my office again. Enough is enough."

Miss Harrogate stood. "Thank you for your support, Miss Dazzleday."

Miss Dazzleday flashed her perfect teeth. "That's what I'm here for."

Miss Harrogate sniffed and pulled Gabriella towards the door. Gabriella tried not to smile – they were out of there. Her best joke yet was definitely worth a week of sweeping!

"Oh, and, Gabriella, I will be writing to your parents to inform them about the whole sorry situation."

"NO!" Gabriella almost screamed. "I mean you don't need to. I'll tell them."

Miss Dazzleday chuckled. "Of course you will but I'll drop them a little note anyway."

Gabriella wished she had something to throw at Miss *Drizzleday's* head. She was far more drizzle than dazzle.

"Come along, Gabriella." Miss Harrogate was in such a hurry to leave the office that she bumped her arm on the door handle. Gabriella hurried after her.

The corridor was empty except for an adult fairy who Gabriella didn't recognise.

"Councillor Knightsbridge," Miss Harrogate said, bowing her head slightly at the serious-looking fairy that passed them. She muttered a greeting but didn't pause as she headed towards Miss Dazzleday's office. She was tall for a fairy and stood straight as a ruler.

"Stop!" The voice boomed down the corridor. "Yes, you child."

Gabriella watched as the councillor strode back down the corridor, her pointy nose leading the way. She had the strangest wings. They were so dull as to be almost moth-like. Gabriella glanced back at her own glittery pale blue wings and thanked her lucky stars that hers were not so plain.

"What did you do just then?" Councillor Knightsbridge almost poked Gabriella in the chest.

"Nothing." Gabriella shuddered but tried to disguise it as a shrug.

"Don't lie to me, child! Whatever you did I felt it as you walked past me. Now, what did you do?" The woman was leaning so far forward that Gabriella could feel breath on her face. *What is she talking about? For once I didn't do anything!*

"Nothing." Gabriella stepped back. How could she be in trouble again already? She looked to Miss Harrogate for help.

"Councillor Knightsbridge, what is it that you felt exactly?" Miss Harrogate smiled politely but her face read: *You'd better not have done anything!*

The councillor frowned and looked from Gabriella to Miss Harrogate. "I am not totally sure but it was as if she *touched me*."

It was clear that the thought of being touched by Gabriella was not a pleasant one!

"Touched you?" Miss Harrogate was puzzled.

"I know she didn't touch me but it *felt* as if she did. You did not feel anything unusual?" Councillor Knightsbridge looked Gabriella up and down, looking for a sign of something out of place.

"No." Miss Harrogate hesitated. "Perhaps you are mistaken. This is a rather draughty corridor."

"Perhaps." The councillor looked like she was sucking on a sour sweet as she pulled her wand from her pocket. "But I think it unlikely."

Gabriella looked straight ahead as the wand was waved around her.

The councillor's tunic dress, although smart, was as plain as her wings. Her frown deepened as she noticed Gabriella looking at her wings.

"Is everything in order, Councillor?" Miss Harrogate asked, placing a protective hand on Gabriella's shoulder.

"I sense nothing unusual." She shoved the wand back into her pocket. "You may go."

"Good day to you," Miss Harrogate said, nudging Gabriella along.

*"Most peculiar – I'm sure I felt something. Oh well, back to work. That dreadful Dazzleday better keep this to half an hour. Such a waste of my time."*

Gabriella whizzed around and stared at Councillor Knightbridge's back as she walked towards the head's office. "I can't believe she just said that!" Gabriella gasped.

Miss Harrogate cocked her head to one side. "Said what, dear?"

"Dreadful Dazzleday!" Gabriella's eyes were wide at the naughtiness of it all.

"What are you talking about?"

"That was what she said, not me!" Gabriella pointed at the councillor as she disappeared into the office.

"Well I certainly didn't hear her and I'm quite sure Councillor Knightbridge would never say such a thing. You're being ridiculous!" Miss Harrogate shook her head and continued towards her classroom.

Gabriella looked back as the office door closed behind the councillor. "But I heard her," she whispered.

### **Chapter Three**

Mum clutched the letter so tightly that her knuckles were white. Gabriella hurried to keep up as her mum marched onto the white pebble path that led home. Mum's skirt swished but her lilac wings stood stiffly behind her.

The Winton family house came into view. It wasn't a normal pretty fairy cottage or toadstool. It was a white rectangular box with a glass front. It looked out of place set next to the forest.

To the front of the box house were more white pebbles with the odd spiky plant jutting out as if to warn the forest to stay back. It was nothing like the garden at Molly's house which was full of flowers of every colour of the rainbow.

Gabriella's eyes were drawn back to the letter. She was in so much trouble. This was all Miss *Drizzleday*'s fault. Why did she have to write to her parents?

The glass door slid aside and the thumping sound of goblin rock greeted them. Her older brother, Jay, was already home.

"Turn that down!" Mum called up. There was no response.

"He can't hear you," Gabriella said.

"Obviously." Mum glared. "Sit there. I will be back to discuss this shortly." She waved the letter in the direction of a white leather chair.

Most fairy houses had small cosy rooms but not this one. The main living area was big and open. There was only a second floor (for the bedrooms) to the back of the house which was like a platform. This made the living room seem huge with its double height ceiling. Mr Winton had designed the house himself with only one thing in mind – books!

Each end wall of the box house was floor to ceiling with row after row of books. Every book was perfectly placed and in order. Why did her parents need so many books when they ran the kingdom's library all day?

Mum flicked a switch on the far wall. In a normal house the switch would have been a light, but not here. A whirling sound mixed with the goblin rock as a white screen dropped from the ceiling. Gabriella watched as the screen lowered, covering the whole side wall and hiding the books behind it.

As the screen came on flowery wallpaper was the background for several gold framed pictures of the countryside. At the base was a large fire place with a roaring fire dancing in the grate. To one side of the fire was a grandfather clock and to the other a black dog was curled up asleep. What a joke! As if this house would ever have a pet! Gabriella thought a *real* fire and a *real* dog would be more like it.

With two flaps of her lilac wings Mum was on the upper floor. She opened the third door and Jay's music blasted out. Gabriella knew that Jay would think the pencils were funny. Jay always laughed at her jokes. She pulled the red pencil out of her pocket. Would she be able to make him sing again? She wanted to tell him off for being rude to Miss Harrogate and getting her into all this trouble.

Gabriella sighed and hugged her legs so that she could rest her chin on her knees. Would the birthday outing to the pizza restaurant be cancelled? Going for pizza was her treat for not having a party. After last year's disaster Gabriella didn't want another party. Her mum's idea of fun was quizzes (which included maths questions!) and the party bag had contained a history book. So embarrassing!

Mum reappeared as the music faded to a background thud. She stepped from the open balcony and her long blue skirt puffed out like an umbrella as she glided down. Mum smoothed her blonde hair and stood before her daughter, hands on hips.

"Well? What have you got to say for yourself?" Mum asked but didn't wait for an answer. "You can't stop yourself, can you? Messing around and showing off. You can't even behave on your birthday!"

"It was just a joke. Everyone was joining in and laughing." Gabriella shoved the pencil back into her pocket.

"Everyone? Laughing? I don't think so, Gabriella. Miss Harrogate wasn't laughing. I'm not laughing!" She glared and then turned away, shaking her head.

The orange flames of the fire flickered silently. Mum dropped her head forward and sighed. "I've had the worst day at work. The Fairy Queen asked for an old book but it's missing. And now you are in trouble again."

"Wow. Did you meet the Queen?" Gabriella rushed to join her mum by the fire – it still felt odd that the flames gave no warmth. Imagine meeting the Queen!

"Of course not – she sent her historian." Mum rubbed her hand across her forehead.

"What is the book about? Can't you find another one?" Gabriella knew how proud her parents were of the library. Not finding something for the Queen seemed much worse than some rude pencils.

"No. It's a diary written by someone who died three hundred years ago. Miss Richmond was an important fairy in her day but why the Queen wants this diary I have no idea."

Three hundred years! That was the second time today someone had mentioned three hundred years. What on earth could be so special

about a three-hundred-year-old diary? How strange.

“Did someone steal it?” Gabriella asked. Now that would be properly naughty, not just a silly prank.

“People do not steal from the library, Gabriella. Hopefully it will turn up.”

A tap on the glass made them both look up. Outside the door, tapping with its large beak, was a parrot. The bright blue feathers on top of its head bounced as it tapped over and over.

“This will be for you!” Mum huffed. “Ridiculous things. What’s wrong with a letter?”

Gabriella rushed to open the door. It would be a twext from Molly! The parrot cocked its head to one side.

“Hello,” it said. Yes, it was Molly’s parrot. Gabriella could tell by the lovely red tips to its wings. Lots of the cool kids had parrots but she wasn’t allowed one.

“Hello,” Gabriella said.

“Twext for Gabby. *Hope you’re not in a bubble, from Tolly.*” It nodded its head as it finished the message.

“Silly bird,” Mum tutted.

Gabriella looked at the bird. “Do you mean: *Hope you’re not in trouble, from Molly?*”

“That’s what I said! *Squark!* Twext delivered! Any reply?” It hopped from foot to foot and seemed in a rush.

Gabriella glanced at her mum’s furious face. “No. Just thanks for the twext. Bye.” It immediately turned and flew off with a rush of colour.

“I’m sorry you had a bad day.” Gabriella tried to smile at her mum. This missing book seemed to have made her forget about the school letter. “Maybe a pizza will cheer you up.”

“There will be no pizza today. I suggest you go to your room and think about how you will apologise to Miss Harrogate.”

“But it’s my birthday treat!” Gabriella stamped her foot.

“Not any more. Not after this.” She waved the not-forgotten letter.

“You’re mean!” Tears stung Gabriella’s eyes. She couldn’t fly to her room fast enough. How could everyone be so horrid on her birthday? She lay on her bed, tears streaming down her face. The pencil in her

pocket jabbed into her and she pulled it out. There was no face, just an ordinary pencil. Was she really so odd and strange? She didn't mean to be. Why did she have the strangest feeling that the pencil was trying to tell her something?

## SECRET MAGIC: THE THREAD FAIRY ADVENTURES

by Kerry Cassidy

### SYNOPSIS

Gabriella loves playing magical pranks but sometimes they don't go to plan. She is summoned to face the Fairy Council and be tested. This reveals that she is a thread fairy with special magic allowing her to understand the feelings of others. She knows there is more than she is being told – she hears people's thoughts and feels the pull of gates between worlds. Being special may not be as easy as she thought.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Working in the City lost its appeal, long hours making me miss bedtime with my boys. Who wouldn't rather be reading *Room on the Broom* than sitting in a meeting? My love of children's books reborn, I started to write. Writing is my time – being published only a bonus.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Hard to make fairies seem fresh, but this did it for me.'

'Charming and funny fairy magic without being soppy – nice notes of toughness and resolve.'

'I was attracted by the funny likeable heroine and thought the storyline was interesting. I had the feeling that this was going to be a well-structured story as there was good seeding of plot points. Nice writing.'

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# NUTS

By Simon James Green

## CHAPTER ONE

It had been a bummer of a day.

Noah clung on for dear life. One slip and that would be it. He wasn't sure how much longer his fingers could hold out. If he let go . . . instant death! Maybe that would be the best option now. Is this how it would end? Three weeks off his sixteenth birthday. Would there be headlines in the papers? Would they describe it as a "tragedy"? Would they print things like "He had so much to offer the world" and "His death is a huge loss not just to society, but mankind"? He hoped they would illustrate the story with a picture from his Facebook profile. But not the one of him crying at his thirteenth birthday party when his mum hired a stripper because she thought it would be funny. It wasn't at all funny. All he'd wanted was pizza, bowling and a sleepover with Harry. Instead, she'd invited a load of her mates over, along with "Bambi Sugapops" and her medically unfeasible breasts.

At least in his young death, there might be glory. At least he would be immortalised, never growing old, forever young and . . .

"Get the hell down, you skinny little runt!" shouted Ms Connor from the bottom of the climbing frame, blowing her whistle at him.

"I can't, I'm stuck!" he lied, readjusting the stupidly small shorts that his mum had bought him in Year 8 and refused to upgrade ever since. If this debacle ended in anything less than mortifying embarrassment and his utter downfall, he would totally reconsider being an atheist.

"If the Year 7s can climb to the top, then so can you!"

"They're smaller. More nimble!" He shifted about, hoping a combination of *distance* and *angles* meant she couldn't see what he was hiding.

"Get down!"

"Miss, I am up here, *without the protection of a safety harness*, and I'm in grave danger of falling and sustaining a catastrophic injury."

"No one cares!" she yelled, because apparently basic safeguarding and student welfare doesn't apply to PE teachers. "What goes up must come down! If you want to die of starvation, that's fine by me!" She rattled the frame menacingly, grabbed a medicine ball, hurled it at a kid in the middle of an asthma attack and strode off to shout abuse at Fat Eddie who had beached himself on the trampoline and couldn't get upright.

He glanced despairingly across the expanse of the sports hall. The boys were in one half, engaged in an assortment of crap gymnastics; the girls were in the other half, enjoying badminton. In the middle, unseen to the others, but visible to Noah from his vantage point, was Eric Smith, hiding behind some crash mats with his hand down his shorts, secretly filming the girls on his phone so he had something to get off to later. Although, it looked like he was getting off to it now, to be fair.

"Aww," he whimpered, as the frame rattled and his best mate started climbing up towards him. *This is not gonna make things any better.*

"I've been told to get you down," Harry explained, clambering up opposite him so their noses were almost touching.

"Well, I can't." He seriously needed Harry to go. "Just leave me here to die. Save yourself."

"Don't be a nob. You put one foot below the other. And repeat. I'll do it with you, take your mind off the height or whatever the problem is."

"That's not the problem!" he snapped.

"Right, well, this is ridiculous then. I'll have to perform a fireman's lift!"

"No! Haz!"

"No choice," he said, trying to swing round, the frame lurching dangerously as he did so.

"I've sustained a highly unfortunate erection!" Noah bleated.

Harry stopped in his tracks. "Right . . ." He looked down at Noah's shorts. "Oh yeah," he grinned.

"There was no need to look."

“*Wowzer.*”

“Stop looking!”

“The best way to get rid of a boner is to have a wank.”

Noah blinked at him in disbelief. “I’m not about to become the first boy in the school to masturbate at the top of the climbing frame.”

“Well, what caused it?”

He felt his stomach flutter. “What?”

“Because you gotta think of something else. Is it ’cause I’m looking *fine* in my new polo shirt?”

“Idiot. Shut up,” he said, forcing a chuckle.

Harry shrugged. “What then?”

Noah dropped his eyes and busied himself wiping his sweaty hands on his T-shirt. “You can see the cobwebs on the lights up here. They should clean this place better.”

Harry raised an amused eyebrow.

“Sophie then,” Noah muttered.

He knew it was stupid the moment he’d said it. They had all been equals at primary school, spending quite a lot of time together, culminating in a trip to a zoo for Sophie’s eleventh birthday in Year 6. They’d spent four disappointing hours looking at sleeping lions, sitting-down giraffes and a lizard that turned out to be dead. But it hadn’t mattered because there had been, for the only time in his life, *banter* and *jokes*. But then, in Year 7, things started to happen. Suddenly Sophie was really tall and Noah was still really short. She’d got proper tits before he’d even got one proper pube. It was terrible. And then she won the maths prize in Year 8, was voted Year Rep on the school council in Year 9 and predicted all As at GCSE in Year 10. She was this totally unstoppable force of brilliance and sophistication. He’d tried talking to her last year, just like he’d talked to her in the old days, but he got his words all mixed up and then he needed the toilet, so he had to go away.

“Noah, give it up. Maybe once you had a chance, but she’s out of your league now.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” He didn’t consider himself the hottest boy in the school . . . that accolade would be given to Josh Lewis, who was exceptional in every department (annoyingly), but he did have

good teeth, feet that didn't smell and, according to the charts and diagrams he had poured over online, a nearly averagely sized penis. On top of this, he was top set for *everything*, and if that didn't count enormously in his favour, then he just didn't want to be part of the world any more. He narrowed his eyes at Harry. "*What exactly do you mean?*"

"What are you wearing for Melissa's party tomorrow?"

"I'm not going to . . . Oh, *funny*. You're *funny*." Noah grimaced. OK, there may have been some slight issue in the popularity department, but who cared? Even if he did want go to her stupid party for cool people, *which he didn't*, there wouldn't be anyone else going that he liked. And even if he did want to go, *which he totally, 100% didn't*, he didn't have anything remotely suitable to wear. And even if he did want to go, *and he absolutely could not think of anything more vile than spending any time in Melissa's cursed company*, there was no way he could ever get hold of any alcohol because he still managed to look about twelve, even though he definitely wasn't.

"Some girls like geeks! Some girls know it'll be us who will one day get the top jobs and the big salaries. We're good long-term bets!" He'd read this on a blog, so it had to be true.

"*It doesn't matter*. We don't look like we'd be a good shag."

"I did not mention anything about shagging!"

Harry rolled his eyes. "You're up a climbing frame with a boner because you were ogling Sophie and you're telling me it's not about shagging?"

"Sophie and me would have an intellectual union. Besides, geeks can get a bit of *bow chicka wah wah* too. It's not unheard of."

Harry screwed his face up. "Er, I think it's pretty unheard of. Anyway, if Sophie wants to do *bow chicka wah wah*, she'd probably want to do *bow chicka wah wah* with someone that does *bow chicka wah wah* really bloody well."

"What sort of person is that?" Because he had a nagging doubt it wouldn't be him. He'd seen diagrams of women in PSHE and they seemed unduly complicated.

"I dunno – maybe he has pecs and abs. Maybe he has a tattoo . . ."

"I'm not getting a tattoo. I'm not a manual labourer."

"These are the things people go for."

“Are you planning on getting a tattoo?”

“No. Maybe.”

“*What?* It’s illegal until you’re eighteen!” Noah squealed.

“Rule breaking. It’s very attractive. Everyone loves a bad boy.”

“I’m telling your mum. You can’t trust those places. They don’t have medical training, you know? They’re sticking all these dirty old needles in you and they haven’t got so much as a first aid badge from the Cubs. It’s disgusting.”

“Chill out, I’m not getting a tat.”

“*A tat? A ‘tat’?* What have you become? Why are you speaking street-slang like some drug-dealing homie? You can’t become cool. If you become cool, I’ll be the only uncool person left!”

Harry grinned. “There’s no danger of me becoming cool, *innit?*”

“Don’t push it. *Nob.*”

“Speaking of which, how’s yours?”

“It’s worse than ever. If you have a boner for more than an hour you have to go to hospital. I read it on the internet. I can’t be hospitalized with a boner. My mum would have a field day.”

“What’s happening up there?” Ms Connor bellowed up, rattling the frame again. “This isn’t a mothers’ meeting! This is Year 11 Physical Education! I don’t see anything *physical* happening!”

“You would if I came down,” Noah muttered, making Harry giggle.

“*Martha* Grimes, get your bony little arse down here – NOW!” Ms Connor demanded.

“My name’s Noah!” he shouted down indignantly. “She knows damn well my name’s Noah!” he hissed at Harry.

“I think she’s taking the piss.”

There was a sudden flurry of excitement at the entrance to the sports hall, as Jess Jackson ran in, clutching a fistful of A5 flyers in her hand.

“OH MY GOD YOU GOTTA SEE THIS SHIT!” she squealed. “YOU ARE GONNA PISS YOURSELVES!”

“What the hell’s going on?” Noah asked.

“Who cares? It’s probably nothing.”

“Why’s everyone pointing at us?”

“Umm – I think they’re pointing at you.”

Noah swallowed hard. “Oh god. Why? What’s happened? Why’s there hysterical laughter and piss-taking cheering? Oh god . . . ”

It had been a bummer of a day.

It was about to become an *epic* bummer of a day.

## CHAPTER TWO

Noah sat in the furthest corner of the classroom, bravely ignoring the fact everyone was still looking at him like he was a prize nob.

Five years! He had kept this quiet for five years! And then the stupid cow decided to “up the ante” (his mother’s words), and get some flyers made. And now everyone knew and she might as well have just printed up little cards advertising hand jobs and Blu-Tacked them up in the phone box.

Officially his mum was on the dole. Unofficially, she toured pubs and clubs with her blisteringly shite act – “Ruby Devine’s – a Tribute to Beyoncé”. She wasn’t actually called Ruby Devine. That was a stage name to “enhance the magic and glamour” (his mother’s words), but also to put any undercover investigators from the Job Centre off the scent. To date, her act had only been performed in larger nearby towns and a few coastal holiday camps, meaning the true horror of what she did remained a secret to the locals. But in a misguided attempt to break the Little Fobbing market she’d had ten thousand A5 flyers produced and, for reasons known only to her stupid self, left a bunch of them on reception at the sports hall – most of which had now been stuck up all over the school. His mother, in a catastrophic Primark leotard, pouting with blow-job lips like a cheap whore. He might have got away with it, badly disguised as she was in make-up and a wig, had it not been for the details in the bottom right:

“For bookings contact Lisa Grimes.”

And the small personal biography she had added in an attempt to big herself up and sound nice and respectable:

“Lisa has performed at many of the top and most glamorous establishments for over two decades. Proud mum of Noah, she splits her time between New York, LA and Little Fobbing.”

None of this was remotely true. She’d never even been to LA or New

York, plus *proud mum*?! Was she having a laugh? Noah gritted his teeth. Why did she have a complete inability to be a normal mum? Why couldn't she be a top lawyer, or businesswoman or entrepreneur? At the very least, why couldn't she try, just once, *not* to totally embarrass him and ruin his already shite life?

And the piss-taking at school had been on the level of:

"Beyoncé's *thirty*! Tribute to Beyoncé's *gran* more like!"

And:

"Beyoncé's got four hundred million in the bank. Your mum isn't even *allowed* a bank account she's so skint."

And even:

"You do know Beyoncé's parents are African American and Creole, right? Did you know your mum is *white*, Noah? Had you noticed that?"

It had been the most humiliating day ever. Worse than the time his mum loudly accused him of "playing with himself" as they queued for soggy chicken in a packed KFC, and he wasn't even . . . SOMETIMES THINGS JUST NEED READJUSTING, OK?! Things being as they were, Noah decided he was now 98% certain he was an atheist. God was supposed to reward the good and punish the bad – that's how he'd always understood it to work. But he hadn't been bad. Not bad in the sense of being an evil despot doing war crimes anyway. His "bad" list was decidedly lame. In fact the top three entries would be:

1) Pocketing a spare condom from a PSHE class, just in case he got lucky (sadly now past its expiry date).

2) Watching the sixth form girls play rugby when he was in Year 9. (But it wasn't even his idea and he didn't even get a boner. Well, maybe a bit of one, but not one that really counted.)

3) Forging several excuse notes from his mum during football in the cold months. (Which is totally fair enough when the teacher's wearing ten layers of fur-lined survival kit you could climb Everest in, and you're in thin nylon shorts and a threadbare T-shirt. It's *human rights*, right?!)

Not really all that bad in the scheme of things. Surely an All Powerful Being would cut you a bit of slack at some point?

But apparently not.

“How ya’ doin’ No-ah?” came the mock sultry voice.

Jess Jackson smiled maliciously and eased herself into the empty seat next to him. Noah froze in horror. She was so close he could smell her fake tan and Justin Bieber perfume. Jess was trouble. In Year 5 she took the class hamster home for Easter – *and it came back dead*. In Year 7 she threw a Kit Kat at a swan on a geography field trip – *and it went mental and attacked a nearby toddler*. In Year 8 she faked a seizure after an assembly about epilepsy, in Year 9 she stole a horse, in Year 10 she threw a drumstick at Mrs Butcher and the police were called. And this was just the stuff Noah knew about. Here was a girl who traded in evil and other people’s misery. Much like the AQA exam board.

“What do you want, Jess?” He stared down at his desk, doing his best to sound strong and in control.

“I was wondering, does your mum do other acts as well as Beyoncé?”

“No.”

“Does she do Miley Cyrus?”

“No.”

“Does she *twerk*, Noah? Does she *twerk* it all night long?”

“No, she does not.”

*Straight answers. Direct. Give her nothing.*

“You’ve gone bright red. Is it because you’re getting turned on, thinking about your twerking mum?”

He swallowed hard. *Ignore her. Don’t rise to it.*

“Is everyone getting on with their work?” Miss Palmer shouted, looking over. “Jess?”

“I’m just *liaising* with Noah, miss, about one of the questions, but he’s clueless! Are you sure he should be *top set* for everything?”

“*Piss off!*” Noah hissed. How dare she jeopardise his hard-won academic success!

“Ooh, Noah, you’re looking *so crazy right now!*”

“Shut up!”

He felt the blood drain from his cheeks. He’d let her get to him. You didn’t answer back to girls like Jess. Better just to take it and not give them bait. He’d got through four and a bit years of secondary school, pretty much totally ignored (but at least not particularly bullied), through this policy. Now he’d gone and ruined everything.

“Wanker,” she said, getting up abruptly so the chair fell backwards. “Nice boner.”

“I haven’t got . . .”

“You so have. Everyone! Noah’s got a boner ’cause he’s thinking about his pop-star mum!” she shouted, to cheers from the rest of the class.

“Jess! Enough!” shouted Miss Palmer. “Two minutes and I want the worksheets finished.”

Jess sauntered off in the direction of her desk as the noise subsided. He threw his pencil down. He’d never done anything to her. Why couldn’t she just get on with her own pointless life and he would get on with his? Why did the day have to get worse and worse? He quickly looked across the room to see if Sophie was also joining in the fun at his expense – because that would just be the crappy icing on the shitty cake.

No.

Of course she wasn’t. Because Sophie was perfect and lovely and all-round A-star fantastic and just wouldn’t do something like that. She was just quietly finishing her worksheet – with all the correct answers and with perfect handwriting, Noah guessed. Perfect Sophie. But she definitely wouldn’t be interested in him now all this had kicked off. She would get less flak if she just French-kissed a dog.

Damn it. He was 98.5% certain he was an atheist. Life wasn’t a miracle courtesy of some higher power. It was just bad luck.

*Well, if you do exist, he thought, this is it. This is your final chance. You have a 1.5% window in which to prove yourself to me. To make something good happen. Prove it. Prove it by the time the bell rings at the end of the lesson.*

“MISS! The SEX PERVERT is filming me AGAIN!” screamed Jess.

Noah looked over to where a red-faced Eric was trying (badly) to act all surprised at the accusation.

“Eric, give me your phone,” Miss Palmer sighed.

“I’ve not done nothing,” Eric said, anxiously wiping his sweaty palms on his trousers as Miss Palmer approached him. “She’s lying. She hates me.”

“I am NOT lying! You’re the liar. A lying, filthy paedo! Look! Sweating! You’re covered in sweat. That proves it!”

“Jess, it’s not right to call someone a paedophile if they are sixteen

and they perhaps fancy another sixteen year old.”

“Well, he’s a month older than me, so he is a paedo actually.”

Noah rolled his eyes. Her stupidity was beyond measure.

“I don’t fancy her!” protested Eric.

“You better not do! Do you think I want someone like you fancying me? Eugh! It makes me want to peel my skin off just thinking about it. I’m gonna tell my boyfriend about you! He’s older. He’s at college,” she bragged, “and when he finds out about you, he’ll—”

“Jess!” Miss Palmer interrupted. “Eric – give me your phone.”

Eric sighed and pulled the hot and sticky Samsung out of his over-tight and too short trousers. Noah smirked as Miss Palmer took it gingerly, as though handling nuclear waste. Eric’s reputation was legendary and everyone knew it – even the teachers. God only knows what would be on that phone. Thing is, it was normal to sometimes have *thoughts* about the people you were at school with. Noah had checked that fact on the internet, and it said it was a normal thing on at least six sites, so that was fine. *Normal*. But Eric went beyond that. What Eric did was creepy. It was sex offender territory. *It wasn’t normal*.

“Delete the video, please,” Miss Palmer said, thinking better of it and handing the phone back to him.

Eric scowled and pressed the relevant buttons. “Done,” he muttered, squeezing the phone back in his pocket and giving the finger to Jess as Miss Palmer turned her back.

“Right, everyone!” Miss Palmer began, moving to the front of the class. “Listen up, here’s what I want you all to do over the weekend ready for Monday’s lesson . . . ”

“Monday?!” squawked Jess, in disbelief.

“Yes, Monday. I’m going to put you in groups of three and you’re going to be either ‘for’ or ‘against’ the building of a new supermarket in the town. You’re going to imagine that we’re having a big town council meeting and you’ve got to present your views. Everyone understand?”

There were general discontented murmurs from the cool kids who didn’t want their weekend of being popular to be put in jeopardy. Noah got his best fountain pen out and selected a fresh page of his homework journal, ready to make notes. He liked the sound of this project and he

would do a totally ace presentation. There would be time for fun when he was a millionaire. And that would be fine. Really it would. It would have to be.

“Right!” Miss Palmer surveyed the room, deciding on the groups. “Jess with Dan and Tom . . . Ella and Louise with Eric . . .”

“Jesus Christ,” muttered Ella.

“Sophie, you can go with . . .”

Noah held his breath and looked up like an enthusiastic meerkat, hoping to catch Miss Palmer’s eye and make her choose him.

“You can be with Jon and Lauren . . .”

Noah sank back down. 99.94%. What was the point? Things were terrible and they were always going to be terrible. He wallowed in misery whilst Miss Palmer rattled through the rest of the class, the percentage points of his atheist certainty going up like the display on a stopwatch. 99.95%. 99.96%. The All Powerful Being just had the perfect opportunity to prove his existence and had blown it.

It was only when Miss Palmer started recapping exactly what the exercise involved that he realised he didn’t have a group at all, never mind one with someone he definitely fancied in it. Noah panicked. Everyone else had a group. Why had he been left out? He raised his hand.

“I’ll answer questions at the end, Noah.”

Transparently, that would be too late. He might end up having to do the exercise all by himself, with no help. That would be intolerable. 99.97%.

“Noah’s still got his hand up, miss!” Jess said, with relish.

*“I will answer questions at the end!”*

99.98%

“Maybe he needs the toilet, miss,” suggested Ella.

*Oh, here we go!* Noah thought, knowing damn well what was coming.

“He might piss himself again, miss, like he did on the Year 8 trip to the London Dungeon,” Jess added.

“What is it, Noah?” Miss Palmer sighed.

99.99%. He lowered his arm. “I haven’t got a group, miss,” he muttered, quietly.

“Right. Well, why didn’t you say?”

“Nobody’s gonna want to go with *him*,” Jess snarled.

The bell rang. That was it. The end of the lesson. The window of opportunity for the All Powerful Being to prove himself had closed. 100%. It was over.

And then something totally nuts happened.

## NUTS by Simon James Green

### SYNOPSIS

When fifteen-year-old Noah is caught inadvertently snogging best mate Harry, he desperately tries to prove that he definitely, absolutely, isn't gay. Instead, he makes a girl pregnant (without having sex with her); helps his potty-mouthed Gran escape her care home; and harbours an internationally wanted criminal in his shed. Noah's world becomes nuts, especially when he realises that, gay or straight, it's his life. And Harry might just be the best thing in it.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Simon read Law at Cambridge and now works in theatre, TV and film. He co-wrote the feature-length teen rom-com *Rules of Love* (BBC), and *The Diary of Me*, a teen musical. Simon also teaches acting at a performing arts college and is a member of the Golden Egg Academy.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'The opening is about as stand out as you can get in more ways than one! It sets out the book's stall from the get go, telling us this is an *Inbetweeners*-style, crude teen boys comedy. As a mother of boys (not yet teenagers), I felt I should take notes!'

'I really liked the dialogue and friendship between Noah and Harry and I am sure this is what many teen boys think and talk about amongst their friends. I believe it will appeal to the target market if it continues in this vein and delivers a good story too as well as plenty of brilliantly comic/cringe-worthy set pieces. A very promising start.'

'Truly funny writing. I loved the POV of a 15-year-old boy with a Beyoncé impersonator mum. Very British, quite rude. I loved the realism and want to read more.'

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# THE EVOLUTION OF YOU AND ME

By Rose Margaret Deniz

## **TRANSIT ONE: The Colony**

*Tyrne, Shan Colony, 05 MAY 3048 AD 16:03*

Laughter floats through the open hatch of *The Mirror* and the sound tears my heart in two. In the yard Kenner chases my twin half-sisters around like his bag is not secured onto the spacecraft's luggage rack. I turn away from the porthole and shove an old canvas bag into a cubbyhole next to the captain's chair.

*Bring the girls with you.*

Ignoring the voice in my head, I give the braided leather bracelet on my wrist a tug. Tyrne's Outer Realms with its sprawling military base and seedy bars is no place for two year olds even if it would mean Kenner could delay his goodbyes. Better Sofi and June stay with Mom.

On my way out of the cockpit, I run my fingers over a fading happy face sticker my dad placed over the *ohscum* emergency button. In all his years navigating to Hart Tech where he worked on luxury cruisers, he never once pressed that button. I tap it lightly for good luck.

Only one more spot to check on *The Mirror*; I roll under its newly refinished silver belly on a creeper seat and eye the landing gear. Dad's handiwork is still intact. With a resigned sigh, I push my thick, curly hair off my forehead. Nothing is left to delay the inevitable. Except me, and I shake away the thought.

Kenner pokes his head through the hangar. Even after three years together, my heart still flips at the sight of his dark caramel coloured hair and deep brown eyes. From this angle, he is upside down, his hair falling into his face above a sliver of a scar just above his jaw.

“You ready?” Kenner’s lips twist into a nervous smile.

I screw the control panel closed and wipe my grease-stained hands on a rag, sliding across the cement floor to Kenner’s feet.

“Never.” I ball up the rag and toss it into a pile of oily cloths.

Kenner crouches down on his knees and strokes my chin with his thumb. Joining Tyrne’s Elite Military (TEM) is his chance to be someone other than his father’s pawn, but behind the resolve in his eyes is a flicker of fear that he could lose us, and the inner steel he has built over the years I have known him.

His head slowly drops, bringing his lips closer to mine, and a rush of anticipation makes my skin tingle. My chin rises to meet his lips for a kiss when pint-sized voices interrupt us.

“Pree, Pree.” Sofi and June toddle in and clasp their arms around Kenner’s legs. “Ken, Ken.”

He sits up fast. With a thunk, I drop my head back on the padded creeper seat and scoot up to a sitting position. I pluck June off of Kenner’s legs and bury my nose in her hair, her scalp warm and heady from the oil Mom uses to detangle her hair. I fake growl and she squeals. Sofi clambers into my lap and Kenner wraps his arms around all of us, sandwiching the girls between us and pretending to eat their chubby arms and legs.

“Time to go find Mom.” I break up the game amidst protests from everyone in the hangar. That’s me, Pree the Party Pooper, but if we don’t take off soon, I don’t know if I will be able to let Kenner go. Even worse than him leaving would be him resenting me for making him stay.

We leave the hangar, June clinging to me. Sofi launches herself at Kenner, but I worry some part of Sofi’s two-year-old heart senses that I love June just a little bit more than her.

Mom is waiting for us outside the one-storey house that she and Dad built when I was a baby. We now share it with Ran, Sofi and June’s father. Ran’s sharp eyes, the same as Sofi’s, and the way he lurks around The

Colony on supposed construction jobs give me the creeps. His not being here for Kenner's send-off might be the only upside of today.

"My baby girls, hand them over to me." Mom coos at the twins and switches out the woven linen bag in her arms for June and Sofi. The rolls inside are yeasty and fresh from the deep fryer and cinnamon wafts up. Kenner's favourite. I grin to myself, but my smile quickly falls. His last batch of Mom's sticky sweet donuts.

*One year, Pree, that's all.*

"Hungry, Mama. Want bread and honey." Sofi bonks the dot of flour on Mom's nose with her fist. Mom bakes for communal meal times and The Colony's co-op that fancy Shanbul-ers in city clothes shop from to feel good about themselves. Or whatever.

"Of course, Pumpkin." Mom juggles the girls with an easy smile.

"Well, thanks, Mrs Badian. For everything. I—" Kenner chokes up and crosses one of his arms over his chest.

"Don't you say one more word. You know you are like a son to me." Mom is all big heart and skinny limbs, Sofi and June sticking to her like squirmy barnacles. She leans in for a hug.

I stand off to the side and finger the bracelet around my wrist. The way my mom doles out affection to everyone she loves triggers a burning sensation in my gut that I hate.

"Pree, you make sure this boy gets to his drop-off point safe." She has tears in her eyes when she pulls away from Kenner, which intensifies the burn. Why do I always have to share him? And why does *everyone* love him?

Except his dad. That sobers me up real fast.

"Of course, Mom. I'll see you tonight." I give her arm a squeeze, the soft muscle under my fingers giving way to bone. Sometimes I don't know how she is standing upright, let alone baking for hours and climbing up onto the roof to fix loose shingles.

Worry flashes in her eyes when she looks at Kenner, and she opens her mouth like she is going to say something. I intercept her and angle her away from Kenner. Our house's baked clay walls and tiled roof frame Mom's wild hair.

"The rebellion is just a rumour, Mom." My grip tightens on her arm.

We all saw the news this morning that the Outer Realm's worker

colonies are rallying. Hart Tech workers are the loudest, but compared to Tyrne's military, the rebel numbers are few, and I need to believe that Kenner will be stationed at a cushy offshore post.

Mom nods, but her eyes flit to my bracelet and back up to my face, a wrinkle shooting through her brow.

"Be careful." She gives me a quick peck on the cheek.

My eyes drop to my wrist. Woven into the band of five leather strands is a pair of crude angel wings made out of gold, the pendant a Badian family keepsake from my dad's side. When Mom presented it to me on my seventeenth birthday, I hid my disappointment with a smile. What I wanted was a pair of pliers to work on Dad's ship, not jewellery. But the bracelet now feels like it is a part of me.

After Mom disappears into the house with Sofi and June, Kenner and I walk back to the hangar.

"Pree, you're killing me. Gimme that." Kenner snatches the bag of donuts out of my hands and buries his face in it, moaning with boyish pleasure. "Cinna Pops."

"Eat 'em now before they get cold." I elbow him with a little grin.

In a year, will he still be the same boy that I love? Will I be the same? He won't ask me what I am thinking. Not now, after countless hours talking about how we will reunite after he finishes basic training. By leaving Tyrne, he is giving up everything here for a future with me. That knowledge is trapped in my chest. As well as a guilty feeling of possibility. While he is gone, I will be alone. I don't know myself without him.

He's devoured half the bag before we step foot inside the hangar.

"Kenner Hart, you are a mess." I cup his cheek, afternoon light framing his face.

"You know you like it." He mumbles with his mouth full.

"Oh, yes, I do." I grin and lick the sugar off my fingertip, pressing it against his lips.

He sucks my finger into his mouth and my stomach flutters. I run a thumb across his jaw and sink my hand into his hair. In less than twenty-four hours, his waves will be shorn and he will suit up the dark uniform all new cadets wear.

Kenner. A cadet, with a gun. My lips twitch. They've never seen him shoot.

“What’s so funny?”

I run my hands up his arms and close the gap between us, the bag of baked goods crinkling between us. I brush my bottom lip against his and he pushes closer, cinnamon and sugar on his lips.

*This is the last time.* A warm breeze toys with the strands of Kenner’s hair and brushes my cheek, teasing me with a heat that he won’t be here to feel during the last thrust of summer. We sway together and his eyes flick up to the hayloft, his pupils darkening. My body surges with heat and I cup his jaw with both of my hands and find his lips again.

“We’re all packed up.” My voice wavers.

He drops his lips to my ear and draws a lazy circle.

“OK.” His low voice does wicked things to my resolve, but we already murmured our promises last night on soft, worn blankets in the hayloft. I stick a hand into the back pocket of his old jeans and give him a tug towards the ship.

We climb through the hatch on *The Mirror* and it seals us in. Kenner carefully sets the bag of donuts onto the co-pilot seat. *So Kenner, always thinking of his next meal.* His warm breath tickles the back of my neck and my body refuses to move forward into the captain’s seat.

Hands hot on my waist, Kenner spins me around, walking me backwards. We drop into the back row of passenger seats, his skin hot on my lips. We kiss and scramble closer, chins bumping, the zipper on my jeans sticking. Our bodies are touching everywhere they can, feet and hips and mouths. We are either on the verge of losing each other forever or becoming the people we need to be so we can truly be together.

“I’m so sorry, Prec.” He pulls me onto his lap and buries his head against my collarbone like June nestled in before.

“Not now.” A fist forms low in my belly where warm pleasure once was. “You promised.”

“I know.” He looks up, his eyes wide.

Mik Hart wants Kenner to be Hart Tech’s Vice President, but only if he dumps his lowborn, commune-living girlfriend. Instead of giving in, Kenner is leaving.

“We’re going to survive this. I promise.” The pendant woven into the leather band of my wrist seems to pulse in response. I kiss him one

more time, hoping with my whole body and heart that I am telling him the truth.

Shirt tucked back in and Kenner in the co-pilot chair, I strap myself into the pilot seat. The dash's plastic coating is peeling and it smells like faint mouse droppings, but I inhale deeply. This ship is all mine.

"Yeah, baby, give it to me." I pat the gear stick when *The Mirror* purrs to life.

Kenner laughs. "You never call me baby. Should I be jealous?"

I wink at Kenner. "Now, now, you've always known which one of you I'd pick."

"I'm such a goner." He leans back against the headrest, a sleepy grin on his face.

A dusky sky winks at us from behind massive trees which ring The Colony on its Southern tip. I navigate us out of the hangar, avoiding the massive wall that surrounds Hart Estate. For three years, since I was fourteen years old, we have ignored the wall, climbed it, and laughed in the face of it. But the truth is if Mik knew about my ship, his tracking devices could locate my ship and disable it mid-flight.

Kenner is tense until we break through the pastel-tinted clouds. He tosses a mostly intact donut to me which I catch with my mouth, and polishes off the squished donuts. "Now I can die and go to heaven."

The sweet, doughy ball of sugar in my mouth turns into a tasteless lump. No dying. No getting sent on evacuation missions to Earth. Or caught up in the Outer Realms rebellion. That is not part of the plan.

He crumples up the bag with a satisfied sigh. "Anything else to eat?"

I can't help but grin. "There are more Cinna Pops in the back. Mom's trying to fatten you up so you can work it all off again."

"She's got her work cut out for her." He groans and pats his flat stomach.

"I hope TEM knows what they're in for. They better have a cook assigned just to you." Eyeing the dashboard and the viewfinder, I steer the ship upwards at a steady altitude. A blip of heat flashes underneath the pendant on my bracelet as we pick up speed. The warmth disappears. Must have imagined it.

Once *The Mirror* is on autopilot, I kick my feet up on the dash. Kenner's

eyes half close. Slipping into silence, I pretend we are cruising around Tyrne like we did when I got *The Mirror* running again last year. Dad would be proud. My heart twinges at the thought of him. The ship wouldn't start one day, and Dad died in a plant accident before he could fix it. I repaired it using old manuals in the shed.

"Nice boots." Kenner circles my ankle with his hand and grins.

My smile is interrupted by a rattling noise. I drop my feet to the ground. We are just outside Tyrne's atmosphere where darkness is punctuated by roving spacecraft and distant stars. The Realms are approaching fast. The man-made planets are tethered like ugly balloons to Tyrne by manipulated gravity. Mik's factories are serviced by worker colonies and hybrids designed to withstand extreme weather and living conditions.

The emergency fuel light blinks a fiery red and my stomach sinks. We should have half a tank.

"What's going on?" Kenner furrows his brow and eyes the dash.

"Some malfunction. We should be good until our rest stop." I tap the screen like it will make the light stop blinking.

"We should have taken my craft." Kenner shifts around in his seat.

"And get caught by your dad?" I scan the radar, my pulse speeding up as asteroids from the ring around Tyrne whip past on the screen. My wrist throbs. Surprised, I run my finger under the angel wings. My skin is hot. I spin the bracelet around, a low swooping noise pounding on my eardrums. I yank a pair of headphones off the dash and clamp them over my ears to block the alarm. Kenner follows suit. He grips the armrests, his knuckles white.

"We can make a pit stop near that dive bar we went to once. It'll cost us an hour, but a few adjustments and we'll be back on track . . ." The headphones pick up my muffled, wobbly voice, and reverberate it back at me. "Or I'll put you on a taxi. It won't be great, but—"

I tap the dash to take *The Mirror* out of autopilot and the computer blurts out a response. "Override failure."

*Stay calm.* Heart pounding, I punch in the code for a manual override. Instead of slowing, the speedometer on the console shows us picking up speed. We are passing dots on the radar that only minutes ago had zipped past us. Heat on my wrist slices my skin like a knife.

“We’re overheating.” Sweat drips down Kenner’s brow. He leans forward, eyes on the dash.

A blaze appears through the porthole. My mouth falls open in disbelief. Licks of fire ring the largest planet in the Outer Realms, blocking our path to the military base.

“Divert us.” Kenner points to an alternate route around The Realms on the radar. The screen is blinking on and off, struggling to refresh.

“I’m trying.” I clutch the ship’s gearstick with shaky hands and yank back on it as a jolt rolls under my feet. “I can’t change our course.”

Kenner tries the co-pilot controls. When they don’t respond, he hits the dash with his fist. “This isn’t happening.”

The Realms grow bigger in the viewfinder. The alarm grows louder as we move faster, the ship juddering as the gauge shows us approaching warp speed, something *The Mirror* has never done. I slam my palm against the *ohscum* button. It should cancel autopilot and call for a rescue craft, but nothing happens. A sob rises in my throat. On the radar, other craft reverse or zoom out of the way of The Realms, the ships’ silver streaks in the viewfinder.

“Pree, oh my God . . .” Kenner’s voice is hoarse. Flames that were once in the distance now tint his skin orange through the porthole.

A panel overhead clatters to the floor. I bite my lip, a coppery, raw taste filling my mouth as storage units in the back open and shut. Kenner’s bag careens out of the luggage hold and slams into a passenger seat.

Fingers flying across the console, I try to disable the warp drive.

The computer responds. “System failure.”

“No shit.” A raw ache fills me as I imagine June’s soft skin, Sofi smiling, Mom humming in the kitchen, and my best friend’s laugh.

The ceiling rains down on us. Sparks shoot out of the dashboard. I snap my hands back. The hull is rupturing.

“Make us stop.” Kenner screams.

I slam the heel of my boot against the emergency button. Nothing.

Reflected in the porthole glass are two terrified faces, two sets of hands pressed to its thick surface, but the Pree staring back at me is all in white, and the Kenner at her side has a shaved head and tattoos scrawling down his arms. They are shouting, yelling at us, eyes wide as they pound on the glass.

Bits of light and darkness layer on top of each other, erasing the other. Pree and Kenner. My vision fractures into five tunnels of rippling light. I gasp. One of the shards sizzles like an electrical current. The Realms are so close that the cockpit is engulfed in a searing yellow glow.

We hit warp speed. Flames engulf the dash. My ears ring with my own screams. *The Mirror* whirls like a needle trying to land on a dial, spinning my stomach and slamming my check against the seat back. One of the spokes opens into a portal of light and *The Mirror* careens into it at full speed.

*I love you.* Heat crawls over my face and blasts the words out of my mouth. I reach for Kenner. His hand is shaking. The pendant welds to my skin, throbbing. Something clips *The Mirror's* side, one last pulse hitting the ship in a collision of fire and shattering debris.

We don't let go, and I am sickened that my wish came true. He's not leaving.

## **DIMENSION ONE: The Realms**

*Tyrne's Outer Realms, 05 AUG 3041 CE 22:03*

A wayward bead of sweat runs down my clavicle into my tube top. I swipe at my sticky skin. Low, thrumming music pounds against my eardrums. The beat of the spacegoth club in the Outer Realms matches my dark mood.

"Get me a water, will ya?" I moan at Lera. She is fanning herself with her hands. An unruly blonde wisp falls into her eyes.

My best friend snorts, undeterred by my scowl. "Get it yourself, biyatch."

I poke her shoulder and pout. "What you mean is, OK, Pree, I'd love to."

She half-smiles and bites her lip. "Sure that's a good idea? Me leaving you alone? I mean, he might show up—"

"He's not smart enough to find me if he was."

Tonight Lera is radiant in her silver mini, and I know she's looking for any excuse to hang out at the bar, even if it is just a dingy worker colony dive.

She narrows her eyes at me.

“I got it. Seriously.” I cross my arms over my chest. Lera is the only one who can see past my studded five-inch heels and the barbed wire tattooed on my thigh with glowing ink. I give her my very best glare and she throws her arms up over her head. Does a little shimmy and stops mid-spin. Squeals. Fumbles for my arm and squeezes. Hard.

“Ow.” I try to pry her fingers off, but she’s tugging on me, and I stumble in my heels, smacking into her.

“Look. At. Him.”

I right myself and squint through leather jackets and skin-tight dresses. A boy cuts through the crowd, his hands shoved into the pockets of his worn jeans, and my heart skips a beat. He is tall and slouchy with downcast eyes. His whole aura screams, *I’m so average*. But I narrow my eyes. The slouch seems put-on, his mussed-up hair from an expensive cut. Pecs outlined through his tee? Oh God yes. *No. I mean no*. I unclasp Lera’s fingers and turn away. “Not my type.”

Lera’s jaw drops. “He’s delicious.”

I shrug. The guys I date are one heartbeat away from needing a brain chip like those hybrids from the worker colonies, but the less thinking they do, the better. I have enough rolling around in own my head.

Despite Slouchy’s clean-cut look, my pulse is skittish. Why does he look so familiar? Should I warn Lera? *Because he’s too Shanbul prep?* A little denim in a den of leather doesn’t make him a bad guy. I clamp my lips shut, but it takes a few seconds for my heart rate to slow. Slouchy’s dirty-blond hair disappears, and I sink into our booth.

“Get outta my sight.” I wave Lera away.

She gives me a saucy look over her shoulder and shakes her sparkly rump in my direction. I laugh and imitate raising a glass to my mouth.

“You’re so lazy, Pree.” She is grinning. It is the kind of smile that scrubs the sky clean of clouds. Slouchy has no chance. I push away a flare of jealousy and smile back.

Once Lera is out of view, I roll my neck and stretch my shoulders. When we are together, Lera watches me, looking for cracks. Only she knows my wounds aren’t far below the surface.

*Rotten*, he called me, his face purple with rage. *Useless*.

I swallow hard and push my heavy bangs off my forehead. Try to forget

what Mom's husband Ran was doing while screaming at me. Maybe he is still knocked out by the sleep tonic I mixed into his drink. Or distracted. Two neurons can only go so far.

Yet a wisp of fear sneaks its way inside me like it has long, nimble fingers. I glance out the window at clusters of stars and the blinking lights of passing shuttlecraft. The Sun does not reach this side of Tyrne and for a long second, I allow a bottomless, empty feeling to spread through me.

A damp wandering hand attaches itself to my thigh. I whip around, dread chasing away the emptiness.

"Hello, Pree." The slimy voice is attached to a man twice my size.

He smiles and the night grows even darker.

## THE EVOLUTION OF YOU AND ME by Rose Margaret Deniz

### SYNOPSIS

50 FIRST DATES meets THE TIME TRAVELLER'S WIFE when childhood sweethearts Pree and Kenner are pulled into a series of alternate dimensions as strangers, each one more dangerous than the last. In THE EVOLUTION OF YOU AND ME, the seventeen-year-olds must rediscover their love for each other before the final portal they get sucked into closes for good, separating them from their planet and each other forever.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Farm-girl turned expat Rose Margaret Deniz lives in a neighbourhood full of roses and tea gardens. When she is not writing, she plotting an escape to a Turkish village to raise chickens.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'This is a very assured opening, I loved the space setting and found the characters immediately engaging. Pree and Kenner are young couple whose relationship you're rooting for from the outset.'

'A thrilling space story but with a real human heart – and refreshing make-do-and-mend setting.'

'Good set up of difficult family relationships and a rebellion where Kenner will be stationed for training for one year in the 'Outer Realms'. Writing quite sensual – they are clearly in love – and the story ambitious. I'm looking forward to seeing how it unfolds.'

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# GIRL CHURNS UP TROUBLE

By Susan Brownrigg

## Chapter One

Chen La held out her hand, pretending her father was clasping it as she weaved through the crowds. It helped to imagine he was at her side, still offering words of wisdom. She felt smaller than ever as she ducked round swinging arms and dodged long legs, making her way to the Great City of Indrapattha.

Ahead of Chen La was the North Gate, a huge sandstone arch topped by four carved heads which towered over her, one facing each compass direction.

As she got closer, Chen La could see the gatekeepers. She slowed down, stretching her neck to make herself seem taller, more confident.

“My name is Chen La Funan,” she practised quietly, hoping her father’s Khmer lessons would pay off. She pressed her palms together and bowed. “Chumreap suor.” Chen La hoped her hands were high enough, her bow low enough.

The guards returned the greeting, but their hands were low, their bow a mere dip, showing they were more important.

The larger of the brutes was dressed in the uniform of the King’s personal guard. He grunted, then blocked Chen La’s way. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“I am Chen La Funan. Chinese diplomat. I have an appointment to see King Jayavarman the Seventh.” She lowered her eyes respectfully.

“Well, Krait, will you let the girl pass?” asked one of the gatekeepers. “You are unlucky, little one. We are in the middle of our daily inspection. Krait does not like children.”

The bodyguard blew out of his nose like a bad-tempered dragon.

The gatekeepers paced impatiently by their sentry boxes. Their unsmiling faces told Chen La they did not enjoy their role.

"Is there a problem?" Chen La asked, running a finger along the inside of her collar. Her silk jacket felt too tight. She could feel dampness under her armpits. "I have travelled very far to discuss trade proposals on behalf of the Emperor."

The bodyguard grunted again. "*Yôu* have an appointment?" He raised an eyebrow. "I am Krait, the King's personal guard. I would know if he was expecting a . . ." he sneered, ". . . diplomat. The King does not make appointments with children."

"I am here as my father's representative," explained Chen La. "My father has passed away and I have travelled in his place."

"So sorry," said another guard, but Chen La couldn't see any sadness or sympathy in his expression.

Krait scowled at her.

Chen La kept her mouth tightly closed and waited patiently.

Still the bodyguard said nothing.

"I have papers from the Emperor," Chen La carefully pulled out her father's documents, making sure the special list stayed tucked safely inside her pocket. She held them out but the guard ignored them.

"Why are you not in school?" asked Krait. "The King wants all children to be educated. It is my job to make sure the King gets whatever he wants."

Chen La blinked. "I don't want to go to school. I told you I am here to see the King. My father made arrangements to speak to Jayavarman on behalf of the Emperor."

"But you are not your father," Krait interrupted.

Chen La wanted to kick the bodyguard in the shins. Instead she breathed deeply and tried to channel her father's diplomacy. She narrowed her eyes. Nodded. "I will return tomorrow."

Chen La turned; she would think up a new approach, try a different gate. Her father had told her there were five. The gatekeepers might be more sympathetic at the East Gate, or more understanding at the Victory Gate.

With any luck they would let her walk away but when Krait grabbed her arm, Chen La knew that wasn't going to be the case.

## Chapter Two

Chen La rubbed her arm and tried to pull free from the guard's thick grip. She stumbled over her feet as Krait marched her away from the gate.

"My sister runs a school at the centre of learning," he boomed. "Enhydris will teach you some manners. I am sure of it."

In the months up to his death her father had prepped her on every detail of her journey. He had drilled her on Khmer customs and traditions, myths and legends.

There was nothing to be gained from a detour to a school in the Preah Khan. Chen La was losing valuable time and heading in completely the wrong direction.

Chen La looked over her shoulder; the gate was getting smaller and smaller the further away she got, like a fading dream. There had been no lesson on what to do if she failed. Chen La wanted to curl up and hide, but that would dishonour her father. She must succeed in her mission. She would deal with each challenge with calm, intelligence and confidence.

Chen La made a mental note of a series of turns along unfamiliar paths until they reached a huge wall. It stood, two metres high, with carved images of the Buddha around the top.

Indrapattha was hot and dusty. The air was dry and caught in the back of Chen La's throat, making her chest feel tight and wheezy.

The air in the Yandang Mountains where Chen La had lived for thirteen years was fresh and sweet. She loved nothing more than climbing up a crevice as high as she could, then looking down over trees, waterfalls and springs.

In her village she could sometimes go all day without seeing anyone, but in this city people swarmed like bees, and the constant buzz made her feel faint. Traders promoting, families chattering, animals braying and clucking, oxcarts wheels turning, soldiers parading . . . it made her head spin. The air was filled with smells, good ones like flowers and cooking, but bad ones too: human sweat and animal droppings. She kept a tight hold of her shoulder bag, ensuring Firefox couldn't escape. Her father had left a list of what she should take on her journey, but she had added the red panda to the top of it.

Chen La glanced at face after face. Old wise faces. Young cheeky faces.

Even faces like hers. She hadn't expected that so far from home. She had thought she would stand out, but apparently others had also travelled from China to the city. Chen La tried to bow and say hello to each of the strangers, but there were so many and it was impossible with her arm still clasped by Krait.

The guard kept tutting and grumping until they turned towards a miserable-looking wooden building. "Your new school," he said.

Chen La had never been to school; her village was too small to need one. Instead her father had given her lessons in languages, finance, geography, philosophy, politics and history. His only child, he had been determined that Chen La would understand as much of the world as he did. Now he was gone; he would still expect her to continue her learning, but not here and not now.

The school doors opened. A serious-looking, petite woman stepped out and rang a large handbell. Suddenly dozens of children appeared and ran towards her.

"Inside, everyone, inside. Find your place," called the teacher, swinging her long black plait from her shoulder.

Krait stepped forward, and greeted his sister. "Chumreap suor, Enhydris, I have a new pupil for you. She is a foreigner but I am sure you will be able to teach her something."

"Chumreap suor," said Chen La, bowing.

"Chumreap suor. What is your name, child?" asked the woman, bending down. "Where do you come from?"

"My name is Chen La and I am from the Chinese Yandang Mountains." Her stomach was churning; she had no idea what to expect next.

"Pleased to meet you, Chen La. I must say, you speak our language very well. Perhaps you could give a talk to the class about your home country? I understand it is a most fascinating place." Enhydris nodded to her brother then led Chen La inside. "I'm afraid you seem to be the only girl here today."

Chen La winced; the room sounded like it was filled with wild animals, not civilised children.

The teacher closed the door. Chen La felt trapped.

The children found their seats. Enhydris placed a hand on Chen La's

shoulder and steered her to a free space. "Today we are learning our letters and numbers."

"But I'm not supposed to be here," said Chen La, hugging her bag close. She wanted to say she had important business with the King, but thought better of saying so.

"Don't be silly. Of course you're supposed to be here. Jayavarman the Seventh wants all children to be educated." She tapped the top of Chen La's head. "Girls and boys alike. That's why my brother brought you. Now sit down and not another word."

The class began to laugh. Chen La felt small and embarrassed until Enhydris gave a look that silenced the entire room.

"Still no Tomistoma?" she asked, scouring the room with narrow eyes. "Absent again? Hummmph. That child is in big trouble this time."

The class was silent. Enhydris gave a satisfied smile. "Right, everyone recite the alphabet with me. Ka, kha, ca, cha, ta, tha . . ."

Chen La opened and closed her mouth as though joining in. All she could think was how she was wasting time. She should be concentrating on the list. Trying to track down the items on it.

The lesson seemed to go on forever, and Chen La could see Firefox was getting restless in her bag.

At last Enhydris said, "That is enough for this morning. It is time for lunch. Line up."

The class pushed and shoved themselves into some sort of order. Chen La joined the back of the queue. Much as she wanted to escape, the idea of food stopped her from running away. She should eat – who knew when she would get the chance again, and it had been a day since her last meal.

Enhydris rang the bell again. "That's enough; settle down."

Everyone stood up straighter and streamed out of the big doors to a long run of wooden tables outside. The smell of wood smoke filled the air and to one side she could see servants preparing food in simple clay pots and over brazier grills.

Her father had warned her about these "savages" – mountain people sold to families to work as servants. He had explained they were not allowed into family homes and must sleep outside under the stilted houses.

The children found a space on the benches. Chen La slipped quietly

onto a spot at one end. Her stomach grumbled to say it was ready for food, despite her worries. Even though she was surrounded by boys her own age Chen La felt very alone. She loosened her bag under the table, so that Firefox could pop her head out.

Chen La scrunched up her nose; there was a strange smell. She looked up from under the table as a dishevelled, dirty boy sat down next to her. The smell was coming from an animal wrapped around the boy's neck.

### **Chapter Three**

The animal was some kind of mammal with grey fur and long whiskers. It was like a grizzly, bigger, grumpier, shaggier, wilder version of Firefox. Chen La liked it instantly. She was less sure about the boy. He hadn't even greeted her.

A servant bowed low then placed a dish of grilled squid in front of the newcomer, who pulled his flat, round hat down over his eyes. The animal wriggled a little, as the boy reached out to take some of the seafood. Chen La had never seen such an untidy child. He was wearing mud-splattered sarong-like bottoms that fastened between his legs with thick, bright ribbon round his waist and draped in front. He wore extra wrappings around his chest.

"Chumreap suor," said Chen La.

The boy did a quick bow, then stuck his tongue out at her. Chen La widened her eyes in surprise.

The animal was now trying to climb over the boy to get to the table. Chen La couldn't help but laugh as it sat on the boy's head, its thick long tail clamped around his face.

The children all began chattering and pointing at the new boy.

Chen La tried out some more of her Khmer. "Are they talking about you?" She reached out for a bowl of noodle soup, but the boy swiped it before she had chance to take it.

"Of course, people are always talking about me," said the boy with a shrug, as he scooped hot rice noodles into his mouth. "They are saying my father will be furious if he discovers I skipped school again." Chen La could see all the mashed-up food in his mouth as the boy continued. "They are right too, but I will tell Enhydris to keep quiet."

Chen La's mouth fell open.

"I'm Tomistoma," said the boy.

"Chen La Funan," she replied.

Tomistoma picked at his teeth. "No doubt you've heard all about me. Most of it's true. I made my first three governesses quit. One died from shock, one ran off to get married and the third, well . . ." He twirled a finger close to his temple. "Now they make me come here. She won't last long." He stuck a thumb towards Enhydris. "Although she is putting up a fight."

Chen La didn't know if she was supposed to believe any of his bragging. Luckily the boy was shovelling more food into his mouth. She looked down the table and stretched her hand out. Slowly she moved it towards a plate of what looked like water spinach. Surely the boy wouldn't beat her to that.

He waved a hand dismissively. "It's fine, you can have the swamp cabbage."

Chen La tasted it, then forced a smile as she chewed. It was revolting – like rotten, wet, stinky grass.

"Enhydris is always trying to impress my father," continued Tomistoma. "She knows she needs to keep me on side. She is in love with my father, well, all the women are, but he will never love any of them the way he loved my mother."

Chen La could understand that. "My father never remarried after my mother's death," she said quietly.

The servants were bringing more dishes. Chen La's nose twitched; she could smell curries made with creamy coconut milk and lime. Another dish looked like chargrilled pork and rice. Then there were the desserts; she spotted sour fruit – mango and guava sprinkled with chilli and salt-spiked sugar – and grilled banana in slices of pumpkin custard. She licked her lips in anticipation.

A servant brought over a large dish and lifted the lid to reveal live, wriggling, hairy spiders.

Chen La could have wept. "I am not eating that."

"Spider is an Indrapattha delicacy," said Tomistoma, "but if you're too afraid to eat them that way, I could ask them to cook them. Baked ones are

crunchy on the outside but nice and squishy in the middle.” The boy gave an order to an elderly woman who gave a bow and took the spiders back to the kitchen area.

Tomistoma’s animal was wriggling on his shoulders. The boy stood up and tried to get the creature to settle but now it stretched down his back, trying to reach the food. The boy fed little bits of fig and egg out of a leather pouch to the grizzly animal.

“What is he? He reminds me of my red panda.”

“Bearcat is my pet binturong.”

“A bint-ur-what?”

“Binturong. Have you never seen one before?” The binturong hung upside down by his tail. “My Bearcat is better than your red panda.”

“You haven’t even seen Firefox.”

“Yes I have – she’s under the table over there.”

Chen La didn’t believe him. “No, she’s in my bag . . . Oh!”

She jumped up and hurried to the other table. Tomistoma and the binturong followed.

“See,” said Tomistoma, arms folded.

Chen La peered under the table. The red panda yawned and blinked as if to say, ‘About time you noticed me.’

Chen La held out her arms, grinning as she hugged and stroked her red panda before taking her back to their seats. She opened up her bag so Firefox could snuggle safely inside.

Chen La looked for something to feed to Firefox. The red panda liked bamboo best.

Tomistoma handed over some egg. “Will she eat this?”

Chen La nodded, taking it. “Thank you.”

The boy shrugged. “I like animals,” he said. “Animals are better than people.”

Chen La offered Firefox the white of the egg. The red panda sniffed it suspiciously at first, then took it in her front paws and began to eat it gracefully.

“You’re not from Indrapattha, are you?” said the boy, wiping his snotty nose along his arm. “Bearcat’s not sure he likes foreigners. My father doesn’t like them either. He would kick you out of the city.”

“And who exactly is your father?” asked Chen La. “One of the guards? Not that Krait I hope. I hate him.”

“How dare you. My father’s the King of course.”

“Sure,” said Chen La. There was no way this scruffy urchin was a prince. “And my father was Emperor Zhezong of Song”

The boy frowned. “I could have you thrown in the gharial jail for being rude, you know? If I shouted now, half the army would come running.”

Chen La shrugged her shoulders.

The boy jumped off the archway and put his face right up to Chen La’s. “You’re stupid.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are, stooopiidd.”

The binturong was getting worked up too; he was swishing his tail and making strange noises.

“You’ve upset Bearcat now,” said Tomistoma.

“Well you’ve upset Firefox too,” said Chen La, but the bag was perfectly still. The red panda seemed to have gone back to sleep.

“Where is *your* father?” asked Tomistoma, tucking into another bowl of rice with fish paste.

The words were hard to say out loud. Chen La whispered them. “He died.”

The boy wiped his mouth. “Oh. You’re an orphan?”

Chen La swallowed hard and nodded.

“How did you end up here, in my country?”

Chen La paused, remembering her vow. “I sailed on a junk ship from Lin’an, on the coast of China. My father was supposed to travel here on a trade mission. I took his place.”

“So you’re a spy!”

“Don’t be silly.” Chen La nervously adjusted the list in her pocket when Tomistoma glanced away. She had promised to keep it a secret, and had memorised every item in case she should lose it. She tested herself, running the items through her mind – the Divine Cow, the White Elephant, the Ever Flowering Tree, the Precious Jewel, the Powerful Bow and the Amrita. She didn’t know if any of them existed, but the Emperor had promised her father great wealth if he could find out.

Chen La knew what was at stake. No family. No home. Finding at least one item on the list was her only hope of a future. She wiped away a tear then straightened her back. She would find a way to get into the city to see the King, even if it meant breaking in at night.

Chen La broke her daydream. Tomistoma was staring at her. "Pardon?"

"I *said* my father says all the foreign diplomats are really spies," repeated the boy. "The Chinese, the Chams . . . Still you're just a child so I can trust you." He cocked his head to one side. "How old are you? *I'm* fourteen."

"Me too," Chen La lied, "well, near enough." She swept her fringe away. "Is it always this hot?" she asked, changing the subject.

"It's not hot," said Tomistoma laughing. "Vichekan is our coolest month – we are at the start of our dry season."

"It seems hot to me," said Chen La, gulping another drink.

Tomistoma drank too then spluttered it everywhere. "Oh no!"

Chen La looked up and saw the teacher stomping towards the table.

Enhydriis halted, placed her palms together really high, then did a very low bow. "Princess Tomistoma. You are late, again."

## Chapter Four

Chen La's mouth fell open. Princess! It was hard enough to believe that Tomistoma's father really was the King let alone that the grubby boy was actually a girl.

"Chumpreap suor," said Tomistoma, a smirk on her face. "I told my father I would go to school, and well here I am."

"He did not mean just for lunchtime," fumed Enhydriis. She clenched her fists in frustration. Her next words crashed out like thunder. "He will be furious when he hears you've missed my class again. Where have you been? Playing with that creature of yours in the jungle again I suppose. Look at you. You are a mess, a disgrace to the royal family. Your father will be furious."

"So don't tell him," said Princess Tomistoma, with a shrug.

Enhydriis breathed deeply. "Oh, don't worry, I'm not going to tell him . . ."

Tomistoma grinned broadly and winked at Chen La.

"YOU are," said Enhydriis. "And I'm going to listen to every grovelling word."

The girl jumped up out of her seat. “You can’t make me.”

“Yes I can. I am your teacher and your father has given me permission to do whatever it takes to get you educated.”

Chen La bit her lip. What would Tomistoma do now?

Enhydris grabbed the Princess by the ear and began to pull her away from the table.

The children all jumped up and roared with excitement as they followed the fuming teacher. The binturong was clinging desperately onto the Princess’s neck. The teacher stomped towards the North Gate, the whole class in pursuit, screaming with laughter. Enhydris pulled Tomistoma across a moat by a bridge-like causeway.

Chen La grabbed her bag and tried to keep up. She ran a hand over the stone carvings on the side of the bridge. She could hear the echo of her father’s description in her mind. “The carvings show the gods and devils saving the world by pulling on a cobra-like naga.”

The tug-of-war churned the ocean milk, releasing powerful treasures which were given to the first king and passed to each successor in turn. Chen La found the story far-fetched, yet here she was with her list.

The gods carved on the left had friendly petal-shaped eyes, but when Chen La turned to see the devils, she felt their round eyes bore into her. She shuddered then sprinted to catch the others up as they began to walk through the gate.

Chen La couldn’t believe it. They were going to go straight through! She was one step closer to finding the treasures. Krait wouldn’t stop her this time. She could imagine her father throwing back his head and laughing too.

Only one person wasn’t laughing: Tomistoma.

Chen La looked at the scruffy, annoying girl. She felt sorry for Tomistoma – she looked sick with worry – but the Princess wasn’t her problem. She didn’t even know her properly.

She looked again at Tomistoma; she looked smaller now. Chen La couldn’t hear her father laughing any more.

Chen La knew she should go, start her search proper for the treasures, but the more she looked at the Princess, the more her feet stayed firm.

She would stay with the group and make sure her new friend was all

right. When an image of her father smiling popped into her mind, she knew she had made the right decision. Besides this way she would get to see the King himself. He may even be wearing the Precious Jewel or carrying the Powerful Bow.

Chen La checked her treasure list was still inside her pocket. Could she really find them all?

## **GIRL CHURNS UP TROUBLE by Susan Brownrigg**

### **SYNOPSIS**

**GIRL CHURNS UP TROUBLE** is a historical fantasy set in thirteenth-century Cambodia. Representing her late father, Chen La, thirteen, travels from China to the Khmer City of Indrapattha in search of the royal treasures. These include the Divine Cow, a White Elephant and the Amrita – an elixir of immortality. Without the treasures Chen La will be destitute – with them she could lose her only friend and put both their lives in danger.

### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**

Susan Brownrigg enjoys writing about history and animals – not surprising as she is a museum learning officer and spent a summer season working in a zoo. Susan, a former journalist, is also inspired by faraway locations she would one day like to visit. She lives in slightly less exotic Skelmersdale.

### **JUDGES' COMMENTS**

‘An original setting and a lovely surprise as to the identity of Chen La’s new friend.’

‘I enjoyed the exotic setting and regal tone of this fantasy set in thirteenth-century Cambodia – a place and time I know nothing about. I loved the twist that Tomistoma is not just royal but a princess – not a boy, as we and the protagonist had thought. It’s refreshingly different and I like it.’

‘Very good writing and excellent characterisation. I liked the contrast of the two female leads.’

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# CLOPWYCK RIVER

By Georgia Bowers

Pain tiptoes through the darkness of my broken mind, slowly wrenching me from unconsciousness. All I can hear is whistling. The flames and smoke slap me awake as I try to move my arms and legs. My eyes sweep the debris. She can't be dead. Not again. She cannot be dead.

## Chapter One

My forehead's numb from where I've been leaning against the passenger side window, and my back aches from sitting at an awkward angle. I shift in my seat, and realising that I'm not asleep as I've been pretending to be, Jackie, my old neighbour, glances at me.

"I really think this is for the best, Demi."

I sigh. Isn't that what all adults say when they're making you do something you don't want to do? I look ahead and rub my neck. "It's fine."

"It's not fair on you to be stuck with me. You should be with family. My boys are much younger than you, I don't want them—" She catches herself before she says what she really thinks. "You need to be with people who love you, people that know you, people that—"

"Daria doesn't know me."

"Of course she does! She's your sister."

"That doesn't mean she knows me."

Jackie purses her lips and exhales through her nose. "I know you're not happy about this, but there isn't another option. I really think it's for the best." She nods as she repeats the words, convincing herself that palming me off is the right thing to do.

“I said it’s fine.” It’s not. I’d rather stay at Jackie’s with her annoying twin sons blaring their PS4 through the wall, than live with my sister in Clopwyck River. But Jackie has been waiting for this day since she shook me awake from a vodka-induced sleep, and told me that Mum had died in a car crash.

A road sign hurls my thoughts back in my face and officially welcomes me to Clopwyck River. Dense trees shadow the car, shielding us from the rain as we glide into a leafy tunnel. I look through the window and tree trunks speed past my eyes, hypnotising me into almost forgetting where I am, their spell breaking suddenly as we emerge from our passage. As my eyes adjust to the daylight, I experience the only familiar feeling I can associate with this place: a static shock crackles through my palms to my fingertips. I shudder, shaking away the sensation that I’ve had on the previous four occasions I’ve visited my sister here.

I look out at the dull evening and exhale until I have no air left; the weather is as depressing as my life. As is the norm in England at this time of year, it’s chucking it down. Grey clouds tumble and swirl against each other like the thoughts in my head, and the wind forces its will on the tree branches.

“This place is completely off the radar.”

I open my eyes and see Jackie frowning between the road and the satnav, jabbing the buttons on the screen. “Are you sure you can’t remember where Daria’s house is?” I shrug and fold my arms. Jackie’s knuckles are white on the steering wheel and she’s sitting so far forward her nose is almost touching the windscreen; she’s concerned that she’s never going to deliver me to my new babysitter. She spots a young couple in a dilapidated bus shelter, and slows the car to a stop. Deep in conversation, a guy leans over a girl who glances between him and her bright pink nails. The conversation stops abruptly as we pull over next to them.

Jackie winds down the window. “Hello there. Do you know where, um . . .” she grabs the paperwork from the dashboard, “. . . Blackthorn Lane is? My satnav has completely given up.”

Without hesitation, the boy pops open an umbrella, strides towards the car, and crouches down next to the driver’s door as if he’s about to talk to a five year old. I steal a quick look at him. He’s *gorgeous*. His dark brown hair

is styled in that oh-my-luscious-hair-naturally-stands-up-and-slightly-to-the-side look, but the swagger in his walk suggests he spends at least thirty minutes in front of the mirror getting his appearance just right.

“Well, let’s see.” He charms Jackie as he makes a show of squinting down the road. “You’re almost there. Just carry on up here for about two minutes and you’ll see a fork in the road. Take the road on the right, and then you’ll see the woods. Keep driving and it’s the next left turn. Drive slow or you’ll miss it.”

I risk a look into his brown eyes. Big mistake. He winks at me.

“Thank you.” Jackie throws the paperwork onto the back seat, and then looks from Brown Eyes to me. “You two must be around the same age. Demi, this boy might go to your new school.”

“I thought you must be new.” He grins. “I’m Sullivan, and this is Ciara.”

“His *girlfriend* Ciara,” she shoots back. With her long blonde hair, she’s equally as gorgeous as he is, but her blue eyes dart an immediate coldness towards me; she’s not in any way interested in making friends. Suits me. It’s not like I’m looking for a new best friend to have pillow fights with.

Jackie nods at me expectantly, but when I remain silent she introduces me herself. “This is Demi-Louise Darnell. She’s moving here to live with her sister, Daria. She’ll be starting at Clopwyck Academy tomorrow. Demi, won’t it be nice to know a couple of people at your new school?”

I nod unenthusiastically, and suddenly being the centre of attention makes me blush. Ciara does nothing to cool my pink cheeks as her eyes sear my face like white hot pokers.

Sullivan interrupts the glare. “Don’t worry, Demi-Louise. I’ll look after you.” His eyes narrow as he looks at his girlfriend. “Ciara will too – right, Ciara?”

“Yeah. *Right.*”

Ciara shifts her attention back to her red nails and I . . . Wait! Red nails? I squeeze my eyes shut for a count of three, but when I open them her nails are still red. Ruby red. I’m sure they were pink. I pray it’s just the bad lighting making them look a different colour, not me losing my mind. Again.

As Sullivan continues flirting with Jackie, Ciara flips up her hood, sashays around the car as if she’s modelling a line of chic raincoats, and

when she reaches my door, she bends over so her face is level with mine. She says something I can't make out. I wind down my window and raise my eyebrows at her.

"Where were you born?" she repeats.

Is this her version of small talk? "What?"

"I said: *Where were you born?*" She enunciates the last four words like she's speaking to someone who has just learned English.

"Cambridge," I reply, but I don't take my eyes off hers as I answer. It seems like a harmless question, but like the interrogator herself, I suspect there's malice hidden beneath the surface.

"Hmmm." She studies my face, her smile a mile from reaching her eyes. "You just became interesting." She struts back to Sullivan's side as he and Jackie wrap up their little mutual appreciation society.

"Thanks, you two; it was nice to meet you both." Jackie searches for first gear as she prepares to move off. "Oh Ciara, I love that nail colour! What's it called?"

Ciara waggles her fingers in front of her chest, making me gasp. "Sea Breeze Blue." She winks at me. "Welcome to Clopwyck River, Demi-Louise."

## Chapter Two

I'm still thinking about Ciara's nail varnish as we pull up outside my sister's house. I'd never told anybody, but after Mum died I started seeing things, imagining bizarre scenes and sensations. I couldn't confide in Jackie: I had already heard her talking on the phone about whether I should see a therapist or grief counsellor. I didn't want to share my mind with anyone. When Jackie told me I would be coming to live here, the hallucinations just stopped. Until just now.

"Well, I guess this is the place."

Jackie turns off the engine, her eyes firmly placed on the house, probably silently praying that my new guardian is home. "You never told me how beautiful it is here, Demi."

I look beyond the birch trees lining the front of the long garden, and remember that it is beautiful. The driveway curves up to a red door, ivy twists over a canopy, and creeps up a trellis towards the windows upstairs.

All of the window ledges are lined with glass bottles in different shades of green, a little hobby of one of the inhabitants perhaps.

I'm drenched by the rain as soon as I open my door, and rush to the boot where Jackie is already unloading my things. I grab what she hasn't managed to load herself up with, and jog up the driveway. The aroma of snapdragons and rosemary jolts a memory of walking up here with Mum three years ago. I blink back tears before they can take hold and wait as Jackie knocks on the door.

Before I can bolt into the descending darkness, my sister's husband, Andrew, opens the door. "You made it!" His eyes shine brightly behind his glasses and his wide smile makes me feel a fraction less sick and nervous.

"Hi, Andrew."

"It's good to see you, Demi." I stiffen as he pulls me into a bear hug. "We're really pleased to have you here."

Clumsy footsteps prompt Andrew to finally pull away as Elliot, my nephew, comes bounding over and flings himself around his dad's legs. He looks up at me through a mop of golden brown hair, unsure what to make of this stranger. The feeling is mutual.

"Hey, buddy!" Andrew picks Elliot up, making him squeal loudly as he gives him a big kiss. "This is your Auntie Demi. She hasn't seen you since you were a tiny baby."

Elliot and I solemnly regard each other until he buries his head into his dad's shoulder. I wish I could do the same thing but I don't have anyone's strong shoulder to retreat to, and I never will again.

"Sorry, you must be Jackie. What are we waiting for? Let's get inside and I'll make you a cup of tea. I'm sure I can find a towel so you can dry—"

"No, no, it's fine." Jackie waves both of her hands nervously. "I really must get going. I'm worried about getting out of town. My satnav doesn't seem to like it here."

Me neither.

"You're sure you don't want to come in for a quick drink? Use the loo?"

"No, no, I really must be going. Demi . . ." She turns to me and awkwardly pats my shoulder. "I'm going to miss you. If you need anything, just call."

Yeah, right. On both counts. “Thanks, Jackie. For . . . you know, everything.”

She scurries down the drive in that weird half run, half walk that adults do, and gets into the car. I feel a mild pang of gratitude and loneliness as she waves quickly, then drives away. She didn’t have to look after me when Mum died, and she didn’t have to drive me here today. I know she’s glad to be rid of me, but I was lucky to have her when I did.

“Shall we find Mummy?” Elliot claps his hands as I follow them in and Andrew closes the door. I take a deep breath, bracing myself to meet this blood relation who is practically a stranger to me. All these people are practically strangers, but if I dwell on that too long I know I’ll start crying, and I can’t let myself.

We walk inside, and the unique smell of their house, of them, embraces me without invitation. I look around and the flicker of a television lights up the living room doorway on the right; the stairs stretch upwards in front of me; a table sits in front of a disused understairs cupboard, a telephone and stack of books sitting on top of it. I follow Andrew into the kitchen.

Daria sits at a wooden table turning the pages of a magazine. She looks up and I see why Mum said that I’d grown to look like her. Our shared genes show in her fair skin, freckles across her nose, and full eyebrows; the only differences in our appearances are her long, straight nose, and her curly dark brown hair. Mum used to press the end of my nose with her finger and call it a “button”, and my hair is the same colour as Daria’s, but it’s dead straight.

“Demi.”

She stands up, but there is no welcoming smile and no outstretched arms to her orphaned sister, offering to share the pain of losing our only parent. She wears the expression of a world champion poker player, her eyes pointing in my direction but not focusing on me. She stops in front of me, close enough that I can see the familiar colour of her eyes, and for a second I think she’s going to hug me, but instead she takes Elliot from Andrew. She holds him tight and kisses him on his forehead.

“I show Demi bedroom?” Elliot quietly asks his mum. I feel under inspection as Daria looks me up and down.

“That’s a great idea, buddy!” Andrew says. “Come on then. We’ll all show Demi her bedroom.”

Andrew leads the way up the stairs and I follow them to the last door on the landing. “It’s not huge but we hope you’ll feel comfortable in here, Demi.”

Andrew opens the door for me and I walk inside, floorboards creaking under my feet until I step onto a woolly rug. The room smells like polish and air freshener. I take in the wooden furniture, the TV, and the matching spotty blue curtains and duvet cover, trying to picture myself living here, settling into a new life.

“Do you think you’ll be OK in here?” Andrew asks nervously.

I look around the room. My room. It couldn’t feel any less like my room. I sit on the edge of the bed, my legs suddenly weak. “Yeah. I’ll be fine.”

“Daria picked everything out and got it all ready for you.”

“Thanks, Daria.” God, it’s hard addressing her. I feel like I know Andrew better than I know my own sister.

Daria shrugs. “It was no trouble. I had to get new towels anyway so just picked up new sheets at the same time.”

“Well, thanks anyway.”

There’s an awkward silence until Elliot demands to be let down and toddles over to my bed. He puts his chubby arms up to me. “Up!”

I look at Andrew who’s smiling and nodding, and Daria whose face is inscrutable. Having never in my life picked up a child, I put my hands around the sturdiest looking part of Elliot’s body, lifting him under his armpits, and plonk him onto the bed next to me. He clasps his hands together and raises his shoulders as he grins shyly up at me. The tension in my body eases a little as I look at his face, and for the first time in months I feel tiny warm fingers of emotion trying to nudge my empty heart back to life.

I’ve nearly unpacked one of the boxes when I suddenly see my mum’s face smiling up at me. Jackie must have slipped the framed photo of me and her taken five years ago into the box. I stare at the picture for a few seconds then open the drawer of the bedside table and place the frame inside, face

down, and firmly close it. I go downstairs and quietly open the living room door, an intruder as I stand awkwardly waiting to be discovered. Andrew looks up at me and smiles.

"All set, Demi?"

"I think so. I've started unpacking anyway."

"Good. If there's anything you need, just ask. You hungry?"

I'm starving. "No, I'm fine. I was thinking of going for a run."

"It's too dark," says Daria, who is sitting in an armchair by the fireplace. She's watching Elliot playing with his toys even though she's addressing me.

"I'll be fine."

"You don't know your way around."

"I do. Kind of."

Andrew gets up and goes to the kitchen. He returns with a head torch. "Here, take this. She'll be fine, Daria. Have you got your phone with you? Leave us the number. Just stick to the road, Demi; I wouldn't go into the woods. Even with the torch you'll hardly be able to see anything."

Daria frowns at Andrew. Great. I've been here two hours and I'm already causing tension between them.

"Oh, and here's your key. Don't be too late; remember it's your first day at school tomorrow."

Like he cares. Like I care, for that matter. "I won't be long."

With my earbuds lodged into my ears, I start to run, my feet splashing through the rain pooling on the ground. Ignoring what Andrew said, I run towards the woods and flick on the torch strapped onto my head. I don't know why I have to do the opposite of what anyone tells me. I just do.

I stomp into the opening of the dark trees and after a few minutes I regret ignoring Andrew's advice: the isolation I've been feeling for the last two months seems manifested in the barky darkness surrounding me. I jog unsteadily, a feeling of unease growing in my belly. If this was a scene from a horror film, the audience would be shouting at the ditzy lead actress to go back the way she came. I stop to catch my breath, and suddenly my skin prickles like something's brushed its nail down my neck.

"Hello?" Please, don't let anyone answer. I pull my earbuds out and

stand motionless, the tinny sound of the music, my breathing and the swishing of leaves the only sounds in the darkness.

Suddenly, from behind, I hear a twig snap. “Hello?! Who’s there?!” My voice cracks from the fear that’s taken residence on my chest. I spin around hoping to see Andrew, but my foot catches under a tree root and before I can see anything, I’ve fallen into the mud. The beam of light dances frantically in front of me as I try to regain my footing and stand up. I freeze, panic sprung from its starting blocks: there is someone standing in front of me.

It’s not Andrew.

I try to scream for help but fear is squeezing its strong hands around my neck, choking me into paralysed silence. Telling myself not to, I slowly look up anyway, and the head torch creeps up the hunched shape to reveal who’s there.

His feet are hidden underneath a long dark coat, the stench of stale urine, rotten food and sewerage wafting across my face as it ripples in the wind. Spindly white hands protrude from the oversized arms of the coat, jagged and dirty fingernails making each finger a deadly claw. His head is masked beneath a heavy hood; eyes glow from deep within its shadows. He reaches towards me with one of his bony hands. Panting with panic, I instinctively throw my hands in front of my face.

His hand clasps my wrist and he starts to pull. I struggle against his grip but I’m hauled up to his level, surprised when I stand an inch taller than him. When I’m at my full upright position and steady on my feet, he releases me, takes a step back, and pushes his hood back. It’s not a man at all: it’s a woman. A really old woman. She wasn’t trying to kill me: she was just helping me up.

The old woman gazes at me, her bright eyes shining out of deep sockets like they’re trying to escape their wrinkly surroundings. Her skin is plump around her cheeks but it’s riddled with deep lines crisscrossing her skin like a spider’s webbing. Wisps of dirty white hair stick out around her head like a crazy halo, and her chin juts up too close to the bottom of her hooked nose, no teeth inside her mouth to keep them apart. She looks a lot smaller from where I stand now, and she definitely doesn’t look as dangerous.

I bend over and put my hands on my knees, trying to slow my heart

rate. I get my breath back and glance up at her. She's still watching me. "What the hell are you doing?" She doesn't answer and I straighten up and click my fingers in front of her face, covering my nose as I get another whiff of her putrid aroma. "Hello? Hellooooo, anyone in there? What are you doing creeping up on me?"

Still no response; she doesn't move but slowly stretches her mouth into a toothless smile, her thin lips creeping up to her sagging ears. Her eyes remain locked on mine, and she shuffles forward.

"Get away from me!" I step backwards, one eye on her and one on potential trip hazards. "What do you want?"

"Stay." She stops as she speaks. I barely make out the word; her voice a croaky whisper carrying away on the wind.

"What?"

She tilts her head like an inquisitive old owl. "Stay," she repeats.

I calm a little: she's insane, but probably harmless. I hope. "I'm not staying. I'm heading back now. You should too. Where do you live?"

"Stay."

"Oh for God's sake! This is ridiculous! Stop saying that! You can stay if you want." I start to retreat and try to get my bearings. "Last chance. I'm heading back now if you want me to walk you home. *If* you know where you live."

"It will happen."

I stop and turn back to her. "What?"

"It will happen. You need three."

I shake my head and take a step closer to her, frowning into her wrinkly face. "*What* will happen? Three *what*? What the *hell* are you going on about?"

Her sunken eyes gleam, disjointed from the rest of her face. She reaches her hand up to my face, but I recoil from her papery skin. "You will need three. You will need it to be blood."

"I-I-I need it to be . . . *what*?"

Something clip-clops over my grave and makes me shudder; a gust of wind swoops down around us and fallen leaves and feathers whip up into a whirlwind. I glance up at the tree branches creaking in the darkness above our heads. I look back down.

She's gone.

“Hello? Hello? Old lady?” I look into the trees but there’s no sign of her. I’m glad she’s gone; she was giving me the creeps, big time. “Crazy old bitch.”

Despite her obvious lack of marbles, that was probably the longest conversation I’ve had in months. I put my earbuds back in and jog towards Daria’s house. The feeling of unease is still nipping at my heels so I pull out one earbud, my free ear listening out for any more crazy old people.

I hear rapid footsteps behind me, and I pick up my pace. Warm breath tingles the skin on the back of my neck, a male voice shouts something, and a hand brushes my shoulder. I brake on my heels and wheel around with a clenched fist smacking my attacker right in the nose. He falls backwards onto the ground, both of his hands pressing against his face. I train the light onto this pervert rapist, and see a pair of blinking blue eyes. He pulls his hands from his nose and looks at the blood that’s trickled into his palms, then frowns up at me.

“What the *hell* is the matter with you?! Are you *crazy*?”

## CLOPWYCK RIVER by Georgia Bowers

### SYNOPSIS

When fifteen-year-old Demi-Louise Darnell arrives in town, she soon learns that everyone born there has a dark, magical power. Just as Demi starts to accept her place in her new friends' hearts, family secrets are revealed and she battles a life changing truth and a threat against her loved ones. She must come to terms with her hidden past and fight for her family and friends' lives – by any means possible.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Georgia is a YA-reading, *Buffy-the-Vampire-Slayer*-obsessed librarian. Working in libraries gave her access to a huge range of books for children and teens, and after reading so many of them, she decided to set herself the challenge of writing one.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Demi's voice is really strong – she's closed and very insular but at the same time has razor sharp observations of all those around her. Everything about the opening was charged, unsettling and full of promise.'

'Haunting and spooky teen story with a growing menace. The supernatural element here made this stand out from the crowd.'

'Well-paced opening with good characterisation and nice sense of mystery. Why does Demi have such a distant relationship with her sister? Who's to blame? The coolness of the sister is well done and nicely balanced with the enthusiasm of Andrew the husband. An assured beginning.'

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# THE CHINATOWN CAT

By Emma Dowson

## Chapter 1

*Tuesday 7 July 2005*

I'm skiving school so there's no rush. I let Mei-Mei sniff her way slowly along Gerard Street, scaring off pigeons and licking orange sauce from a discarded takeaway container. Hundreds of scarlet and gold lanterns hang way above my head and there's a crispy duck pancake smell even though it's eight in the morning. Being in Chinatown makes me feel like I've travelled halfway around the world, when really I'm only five minutes away from home.

My stomach twists with hunger and I pull Mei-Mei towards the Lucky Cat Bakery, the only place that's open this early. The window is filled with trays of cream cakes, fried sesame balls, long, thin Chinese doughnuts called *youtiao* and, best of all, a mound of peanut cookies which look kind of ugly, like sandy rocks, but are soft and salty-sweet on the inside. A row of lucky cat ornaments, gold and silver mainly, but a few white ceramic ones with orange and black spots, sit on a shelf above the cakes, all waving their mechanical paws in synch, beckoning me in.

There's only one other customer inside the bakery, a boy leaning over a tray of buns, dark hair flopping into his face. Mei-Mei lurches forward and sniffs at the boy's trainers, making him kind of jump out of his skin. He turns towards me and his face is tight and wary, like an animal's. His right hand jerks up to push his hair to one side and for a moment I see that he has the most amazing coloured eyes. Light blue, like jeans that have been washed a hundred times. Then his hair falls back into them again.

The boy picks up a bun, slides it into a paper bag and takes it to the counter where a shop assistant with pink streaks in her hair talks on her phone. He stands there for a few moments fumbling inside a beaten-up looking backpack and pulling out a handful of coins. Then he turns to leave, but as he gets to the door he reaches up and grabs one of the lucky cats from the window display.

The shop assistant is hunched over the counter now, writing something down, still whispering into her phone. I don't think she saw what happened. She finishes her call, pockets her phone.

"Hey, that boy just stole one of your cats," is what I open my mouth to say, but somehow nothing comes out.

"Cute pug," she says as I pay for my peanut cookie. "Oh, it's Mei-Mei. I recognise her red collar."

"I'm looking after her while Mrs Chen's on holiday," I say, pulling Mei-Mei out of the shop before she can ask any questions.

I can still see the boy. He's walking slowly along Gerard Street, weaving between two men unloading boxes of pineapples from the back of a white van. He stops beside a stone dragon statue, shoves the stolen cat into his bag, takes a bite of his bun, then crumbles a little between his fingers and throws it at the pigeons in the gutter. Must be a tourist. Londoners never feed pigeons. He starts to walk again. "Hey," I shout, but he doesn't respond. I run towards him. Surely he must hear the pit-pat of Mei-Mei's nails on the pavement, the slap of my Converse behind him, but he doesn't speed up or turn around. I stop dead when I'm close enough to tap him on the shoulder. My heart pounds. I don't know what I'm going to say if he does turn around. But he doesn't. I stand there for a moment and he carries on walking.

I follow the boy on to Wardour Street, then speed up a little, but just as I'm about to catch up with him again, Mei-Mei stops outside Won Kei's restaurant and squats. A woman in high heels tuts as she almost bumps in to me and I bend down quickly to pick up the poo with a plastic bag. I look up and the boy has disappeared and I'm left with Mei-Mei's hot little parcel dangling between my fingers.

I walk on to Shaftesbury Avenue, bin the poo bag and then just stand there looking around, but I can't see the boy anywhere.

I check the time on my phone. Eight-twenty. Usually I'd be at school by now. I've never skived off before, but I just woke up with this weird feeling that something's going to happen and if I go to school I'll miss it. And even if absolutely nothing happens it will still be better than going to school and having Amber look straight through me as if I don't even exist.

Sore throat? Terrible stomach cramps? Blinding headache? Excuses whizz around my brain. I'm not sure which to choose yet. Mum's a nurse at the Royal London Hospital so she's not easy to fool. "*I think you'll survive,*" she said the one time I tried to pull a sickie, raising her right eyebrow in that way she has of letting me know I'm busted. But Mum left for her shift before I got up this morning and she won't be home for ages so I've got plenty of time to come up with something.

I turn around and walk back the way I've just come, past the lion statue and the bakery, towards the red columned pagoda, where fierce golden dragons stare daggers at us from the slanting roof. But when we stop outside Chinatown Place, the block of flats where Mei-Mei lives, she sits down and pulls her sad face, showing me the whites of her eyes.

"Shall we go for a proper walk then, Mei-Mei?" I say, and she leaps up and licks my knee.

It takes about twenty minutes to walk to the park and all the way there I'm thinking about the boy, wondering who he is, where he is now. Because of his dark hair I decide he's Italian or Spanish, here on a school trip and up earlier than everyone else. Stealing the lucky cat as a present for his little sister because he's run out of money. I imagine him flicking his hair out of his eyes and smiling as he gives it to her, telling her where he got it from, but not how.

Russell Square Gardens isn't really a park, just a grassy oblong with a café on one side, surrounded by tall buildings. Mum used to bring me here when I was little to watch the squirrels leaping around in the trees and raiding the bins for bits of chucked-away sandwich. Most people think there's no nature right in the centre of London, but that's not true. There are seagulls screeching over the river, pairs of dragonflies flitting around the London Eye, families of mice living in the tube tunnels – maybe even snails slithering up Big Ben for all I know. Beneath the traffic and people noises there's a constant buzzing and humming and scratching

and flapping and caw-cawing. A layer of sound you can only tune into once you know it's there.

As soon as we arrive, Mei-Mei spots a squirrel in the grass and chases it up a tree, launching herself at the tree trunk, yapping as the squirrel tut-tuts down at her from the safety of the branches. I find a stick that's thin enough for Mei-Mei's small mouth and throw it to distract her.

"Fetch, Mei-Mei. Fetch." But she ignores the stick and carries on looking up at the squirrel.

"You're never going to catch him. He's much cleverer than you."

I turn around to find another stick and there's the boy, sitting on the top of a wooden bench, his elbows on his knees, chin in one hand, feet planted on the seat, fringe flopping into his eyes. My stomach lurches. It's like I've magicked him up just by thinking about him so much.

"I saw you in Chinatown." It's out before I have a chance to stop it.

He smiles.

"I saw you too."

"Why did you take that cat?"

He shrugs. "You followed me. In Chinatown."

"No I didn't." I feel my cheeks start to burn.

"I don't care if you did. I'm just saying. Anyway, maybe I followed you here." He's definitely English then, not Italian or Spanish, but his accent isn't a London one.

"But you couldn't have. You disappeared."

"See, I knew you were following me."

I can't think of anything to say, so I turn my back on him, wishing that I wasn't wearing old denim shorts and a crumpled T-shirt I scooped off my bedroom floor, and that I *had* bothered to brush my hair. I throw another stick for Mei-Mei and this time she races after it and drops it at my feet. I try to work out how old the boy is. A bit older than me. Fourteen maybe.

"Shouldn't you be at school?" I ask.

"Shouldn't you?"

"I'm sick. I've got . . ."

"Yeah, me too."

He twitches his hair out of his eyes again and the sunlight glitters between his lashes.

I throw a few more sticks for Mei-Mei, gradually edging backwards until eventually I'm sitting down on the bench too. A fire engine screeches past. Neither of us speaks for a while, and I'm trying to think of something else to say when my phone starts ringing. I pull it out of my pocket and the caller ID *Mum* flashes back at me. I let it ring for ages before I answer.

"Hi."

"Essie? Oh, thank heavens. Are you OK?"

"I'm fine. Well, not fine. I was a bit sick this morning so I decided not to go to school."

"Where are you, then?"

"I had to walk Mei-Mei even though I'm not feeling . . ."

"Essie, there's been an accident . . . something wrong with the trains . . . they don't know yet exactly . . . I want you to go home now. Do you understand? I'll call you again when I know more."

I'm so surprised that Mum hasn't grilled me about not being at school that it takes a while for what she said to sink in. I suddenly notice that tons of people in smart work clothes are streaming through the park, most of them with phones clamped to their ears. A woman in a bright yellow dress flops down on a bench and puts her head in her arms. I can tell from the way her shoulders are moving up and down that she's crying.

"Wonder what's going on?" the boy asks.

"That was my mum on the phone just now. She said there's something wrong with the trains. An accident maybe."

He doesn't say anything.

"Anyway, I should go home." I stand up slowly.

He still doesn't say anything.

I suddenly notice that Mei-Mei's not at my feet any more, she's outside the café across the grass and a man is feeding her scraps of something from his plate.

"Come on, Mei-Mei, we need to go," I shout.

But Mei-Mei doesn't come and I have to go and pull her away from the man and his croissant and put her on the lead. I walk back towards the boy who is still sitting on the bench. He's holding a drumstick in each hand, leaning forward, drumming on the arm rest and even though his

eyes are hidden behind his fringe, I know they're shut and that he's zoned out, listening to the music in his head.

"Bye then," I shout, cringing inside but kind of stuck to the spot, waiting for him to look up and say something.

And then there's a booming sound, a bit like thunder but hollower somehow, very close by and he jumps off the bench.

"What the . . ."

The woman in the yellow dress runs towards us, arms in the air, shouting.

"A bomb. I'm sure it's a bomb. Run."

A cloud of grey smoke billows up above the trees. I follow the woman out of the park and the boy is there too, all three of us running down Southampton Row, suddenly swept up in a crowd. Sirens shriek and people shout. Mei-Mei barks excitedly as if it's just a big game. The lights are green at the big junction by Holborn station but the traffic is standing still, so we just keep running, past Boots and all the sandwich shops on Kingsway, past open-mouthed people standing in doorways. My shoelace has come undone and slaps against the pavement like a skipping rope. I can't see the woman in the yellow dress any more, but the boy is still right there by my shoulder. We slow down a bit. I reach out for his hand and pull him down a side street past some stinky wheelie bins and on to Wilderness Street, dropping his hand and stopping when we get to Wilderness Court.

"Shit," he says. We are both bent double, breathing hard. My ears are thumping like I've been underwater too long. "Have you got any water?"

"I live right here. In these flats. D'you want to come up and get a drink?"

He doesn't reply but follows me and Mei-Mei past the "No ball games" sign and the ground floor flat with the picture of Nelson Mandela in the window and into the lift. And, as the door slides shut and I press the button for the sixth floor, I'm thinking that it doesn't even matter that I don't know this boy's name and that Wilderness Court has a strict no pets policy.

When we get home, the boy gulps down the water I give him while he's staring out of the living room window at the rooftops, the brown river, the London Eye. A police helicopter zooms right above us filling the flat with the sound of whirring wings.

I turn on the TV and terrible images jag across the screen. Bloodied faces and bandaged heads. An injured man on a stretcher made of tied-

together coats. The number 30 bus with its roof ripped off, crumpled up and lying on the road next to a red post box. A terrorist attack, the newsreader is calling it. There have been bombs on three trains and a bus blown up in Tavistock Square.

"That's really close to the park where we were," I tell the boy. "No wonder the explosion was so loud."

I realise I'm shaking now. Cold inside, even though the flat is warm. If the boy wasn't here I'd get into bed and dive down under the duvet. I can't believe this is really happening, not in a nightmare or a movie, but right here, where I live. It makes me feel angry as well as scared.

"It's just so random. Tubes and buses run every few minutes, don't they? Those people who got hurt just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time . . ." The boy's voice wobbles.

We watch the TV in silence, hypnotised by the images flashing across the screen. I think about everyone I could possibly know who might've been travelling at that time. At least Mum is safe at work and school had already started by the time the first bomb went off.

Thinking of school reminds me that I haven't called in sick yet. I dial the number and get a recorded voice telling me to leave a message if I want to report an absence, so trying to sound older and more Mum-like, I say: "Essie James, 8B, absent today, 7<sup>th</sup> July, because of a stomach bug." I wonder if whoever listens to the message will be able to hear the butterflies that've escaped from my stomach and are fluttered around my voice box.

Mei-Mei is at my feet now, panting, so I go to the kitchen to look for an old bowl that she can drink from, watching out of the corner of my eye as the boy turns away from the TV and checks the flat out. Mum's a neat freak, but some of our furniture is old and a bit scruffy; the brown leather sofa criss-crossed with wrinkles, the wooden dining table watermarked by spilled drinks.

"What part of London is this exactly?" he asks.

"Covent Garden. The market and all the touristy bits are about two minutes' walk away. Over there," I say, pointing.

"Don't you have to be like . . . a millionaire to live in Covent Garden?"

I'm sure most people think that. They imagine it's just rich bankers or celebrities who live somewhere like Covent Garden. But tons of ordinary

people live right in the centre of London too, going to school, shopping in Tesco Metro, watching *Hollyoaks* and hanging their laundry half out of the window to dry when it's sunny, just getting on with their lives, not eating in the posh restaurants or going to the opera or getting ripped off by the street performers in the Piazza.

"It's a housing association place. The rent's cheap. A bit like a council flat, but we pay rent to this trust that owns the building, not to the council."

"It's nice. It kind of feels safe up here," he says.

"It's a bit small though. Look I can go from here —" I touch the living room window — "to the kitchen sink in nine steps. But it's fine for Mum and me."

I wish I could stop gabbing. I talk way too much when I'm nervous.

The boy turns back to the window again, shielding his eyes as sun flashes off the glassy pods of the London Eye.

"I've never even been on it. The London Eye. Mum doesn't see the point when we've got such a great view from our window, but I'd still like to go."

"I nearly went on it once, a long time ago . . . Anyway, thanks," he says, handing the empty water glass back to me. "Better get going."

"But there might be more bombs. They said so on the news."

He can't go yet. There's still so much I need to know.

My stomach gurgles. The only thing I've eaten today is that peanut cookie in Chinatown.

"I'm starving. I'm going to make French toast. Do you want some before you go?"

"OK," he says.

"By the way, what's your name?" It seems weird now knowing it after all that's happened.

"Jake. And you're Essie, right? I heard you say it on the phone."

How come he's always one step ahead of me?

I go into the kitchen and put a loaf of sliced white bread, butter and an egg on the counter top. My hands are too shaky for cracking eggs and I get tiny bits of shell in the bowl and have to fish them out of the gluey white with my fingers. I've been cooking French toast a lot after school recently. Measuring things out and stirring and breathing in the smell of frying

butter somehow helps to calm me down. My dad showed me how to make it when I stayed with him last summer in Cornwall. He makes big meals from scratch on his tiny little caravan cooker, whereas Mum only uses her big silvery oven to heat up frozen stuff.

I pile the pieces of French toast into a tower, with maple syrup between each layer, cut a strawberry into the shape of a fan to put on the top and sieve some icing sugar over the whole lot. I'm kind of hoping Jake will say how amazing it looks, but he just wolfs it down as if he hasn't eaten for a week and then says, "Great . . . thanks," really quickly afterwards.

It's hard to tell what Jake's thinking and it makes me feel uncomfortable. It's easier just to know how people feel. Take Madison Carter. It's obvious that she hates me even when she's pretending to be nice. I see it in the twitch of her mouth, the way she crinkles her eyebrows when I say something to Amber. I'm not sure *why* she hates me so much; I just know that she does.

"So you're not *that* sick then," Jake says, pointing at my empty plate.

"Just didn't want to go to school today. What about you?"

He pauses for a few moments. "I'm visiting someone."

"Where do you live?"

"Nottingham."

"And your parents don't mind you missing school?"

He shrugs. "You ask a lot of questions." Amber says that about me too, but I hate not knowing stuff.

I clear away the plates and dump them in the dishwasher. Mei-Mei follows me, hungry now. I find some scraps of ham in the fridge and put them into a cereal bowl with a couple of broken up digestive biscuits, and tell her that's all I've got and that I'll take her back home to Mrs Chen's soon.

When I come back into the living room, Jake is lying on the sofa, his legs pulled into his stomach, asleep. He looks younger somehow, his face softer, but very pale, underneath his eyes bluish almost. A tiny faded scar and a chicken pox spot form an explanation mark under his chin. I wonder if I'm the only person to ever notice. It feels wrong to look at him like this when he's asleep, but I can't stop. His nails are bitten down and there's a tatty friendship bracelet on his left wrist, black and white plaited, the white strand faded to the colour of old chewing gum. If I could cut it off without

waking him and keep it as a souvenir then I know I'd do it. The thought passes through me like a shiver. And then he moves, and I jump backwards, and he stretches out his legs and for a moment there's a gap between his T-shirt and jeans and I see the start of a yellowish-purple bruise. And then he curls his legs in again and it's gone.

## THE CHINATOWN CAT by Emma Dowson

### SYNOPSIS

*The Chinatown Cat* is a YA adventure novel set in London's Chinatown at the time of the July 2005 bombings, featuring a runaway boy, a girl whose confidence has nosedived after falling out with her best friend, and an inquisitive pug. Bunking off school for the first time ever, Essie watches Jake steal a lucky cat ornament from a Chinese bakery and decides to follow him.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Emma Dowson works as a book publicist. After working with authors on their books, she realised that she wanted to write her own! She lives in London with her two children and two rabbits. She likes Chinese food, holidays, baking and reading, and hopes to have a dog one day.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'The voice immediately sounded natural and one which I could happily spend time reading. The plot moves easily from scene to scene, always generating interest and a mounting sense of something's-going-to-happen.'

'A lot of detail is conveyed but none of it weighs heavily on the reader. I like the variety of the sentences and the general rhythm – it feels contemporary and accessible.'

'I like the way this felt at once familiar, located as it is in central London, but also very distinctive and set up well. I'm intrigued to see where the friendship between the mysterious runaway and Essie is going to lead.'

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# THE HUNT IS ON

By Catherine Miller

## Chapter One

In the heart of the chase, I'm alive.

I'm a few metres ahead of the cop. His breath rasps. Old man will get tired soon; I can keep running all evening. I smile to myself. You're up against Boy Wonder now.

I weave between two cars and into the road, then cross to the other side. He follows, of course. I see him in my mind's eye, red-faced and head down like an angry bull. He doesn't know he's up against me, Robbie O'Brien, master of the getaway since I was eleven years old. I've always been good at this bit, the running, and part of me knows I enjoy this more than the actual lifting – more than having the stuff in my hands.

I let myself feel it now. The soles of my feet kiss the pavement again and again. My lungs burn. My rucksack slams into the base of my spine with every step, but I don't care. I'm alight with the thrill of it all.

I cut across a well-manicured front garden. Bit different from what you get in my neighbourhood, just a short drive away, where you're more likely to get a rusting shopping trolley than a water feature. But that's South London for you: council estate cheek by jowl with the upper crust.

In the dying light, the windows of the big houses are dark and cold and the sleek cars in the driveways gleam. I tell myself I come here for the higher class of swag. Which is true; you don't get guys in suits sitting outside a bar with their iPhones on the table round my way. Not to mention, I've had to move off my home patch lately because every cop round there knows exactly who I am. But there's another reason

why I like exploring these winding streets of red brick. My dad grew up here.

“Oi!” someone shouts, and I have to risk a look back. Shit, he’s got backup. Two more guys are on my tail and now I’m not so sure I can outrun them all. I dig deep and drag up a little more energy, just enough to give me time to assess the situation.

There, up ahead of me, there’s a fence. It’s tall and black with spikes on the top, but I reckon I can clear it. Maybe. As I get closer, the tall buildings behind it loom above me, but I don’t have time to work out where I am. I just need to hide.

I need a run up. Come on, Boy Wonder. You’ve got this.

I spring towards the fence, leap, grasp the top and swing my legs up. Time slows as my thigh brushes the metal and I think I’m about to tear my bits off, but then I’m up, up, over, and then falling to the ground with a thud that shakes my whole body. My palms slam into the tarmac and I know they’ll hurt like a bitch pretty soon, but for now I’m running again.

I dart into the space between the tall buildings, where the shadows welcome me like an old friend. The fence rattles as the cops try it, but they’re too chicken to vault it like me.

The path leads me onwards. I slow my steps. I reckon I’ve bought myself a bit of time while they try to figure out how to get in here. So where the hell am I, and how am I going to get out?

The building to my left is brick, Victorian maybe, with a set of double doors leading out to this paved walkway. To my right, something more modern, a concrete monolith with square windows. As I peer in, I catch a glimpse of benches and gas taps.

I’m in a school.

Wait, not just any school. I know this place.

St Julian’s.

The most expensive boys’ school this side of the Thames. I’ve seen them before when I’ve been hanging around, spilling out of the gates in their blazers and loafers and side-swept hairstyles. None of them looked at me in my grey hoodie and battered trainers. To them I was nothing more than street trash.

In another life, I could've been one of them. Thank God my dad left us to drink himself into an early grave up in Manchester.

I finally stop running because the walkway has taken me to a courtyard space with those wooden picnic benches they probably crowd onto at break time. It's what, six? But there could still be people around. I can't risk getting out in the open. I sink down to sit on the stone, my back to the brick wall, and finally breathe.

My fingers go to the phone in my pocket. A fork of lightning runs through me as I graze the smooth cover. Ha-ha! Boy Wonder wins again. I pull it out and examine it. A nice specimen. Should get me a few bob and that new Call of Duty. Since I left school last year, I've been funding my almost full-time PlayStation career with my light fingers. Never been interested in some crappy McDonald's job. This is way more exciting.

I slip it back into my hoodie and rub my now tingling hands on my trackie bottoms. I don't know if I'll make it back over the fence without that adrenaline fuelling me, so I need to find some other way out. I have no idea how big this site is or where the other side is.

Then a door opens on the other side of the courtyard and some fat bloke in a yellow hi-vis strolls out with a big walkie-talkie in his hand. I press myself into the brick and hold my breath. He could probably see me if he looks hard enough.

The walkie-talkie crackles. A broken voice comes through but I can't hear what it says. Then he replies, "Sure, I'll come and let you in. We'll find him."

My cue to get out of here. He turns away for a moment and I take the opportunity to leap up and run for the doors just behind me. Please let them be unlocked! I grope for the handle and the door gives. I give it one sharp tug and then slip inside.

He probably heard that, so I'm not off the hook yet. I'm in a lino-floored corridor and the lights are off. Time to find a good hiding place.

I hotfoot it down the passage, trainers squeaking on the shiny floor. I round one corner and then another. There are a couple of doorways here I could dive into, so I'll just make my choice and hide under a desk or something until the cops give up and go home.

I open the door. Just as I'm about to step inside, someone yanks me

back by my hoodie, spins me and slams me into the wall. He's got my wrist twisted back to my shoulder blades. I grunt as my cheek is pressed into the paint.

"You've got five seconds to explain what you're doing in my school," a deep, male voice says in my ear. "And then I'm calling the police."

"Hiding," I say. I don't think he's going to buy any weird excuses, to be honest.

"From?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Well, if you won't tell me, I'm sure you'll tell an officer." He pulls me off the wall and marches me towards a door. My stomach sinks down to the grubby soles of my shoes. I'm hardly Boy Wonder now. Just a stupid thief who's about to get his comeuppance.

The room he shoves me in turns out to be his office. He pushes me into a chair and then locks the door behind us.

"You'll sit there until they've arrived," he says.

I've got the chance to look at him now. He's got one of those eagle faces, you know, all long nose and bushy eyebrows, white like his hair. He's kinda old for being so strong. He's got some swish suit on and now I look around the office, I realise who's caught me. The headmaster. His room is all leather and gilt and covered in bookshelves. I imagine him hauling boys in here for a stiff telling off.

He steps over to his desk where there's a gold name plate reading "Dr W. Chisholm" and a black telephone. I reckon I've got about three minutes of freedom left after he calls them. It'll be Feltham for me after this, no doubt. They're going to throw away the key this time – no more cautions left.

"Wait," I say.

He actually pauses and raises an eyebrow. "And why should I do that?"

My brain's whizzing. I need something good. "Look, I'm sorry, mate. I'm hiding out here 'cause . . . 'cause . . . the cops got the wrong end of the stick."

"The court can decide that." His hand goes for the phone again.

"My dad used to come here," I add. "I was hanging round outside and the cops thought I was up to something dodgy, but I was just remembering

him.” It’s not the biggest lie I’ve ever told. In fact, part of it’s true.

“*Your* father . . . went here?”

“Yeah.” No need to put such an emphasis on your, like one of my kind could never have set foot in a place like this. “Kevin O’Brien. Scholarship, 1974.”

He looks at the phone, but then his gaze flicks away, back to me. I think I’ve distracted him. “Kevin O’Brien. Now there’s a name I haven’t heard in a long time.”

“You knew him?”

“Yes. He was one of my first students.” How long has this dude been working here? But I smile at the thought that he actually remembers my dad. “One of the first scholarships as well. He was a fine young man.” He sits in his chair and leans across the desk towards me. “I seem to recall he went into the Metropolitan Police, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” I answer. “He was a senior detective at one point.”

“So how have you ended up here? Like this?”

“My dad’s dead,” I reply.

“Ah. I’m sorry.” He shakes his head. “And your mother?”

“She’s fine. He never married her, though, so we don’t get the pension. His first wife got all that.” I kinda want this to sound like a sob story, even though it’s fine, really. I need to spin it out a bit, keep him talking. The longer he’s distracted, the longer I’m free. “My half-brother’s a copper. He’s done really well for himself. Just got promoted to CID.”

“Good for him. You didn’t want to join him?”

“I don’t know what I want to do at the moment.”

“Studies?”

“I’ve got my GCSEs.” I look down at my hands. “It’s been a hard couple of years, though.” Man, I should have gone into acting.

He pauses, and I can almost see the options scrolling past behind his grey eyes. “Hmm,” he says eventually, “well, perhaps at this stage, then, there’s no need to—”

The shrill ring of the phone interrupts him. He picks up. “Yes, speaking. Indeed? No, I’ve not seen anything. Of course. Thank you, officer.”

Busted.

He sets the receiver back with an ominous click, then sets a cold glare on me. "That was the police, informing me there is a thief running around my school. By which I gather, you are also a liar."

"No," I say. Probably no point in trying it on with the remembrance thing any more. "I mean, yeah, I took something. But I wasn't lying about my dad."

"Kevin must be rolling in his grave to know his son has betrayed him in this manner."

Ouch. I don't have any comeback to that, because it's probably true.

He looks down at the desk for a moment. I don't know what's stopping him from picking up the phone again. I'd rather he just got it over with, but maybe he's trying to make me squirm.

"What's your name?" he says, after an excruciating few moments of silence.

I could give him a fake one, but at this stage I can't really be bothered. "Robbie."

"This school has CCTV cameras, Robbie," he says. "One of our parents has kindly donated a new security system. There'll be footage of you here, tonight."

"And?"

He folds his hands. "I'm not going to call them back, Mr O'Brien. Not just yet. But just know I have evidence of you being here and what's to say nothing went missing from this office while you were in here?"

Is this blackmail? It sure sounds like it.

"On the other hand, perhaps tonight's tape could have conveniently malfunctioned."

"What do you want?" I ask. I hope my voice doesn't shake.

"Information. You say your brother's in CID."

"He's only just started."

The headmaster waves a hand. "Regardless, I'm sure he has access to what I need. Does the name Alexander Birch-Hamley mean anything to you?"

Sounds like a standard posh name to me. But something about it is slightly familiar and now it niggles at the back of my mind like a needle trying to get through cloth.

Wait, there it is. “The kid who got murdered?” I can see his face on the front of the tabloids now: blond, tanned, head-boy type.

“He was a student here. It’s been three months and the police have questioned everyone. They’ve come up with nothing. Then there’s the death of Andromeda Montague from our sister school. They say they aren’t connected, but I have my doubts.”

I feel like their deaths probably aren’t that much of a mystery. How much trouble can these rich kids get themselves into? Drugs, most likely. Coke deals gone sour. But in that case the cops would know exactly who to pin it on – they’re pretty good at knowing who’s on which patch.

“All that info will be classified,” I tell him. “I don’t think my brother will be able to help you.”

He nods. “Of course. But he might be able to provide something if it means saving you.”

This guy is cold. But Jack’s not bent. There’s no way he’d do that, even for me. I shake my head. “He wouldn’t.”

Chisholm sighs. “I had a feeling you might say that. I’m not expecting the police to divulge everything, when they’ve refused to up until now. But I can’t leave the rest of my students at risk. Already I’ve had a few parents withdraw their sons with concerns over safety here in the city.”

“So what do you expect me to do about it?”

He gives me an icy smile. “Master thief, if he won’t give you the information, I want you to steal it for me.”

## Chapter Two

For a second I can’t speak. *Steal* the info? That’s not my scene, mate. Phones, watches, trainers – yep. Police files are a bit beyond me.

“Not possible,” I finally answer. “I can’t just break into the station.”

“I don’t particularly care how you do it. I just want details. You have until Monday, or I make a phone call and give them the CCTV footage along with your name.” He watches my face. “I could just call them back now.”

I clench and unclench my fists at my sides. There’s a window in here – could I just hop out of that? But I know the cops are hovering somewhere outside and this dude will probably haul me back before I can make it.

OK, I'll just agree to it. I can worry about how I'll pull it off later. "Sure," I say. "I'll get you some info." Maybe I can bargain with him and get some cash out of this.

He opens a drawer in his desk and hands me a small card. It gives his name, Dr William Chisholm, and number. "You can contact me on this number when you have something for me."

He leans over and picks up the phone again. He gives them some story about seeing someone running out of the car-park entrance. Then he stands and waits for me to do the same. I can't quite feel my legs as I do so. I tug my hood up for comfort.

"I'll let you out through the front gate," he says.

We walk through the dark school, me hanging a few steps behind. His silhouette is broad-shouldered and he walks with his head held high. I feel like this is a weird and unlikely relationship we're forming, but I'm not really in a position to question it.

He leads me out of the building and across a covered area, then we're back where I started. He fishes a set of keys from his jacket pocket and opens a gate in the fence I leaped earlier. It opens with a harsh shriek.

"I really need this information, Robbie," he says, as if I could forget. "You've got until Monday."

Four days to get classified secrets out from under the noses of the cops.

What the hell have I just agreed to?

When I get home, back to the stark concrete blocks of the Meade Estate, Sinead and Jack are sitting on the sofa with their feet up on the coffee table and a couple of pizza boxes balanced in front of them.

"All right?" Sinead says as I walk in. "You're later than I thought. We saved you some."

"Texas Barbeque," Jack adds, because he knows it's my fave.

I bump his fist. "Cheers, bro." I flip open the box, grab a slice, and settle myself on the armchair. As I stuff it into my mouth, I look over at my half-brother and suddenly the pizza tastes like cardboard. He's smiling at Sinead. I can see they're having a great evening – and she's not even his mum. Jack was born to the first wife, but he still comes round and checks on us to make sure we're doing all right. He's a good egg, unlike me.

"You lads wanna play PlayStation for a bit? I'll go next door for a bit and do the ironing," Sinead says.

"Yeah, why not?" Jack says. "Grab us a controller."

I pass one up to him and get the other one for myself before switching on the box. We crack a few jokes as the game loads and we pick our usual characters. I wedge another bit of pizza in my mouth. It's a usual Friday night.

And, like always, Jack has a question for me.

"So, got a job yet?"

"Um . . ."

"I'll take that as a no. Any applications?"

"Maybe."

He rolls his eyes. "I don't know what to say any more, to be honest with you." This is the part where he crushes me with his disappointment. Except I've had that routine from pretty much everyone in the last year so it just rolls off me. "Robbie, you're wasting your time hanging round here. You've got good GCSEs, somehow, so why aren't you using them?"

I just shrug. I've got no excuses. Just never felt right at school. Don't need more people telling me what to do.

"You wanna get with Nat, you'd better get off your arse. Speaking of which, have you even asked her out yet?"

"No! That's disgusting, man. She's my best mate."

He lets a little smile crack through his serious-man-talk mask. "Yeah, well, so was Katie. And now we're married."

"Good for you." I glower at him. "Anyway, Nat's way too good for me, you know that. She's actually getting out of Meade, unlike me."

"Only one person to blame for that."

"All right, all right." I need to change the subject, fast. "Hey, how'd the first week at the new job go?"

Jack does a sweet flip with his car and obliterates me. He grins. "Great, thanks. I'm on a big case."

"Nice." I pause to send a rocket straight into his windscreen. "On that note, you know anything about that Alexander kid?"

He goes quiet and concentrates on mashing the buttons for a bit. OK, he knows something. Finally he says, "I might do."

Excitement rushes through me. I might be able to wheedle something out of him and then I'm off the hook without having to go to too much effort. "Is that your case?"

"Do *not* tell anyone I told you this, but . . . possibly."

I'm so flipping lucky. "That's *sick*, bruv."

"Why are you interested, anyway? Not like you to read the news."

"Oi, I know what's going on. It's just a weird case, that's all." OK, I'm going to need something a bit better than this. I know what might get me closer. "I'm looking into it for a college application."

Jack drops his controller. "College? Jesus, you kept that quiet, mate!"

"You were asking about jobs."

"Yeah, but – well, whatever, I'm happy you're doing something. What are you applying for?"

"Law A level." The lie comes so easily.

"Are you pulling my leg?"

I put on my most trustworthy face. "No. I'm not." I press pause and put down my own controller so I can look him right in the eye. "I need to do a case study and I thought this story was interesting."

He raises an eyebrow. "You should probably choose something that's actually been solved. I mean, I can't really tell you much, but we're nowhere near closing this one."

"When you say nowhere near . . . ?"

He shakes his head. "Sorry. I can't really say anything else. Let's just say it's a tough one."

Looks like his lips are sealed. So. I'll have to find another way. What exactly that might be, I have no idea.

We pick up the game again, but about ten minutes later my pocket starts buzzing. It's my own phone, thankfully, not the one I nicked. It's Nat.

"Hey," I say when I pick up.

"What's up? You wanna meet up at the den?"

I look over at Jack, who's smirking. "Don't keep the lady waiting," he says.

I flip him the finger. "Sure, see you in a mo," I tell her.

Jack shakes his head as I put my phone away. "Dude, you got it bad. I'll see you soon."

“Later.”

He waves at me as I go. I put my hood up so I don’t have to look at him any more. Whatever happens in the next few days, I’ll be betraying Jack, somehow.

That knowledge curls up in the pit of my belly and sinks its claws in.

## THE HUNT IS ON by Catherine Miller

### SYNOPSIS

Robbie's not the usual student at the prestigious St Julian's. He's a thief from a south London estate, and he's undercover. The head wants to know who's killing rich kids, and Robbie wants to help his brother get his job at CID back. Turns out the posh are playing life-or-death game The Hunt: a race across London, chased by assassins. Robbie must play and win to unmask the mastermind – or become the next victim.

### AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Catherine Miller grew up in south-east London, reading everything and anything, including cereal boxes. After reading Classics at Oxford she lived in Greece for a year before returning to London to teach English in secondary schools.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'The voice intrigued and hooked me from the start and I liked the way Robbie conveyed drip-feed snippets of essential biography to satisfy us, while also teasing us with questions.'

'Vivid first person narrative – reminded me a little of Tim Bowler. Pacy and convincing and the lightly drawn setting worked well.'

'Strong opening. Original, compelling plotline – feels very different from stuff that's out there at the moment. Well-drawn, interesting protagonist.'

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# HONORARY MENTIONS

Although not appearing in this anthology, the following people received honorary mentions:

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POSSESSION by Emma Bayley  
MEDA by Julian Margaret Gibbs  
THE SILENCE OF SECRETS by Jak Harrison  
DANGEROUS DAVE AND THE FAIRY INVASION by Kim A Howard  
ROSSIO 59 by Jeannine Johnson Maia  
THE FAMILIARS by Elizabeth Joseph-Brahy  
HALF A GIRL by Nicola Keller  
THE LOWAYMAN by Georgina Kirk  
SKIN by Dr Dale Mathers  
KIERKEGAARD by Andrew Moore  
MALISSE IN SHUDDERLANDE by Lesley Moss  
THE WRONG TWIN by Clare Thomas  
THE FIREFLY CAGE by Nicki Thornton  
RE:CREATION by Melissa Valente  
THE GNOMES OF DOOM (AND LUCY KERPOW) by Calum Watson  
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