

UNDISCOVERED VOICES

The eighth anthology of unpublished
children's fiction 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 PATRICE LAWRENCE

Honorary Chair

What was your journey to getting an agent and your first publishing deal?

In some ways, I was lucky in that I loved writing and knew little about publishing. I would have loved to be a published writer – an author with their name on the shiny spine of a book – but it didn't feel like a possibility. Also, with no social media, there wasn't the pressure of comparing myself to anyone else. It was actually quite liberating.

Caroline Sheldon and I found each other through an anthology of short stories. It was an initiative called Decibel, funded by the Arts Council, set up to diversify the arts. It included a short story competition for writers of colour. Although it was an adult anthology, my story starred a working class teenage boy from east London. I met Caroline at an event, slightly drunkenly told her I was a writer, she bought the anthology and agreed to meet me. We met. I pitched an idea. She signed me up.

And that idea? It became something that was unpublishable. I was RUBBISH at writing full length books! To give you an idea of timescale, my daughter was in the infants at primary school when I was signed to Caroline Sheldon, and was taking her GCSEs when *Orangeboy* was published. Before that, I wrote a couple of guided reading books. However, I really struggled to find my voice as a writer. I was lucky enough that Caroline was patient and after many attempts at putting my creative ideas on paper, *Orangeboy* was born from a prompt at a crime-writing course. I should be ashamed, but I'm most determinedly not, to say that I hadn't heard the term 'YA' before I'd written that book. I just thought it was a crime book with a 16-year-old protagonist!

What do you know now that you wish you'd known then?

To be honest, nothing. The publishing industry has changed considerably in 14 years so it wouldn't be relevant. I've always loved writing for writing's sake and would write whether or not I was published traditionally. *Orangeboy* was published when I was 49, so I had a number of transferable skills from my work background that were surprisingly useful. For instance, knowing how to write and deliver a training course is pretty handy when you're designing a creative writing workshop.

However, I do think it's important that new writers learn how the publishing process works and their own power within it. I think we often feel so grateful to be published that we don't feel able to ask questions.

What fuels your passion for writing?

Anger. I often wonder if I've reached peak anger, then something else happens that proves me wrong. I'm furious at inequality and the way that some people and voices are pushed to the margins. I want to use my books to create alternative stories and to challenge stereotypes.

What's your number-one piece of advice for those writers who've been chosen for this year's anthology?

Be nice. I don't mean that facetiously, but the world is shockingly smaller than we sometimes imagine.

Patrice Lawrence

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FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

Welcome to *Undiscovered Voices 2022*, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' (SCBWI) eighth anthology of undiscovered writers. Congratulations to all the longlisted and shortlisted authors! We received a record number of truly high-calibre submissions from our members. We are thrilled to share with you a small sample of the amazing talent in the UK and EU.

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 26,000 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, awards and grants.

SCBWI British Isles is proud to offer a myriad of professional development, networking and marketing opportunities to writers and illustrators, and a very welcoming, diverse and supportive community. Breaking into the children's book market amidst tough competition is often a Herculean feat. Sometimes, you just need a bit of a helping hand, a dash of luck and someone who believes in you. This is where *Undiscovered Voices'* track record speaks for itself:

Authors and illustrators from the seven previous anthologies have received publishing contracts for more than 400 books which are published around the world. These have been honoured with nominations and featured on prestigious literary lists, including the Blue Peter Book Awards, the Barnes and Noble Top Teen book, the American Library Association Best Book for Young Readers, the Borders Book of the Month, the Waterstones Children's Book Prize, the Crystal Kite Award and the Branford Boase Award.

Undiscovered Voices would simply not be possible without an incredibly hardworking, enthusiastic team of volunteers, editors and judges. Thank

you! We are also extremely grateful to Working Partners for their enormously generous support and funding of this exciting project from the start.

In this anthology you will find a wonderful diversity of original ideas and inspiring voices that captured our judges' attention. We are excited to introduce these authors to you. We hope in these pages you will find stories you want to share with the world!

Natascha Biebow and Kathy Evans

Co-Regional Advisors (Co-Chairs)

SCBWI, British Isles region

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FROM WORKING PARTNERS

Working Partners is delighted to continue to sponsor *Undiscovered Voices*. Over the years, this wonderful SCBWI initiative has become one of the most productive vehicles for the discovery of writing talent by agents and editors across the UK children's publishing industry.

There is an extraordinary amount of goodwill involved in the creation of each volume of *Undiscovered Voices* with so many people giving up their time to support new writers. The team, headed up by Sara Grant since *Undiscovered Voices*' inception in 2004, deserves our thanks, and the thanks of the whole of the children's publishing community for their hard work and commitment.

Congratulations and the very best of luck to all the writers in the 2022 edition of *Undiscovered Voices*. Many of you will become published authors and we shall look forward to reading your books!

Chris Snowdon

Managing Director

Working Partners

www.workingpartnersltd.co.uk

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SPECIAL THANKS

Undiscovered Voices is one hundred per cent volunteer-driven. The abundance of talent in this anthology from the British Isles and the EU can be presented to you only because of a generous sponsor and a team of dedicated volunteers.

HUGE thanks to . . .

- **Working Partners** for fully funding and supporting the project from the very beginning. Continued thanks to **Chris Snowdon** and everyone at Working Partners for supporting both published and soon-to-be-discovered writers. And a special thanks to Working Partners editors **Elizabeth Galloway** and **James Noble** who helped us review the 270 submissions we received.
- Our honorary chair **Patrice Lawrence**, an amazingly talented, inspiring and award-winning writer. Thanks for sharing your words of wisdom with the next generation of writers.
- The *Undiscovered Voices* planning committee, which spends thousands of hours organising this project with no compensation – except the satisfaction of helping fellow writers: **Rosie Best**, **Catherine Coe**, **Jenny Glencross**, **Sara Grant**, **Simon James Green** and **Benjamin Scott**. Thanks for your dedication, creativity and professionalism. You are the unsung heroes of *Undiscovered Voices*.
- **Sara O'Connor** who helped launch this project in 2006 and continues to champion it and read submissions.
- Our SCBWI EU volunteers, **Elizabeth Brahy**, **Sandra Nickel** and **Mina Witteman**, for helping to read submissions and supporting writers in the EU.

- The *Undiscovered Voices* alumni who each paid it forward and mentored one of this year's selected writers. Thanks to:

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- The esteemed judging panels for graciously sharing their experience and expertise – as well as an incredible passion for children's and teen fiction:

Davinia Andrew-Lynch, literary agent and the founder of boutique agency ANDLYN

Megan Carroll, literary agent at Watson, Little Ltd

Sarah Davies, founder and agent at Greenhouse Literary Agency

Jane Griffiths, editorial director at Penguin Random House
Children's Books

Sarah Levison, senior commissioning editor for fiction at Farshore Books

Yasmin Morrissey, commissioning editor at Scholastic

Jo Williamson, literary agent at Antony Harwood Ltd

- 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 it's accomplished together.

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ARCHIE AND THE CLOCKWORK SOLDIER

By Zoe Cookson

Chapter One

Archie heaved a shovelful of coal into the firepit, clamping his eyes shut as vicious sparks spat from the flames.

‘MORE,’ the Coalman roared, brandishing an iron poker. ‘Move, boy.’

Archie ducked out of range and bit back a retort. He might be half the Coalman’s age but he knew twice as much about operating a Steam Giant. The Coalman had joined the war from a stint on the railways but Archie had worked in the factory that designed and built these massive war machines. As one of only a handful of sprocket jockeys, it had been Archie’s job to crawl inside the Giant’s armour-plated chest, arms and legs to assemble the most intricate parts and link them to the control panel in the Steam Giant’s skull.

Blinking coal dust from his eyes, Archie checked the pressure gauge, added two more shovels of coal to the fire and slammed the cover shut.

Steam hissed through the pipes. The rod dropped into position with a loud clunk and the engine rumbled into life. The tiny furnace room reverberated with the crack of multiple pistons firing and the rhythmic thud of hundreds of valves opening and closing.

Mopping the sweat from his neck with a blackened rag, Archie straightened to examine the brass dials directly above the firepit. He turned a couple of handles to equalise the pressure and waited. The needle on each dial inched upwards. It finally stabilised in a horizontal position. That was enough power for at least three hours.

Her Majesty’s Steam Giant Titania was ready to move.

Archie turned to the Coalman. He’d lost interest and was slumped in

the room's only seat, goggles askew and mouth hanging open in drunken slumber. The poker lay abandoned amongst the stray coals that littered the floor.

Archie smiled. Unconscious was how he preferred the Coalman. It also gave Archie an excuse to escape their metal box: someone had to inform the Captain that they were all set to move out.

Titania's armour-plating seemed to pulsate as Archie threw open the hatch. He clambered up the narrow metal ladder with practised ease, inhaling deeply as he stepped onto the command deck at the base of the Steam Giant's skull.

The rest of Titania's crew – the Captain, Driver and Gunner – looked up expectantly. Archie gave a brief nod and all three turned away, readying themselves for action. Archie took the opportunity to sneak a look at the Gallian landscape through the narrow rectangular slit that wrapped around the deck.

It was a desolate sight, mostly dirt and mud punctuated by the odd clump of grass and occasional skeletal tree that barely reached to the waist of the assembled Steam Giants. Thin jets of smoke shot from the Giants' shoulders as they lumbered into battle formation. The ground shuddered with the impact of fifty pairs of carriage-sized feet, while the beams of light from their eyes cast a strange pattern of blood red circles on the ground far below. The guns in the steel-clad chests swivelled into firing position and huge metal arms swung the guns in their fingers to face the enemy lines.

To their right Her Majesty's Steam Giant Caliban seemed to paw the ground ready to pounce, while on their left Oberon's movements were sharp and jerky. Archie wondered how long Oberon's new crew would last once the fighting started.

The Captain raised a spyglass to his eye, twiddled the knobs to focus on the horizon and let out a satisfied grunt. 'They've seen us. The cowards are retreating.'

Archie spun around, squinting in the same direction. It was impossible to see anything without the magnification of a spyglass. His hands clenched into fists. The Teutonians couldn't retreat! Not today. He'd faked his age to get on this crew. He was prepared to risk his life for an opportunity to fight.

This battle might be Archie's last chance. The war might be over soon. The introduction of the Steam Giants had changed everything. The Teutonians were retreating – abandoning the trenches they'd defended for over a year. There were rumours at the barracks that the Teutonians were about to sign an armistice agreement. Rumours that they'd all be home for Wintermas.

Archie didn't want to return to fourteen-hour shifts at the factory. He didn't want to go back to Albion without making someone pay for Walt's death.

'Rat,' the Captain snapped, using the shorthand term for Archie's position on the crew. Furnace Rats weren't important enough to have names. 'Out!'

Archie's visions of revenge vanished. He took a quick gulp of air and retreated down the ladder.

The Coalman was still snoring when he closed the hatch and sat down amongst the coals.

The deafening whirl and clunk of the engine intensified, joined by the creak of metal as the Driver manoeuvred Titania's oversized limbs into position.

Thud.

Titania took her first step and Archie was jolted into the air along with a cloud of dust. He tightened his grip on the rail on the back wall and braced for the next step.

Thud.

The Coalman groaned. Thick black dust swirled in the enclosed space like a swarm of mosquitoes. Archie coughed and resisted the impulse to close his eyes. Someone had to monitor the dials and the Coalman was in no fit state.

Thud, thud. A spine-shattering jerk accompanied every step. Thud, thud, thud. Archie tried to distract himself by imagining the sight outside. The Teutonian troops would be terrified by the sudden appearance of fifty heavily armed machines marching in time.

Only they weren't marching in time.

Titania was slowing down, taking smaller steps.

Archie clambered unsteadily to his feet and tugged the rag from the

pocket of his uniform, using it to wipe the dirt from the central gauge. It showed they had plenty of power. So, why were they falling behind?

Archie turned towards the other dials as the same moment a hand gripped his shoulder and shoved him roughly aside.

‘Out of the way,’ the Coalman growled.

Archie stumbled sideways. His elbow clipped the edge of the firepit’s scalding iron cover. He winced and his eyes began to water.

The Coalman rapped clumsily on the central gauge. He was wasting his time. Archie thought he knew what the problem was. He stood still, listening to the engine. To most people it probably sounded the same as before. But Archie knew every clunk and click. He was certain one of the pistons was misfiring.

They stumbled on for another ten minutes before Titania’s engine spluttered, then abruptly shut down. The Coalman slammed his fist against the pressure gauge. The tinkle of breaking glass was loud in the sudden silence.

‘I think it’s one of the pistons. It just needs . . .’ Archie’s voice tailed off.

The Coalman wasn’t listening. Droplets of blood from the cut in the Coalman’s hand splattered across Archie’s cheek as the Coalman tugged at the handle above their heads. The hatch opened and the quiet was replaced by the sound of an argument on the command deck.

The colour drained from the Coalman’s ruddy cheeks. It was clear who would get the blame.

Archie took a deep breath. ‘I don’t think it’s serious. Just—’

Thwack.

Archie was knocked sideways by the force of the Coalman’s fist.

‘Not serious!’ the Coalman snarled. ‘We’ve broken down ’ent we? How’s that not serious?’

Archie was too winded to reply. He wasn’t sure he wanted to. The Coalman wasn’t going listen to him.

The Coalman disappeared. The shouting above intensified. Archie could hear the yells but not the words. He waited until the command deck went quiet, then slowly climbed up the ladder. It was unlikely the crew would pay any attention to him but he had to try.

Archie’s stomach lurched as he stepped into a grim silence. Three pairs

of eyes stared accusingly at the Coalman. No one spoke. The Captain finally broke the silence. Instead of addressing the Coalman, he turned to Archie.

‘Make yourself useful, Rat.’ He pointed at two metal buckets tucked beneath the driver’s chair. ‘Fetch some water. There’s a river about half a mile back.’

Archie shook his head. ‘I can’t. I need to—’ He faltered, jumping aside as the buckets spun towards him like cannon balls. They clattered on the deck where he had been standing moments before.

‘You’ll do as you’re told, Rat.’ The Driver cracked his knuckles.

The Gunner laughed. For once, the Coalman didn’t join in. He was probably too worried about his own fate.

The Captain simply glared at him. Archie knew there was no point arguing. He grabbed the buckets and trudged to the ladder that led to the ground.

Archie stomped through the abandoned trenches, the buckets clanking at his sides. They should’ve let him help. He knew more about the Steam Giants than the rest of them put together. But – no – they thought they knew better. As if a few weeks’ military training could compete with Archie’s experience building the Steam Giants! Archie knew every component, in every part of the Steam Giant. He’d even suggested the extra slide valve. Not that anyone would ever admit a kid had come up with the idea.

Lost in his thoughts, Archie stumbled over a sandbag and dropped the buckets. They clattered against the trench’s timber supports. Archie groaned and bent down to retrieve them. His fingers closed around the metal handle as at the same moment something whistled overhead – an enemy shell.

Archie dropped to his knees, threw his arms over his head and waited for the explosion.

Nothing happened.

A second shell whistled through the air. Archie imagined he could feel the air pressing down on his head. He tensed, waiting. But there was still no explosion. Archie sniffed the air. Was it, perhaps, a gas shell? Slowly, he removed his hands from his head and stood up, peeping nervously over the top of the trench.

A third shell whistled above. It landed a hundred yards away, releasing a cloud of white vapour – a smoke shell.

Archie scanned the barren landscape, then peered into the sky. Smoke was normally used to conceal an attack. But there was no sign of movement.

Two more shells whistled above, heading towards Titania. Were the Teutonians planning to attack the Steam Giant? Abandoning his buckets, Archie scrambled out of the trench and sprinted across what had once been no man's land. If there was going to be a fight, he wanted to be there to help. His boots slipped in the mud but he didn't slow down. He had a score to settle with the Teutonians.

He ran on. He was about fifty yards away when the final shell fell – directly on Titania and her crew. The smoke spread, hiding everything from view. It seemed to swallow all sound. Archie stopped mid-stride. Something was wrong. Where were the shouts? The cries of alarm? The swearing? The Captain might be wise enough to stay silent but there was no way the Gunner or the Coalman would be able to keep their mouths shut.

Archie squinted into the dense smog, his ears straining for any sound in the unnatural quiet. His heart thudded against his ribs. The silence stretched on. Archie waited about ten minutes, then edged slowly forward. The squelch of each footstep in the mud was loud in his ears. He was less than ten feet away when the ground abruptly changed – from soft brown mud to a solid slippery surface that reminded him of compacted snow. Archie bent down to examine the strange white frosting. Something moved above. He looked up and flinched as a ball of white fur dropped from the tree with a heavy thud.

Archie nudged the fur with the steel toe of his left boot. A squirrel. Solid, unmoving and coated in thick layer of ice, the dead animal looked like it had been transformed into a statue. It still had an acorn clutched in its paws.

Archie stumbled backwards, swallowing a scream. Around him the smoke began to clear. He could see the outline of Titania. The mighty Steam Giant was frosted white. His eyes turned to the crew and widened in horror. They were frozen mid-movement. The Captain was frowning at the sky, the Gunner looked like he was trying to run away, while the Driver

had a cigarette halfway to his lips. The Coalman seemed to have fallen over as the shell fell.

All four men were coated in a thick layer of ice.

Chapter Two

Archie stared, almost as motionless as the men in front of him. Then he tilted his head to the sky, desperately scanning the horizon for any more shells. Nothing. Everything was quiet and unnervingly still.

Something rustled in the undergrowth behind Titania. A scrawny rat leapt out of a clump of grass and skidded across the ice towards the frozen men. The rat jumped on the Coalman's face, wrapped a tail around his ear for balance and began to lick his bulbous nose like a lolly. Its whiskers twitched but it didn't appear to be affected by the strange substance.

Archie swallowed and edged forward. The Driver was closest. Archie reached out, snatching his hand back as the ice burnt his fingers. He turned away and found himself staring directly into the Captain's eyes. They were glassy and unfocused. Only then did he realise the truth – all four men were dead.

Archie tasted bile in his throat. A spasm shot up his spine. Every muscle in his body began to tremble violently. If he hadn't been sent for the water, he would be dead too. He spun around and broke into a stumbling run, his feet slipping and sliding beneath him. He reached the grass and collapsed, retching up his meagre breakfast. He'd been with these men for less than a week and Archie already hated them. But now – Archie shuddered and threw up again – he didn't want them dead. He didn't want to be alone in this foreign land.

Head dizzy, limbs shaking, Archie wiped his mouth with his sleeve and stared at the empty countryside. What was he supposed to do now? Should he wait? Surely someone from Albion would come looking for them – or, at least, looking for Titania. The crew might be disposable but Titania was far too valuable to abandon.

The grey sky darkened as a cloud slid over the sun. What if they didn't come back? If they didn't – Archie's train of thought was interrupted by the idea of something worse. What if the Teutonians found them first? Titania was valuable to Albion but she was priceless to the Teutonians.

If Titania fell into the wrong hands – into Teutonian hands – she'd be examined, dismantled and used as a blueprint to build their own version of the mighty machines. That would be catastrophic. It could change the course of the entire war.

Archie struggled to his feet. He couldn't wait to be found. He had to attempt to re-join Albion troops. Clambering back inside the Steam Giant, he examined the drive engine.

'I can fix this,' he muttered under his breath. 'I *will* be able to fix this,' he repeated, his earlier confidence evaporating with every passing second.

He needn't have worried. Within a couple of minutes, he'd confirmed the problem – there were two loose ratchet handles and a small blockage in the number nine piston. It was a straightforward task to tighten the screws and clean the piston. Archie worked quickly, tossing his spanner angrily aside as he finished. If the rest of the crew had listened to him, they would've all been miles away by now. If they'd listened to him, they might still be alive!

Archie sighed. He should be used to being ignored. Used to being dismissed as a worthless child. But it didn't stop him hoping. Hoping that one day someone would listen to him – that someone would think he had skills that were worth noticing. Maybe returning Titania would be that day?

Blinking away angry tears, he clambered up to the command module. Trying to remember the exact order Walt had shown him, he began pulling levers and pushing buttons. The engines spluttered, then roared. Sparks flew into the air from the pistons in Titania's shoulders, followed by white hot jets of steam. Titania's red eyes flashed and Archie found himself bathed in a blood-like glow. The floor beneath Archie's feet juddered. The world tilted and Titania took her first step. Archie punched the air. He'd done it!

Titania wobbled, then veered sideways. Archie's cry of exhilaration caught in his throat. Titania was going to topple over. He lunged forward, grabbed the steer shaft and pulled sharply to the right to level the movement.

Nothing happened for several seconds.

Then, slowly, Titania straightened and began to move. Archie glanced at the frozen figures of his crew. It felt wrong abandoning their bodies but there was no way he'd be able to haul them inside the Steam Giant.

He took a deep breath and turned away, scanning the landscape as they lumbered across the Gallian countryside. The fighting couldn't be far away. He plucked the Captain's spyglass from the console and put it to his eye, adjusting the magnification to maximum. Turning slowly in a circle, he scanned the horizon. There! A plume of black smoke. That had to be the place. He twisted the steer shaft and opened the valve to release the steam's power. Titania marched forward, stepping over the trenches as if they were pavement cracks.

Within minutes they'd left them behind. There was an occasional crater from a stray shell, and what looked like an abandoned artillery gun, but everywhere else had miraculously escaped the war. It was surprisingly peaceful. Archie sighed. He knew the calm and tranquillity was an illusion.

Peering through the spyglass, Archie let out a yelp of alarm as he spotted a dark shadow in the sky. It was still a considerable distance away but its distinctive shape meant it could be only one thing – a Teutonian Zeppelin.

He tugged the lever to reduce the steam pressure and Titania slowed. Archie watched the Zeppelin circle and drop towards the ground. It hovered above the swirling black smoke. What were they doing? Archie fumbled with the knobs on the spyglass. The image blurred. He turned another knob. The image sharpened slightly – enough to see a rope ladder drop from the gondola. Tiny figures clambered down. It seemed a risky way to launch an attack. Archie twiddled the knob again but the magnification didn't change. He was too far away to see any more.

The tiny figures had disappeared into the black smoke. Archie focused on the black and red insignia on the Zeppelin's airbag. His body trembled with pent up rage. He glanced at the panel in front of the chair on his right – at the controls to the guns. He knew how to operate them: he'd fitted the control mechanism when he'd been working in the factory. They had enough power to take down a Zeppelin. But not from this distance. He'd have to get closer.

Before Archie could move Titania's steer shaft back into the drive position, the figures reappeared on the rope ladder. The Zeppelin waited until they'd climbed into the gondola, then fired their engines and turned to leave.

Archie urged Titania to follow. His eyes glued to the spyglass, he tried

to see what had prompted the Zeppelin to leave the battle. Only – now he was closer – Archie realised this wasn't the front. The dark smoke wasn't from fighting. It was coming from the wreckage of an aeroplane in a patch of mud.

Archie focused on the twisted metal. Both the wings and the fuselage were too large for a fighter plane. It looked like a passenger plane. An Albion flag was painted on the tail. He frowned. What was an Albion passenger plane doing flying over enemy territory?

He scanned the crash site. From the way the nose had crumpled, it was unlikely anyone would've survived. But – Archie's frown deepened. Both the front and rear doors were undamaged and open. It looked like someone had opened them after the crash. The Teutonians?

His head spinning with jumbled thoughts, Archie waited until Titania was about fifty feet away, then tugged the brakes. Titania shuddered to a stop.

Archie clambered down the ladder and dropped into the mud.

Senses alert for any sound of movement, he crept forward. The squelch of mud was loud in his ears but it didn't look like there was anyone around to hear. It was just as well. The only way to reach the plane was across a scorched wasteland where he would be totally exposed. Walking briskly, his nostrils filled with the stench of burning metal and rubber.

He'd almost reached the mangled plane when he saw the footprints. Two pairs of men's boots leading towards the cockpit. Archie followed their trail, heaving himself through the door to the main cabin. He immediately wished he hadn't. Torn and smouldering remnants of papers littered every surface while the smashed remains of a china tea set were scattered like confetti over five shadowy figures, their bodies bent at odd angles. The men's clothes had been ripped open. Someone had searched their pockets and beneath their shirts.

The Teutonians had been looking for something. Something belonging to one of these five men. From their smart uniforms, two were probably senior officers but – judging by their expensive frock coats and patent shoes – the other three were civilians.

What had these men had that was so important? And what were the Teutonians going to do with it?

Archie glanced at the man nearest the door. A trickle of blood ran from

beneath his golden monocle, dripping onto a chequered cravat. The man looked familiar. But that wasn't possible. Archie never came into contact with gentlemen like him. Archie turned away, stumbling for the door. It was more important than ever to find the Albion troops and tell the Generals what had happened – to Titania's crew and to these men.

In his haste, Archie forgot he was several feet above the ground and fell, landing face down. Clambering to his knees, he spat the mud from his mouth and froze – there were more prints in the mud. Different prints.

The previous prints had been men's boots – presumably the two figures he'd seen climbing down from the Zeppelin. These, however, were almost perfect ovals. They were evenly spaced and at the right intervals for footprints but no person had feet like these. Could it be an animal? Raised in a city orphanage before being apprenticed to the factory at age five, Archie didn't know much about nature.

The tracks led to a thicket of leafless trees with a couple of spiky bushes and a carpet of grey-green moss. There wasn't much to act as cover and no sign of life beyond a speckled bird perched in one of the bare branches. The bird's beak opened but any song was drowned out by the hum of Titania's engines. Archie froze as he listened to the sound. The rhythmic clunk and hiss had changed.

Archie's stomach flipped. The sound of Titania's engines was as familiar as his own heartbeat. Someone had added extra coal to the engine. Two shovelfuls by the sound of it.

But that wasn't possible. He was the only person around for miles.

Only he couldn't be.

Without hesitating, Archie broke into a run, floundering through the mud as he kept his eyes trained on the Steam Giant.

Clunk. Hiss.

Two jets of steam burst from Titania's shoulders. Her right arm raised, then returned to her side. Her leg wobbled, then she stepped forward, her movements jerky. Whoever was in the command module didn't understand the controls. But they'd worked out enough to make her move. Archie redoubled his pace as Titania began to stagger away.

ARCHIE AND THE CLOCKWORK SOLDIER by Zoe Cookson

SYNOPSIS

Albion and Teutonia are locked in a life and death struggle for global dominance. Albion's mighty Steam Giants are poised to tip the balance but Teutonia is on the verge of perfecting its own 'frozen death' gas. A clockwork soldier and three children – two sworn enemies and a citizen of nowhere – form an unlikely alliance to halt the bloodshed and restore peace whilst discovering the importance of friendship across the gulf of national hatreds.

BIOGRAPHY

Zoe spent fifteen years in the grown-up world before quitting her management job to write for a living (albeit mostly reports, funding bids and business cases). An avid reader, Zoe reviews children's books on her website (www.madgereviews.co.uk) and would love to write for book packagers or publishers developing in-house fiction/non-fiction.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I thought you set up the stakes well, and the building suspense of the situation. I really want to know who is in control of Titania at the end of the pages – I have a feeling you will be introducing a new child character!'

'The high drama of the opening chapter really engaged me and is perfect for the age group. Steam giants are a wonderfully visual invention. I loved Archie's engineering knowhow which will inspire readers. Memorable writing!'

'I also liked the pitch here: it hints at strong child friendships and action, but with a wider resonance of overcoming hatred. It has potential to be both fun and pertinent, which is what I'm looking for.'

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HEART AND SOUL

By Sue Cunningham

Prologue

When they first tell me what's wrong with me, I think they're having a laugh. Nobody gets heart failure at my age, right? On the other hand, Mum doesn't think it's the least bit funny.

"Parvovirus? *Parvovirus?*" she shrieks at the consultant heart specialist. "You're telling me my daughter is going to die from a disease that *dogs* get?"

What the hell? I'm struggling to breathe anyway but this news nearly finishes me off.

Dad clocks my panicky face. "You're not going to die, Jane. Is she, doctor?"

"Not if I can help it." Mr Khan sounds inappropriately jolly. "Didn't you know you were unwell, Jane? Even with rapid onset of cardiomyopathy, you usually have some symptoms beforehand. Shortness of breath, loss of concentration, fatigue?"

"I've been tired, I guess. Feeling pretty crappy." I pause to catch my breath. "I thought it was just stress. Moving house, starting a new school and all the stuff with my mum and dad."

"Our conscious uncoupling," says Mum.

Dad puffs out his cheeks. "She means, we're getting a divorce. What's the treatment, doctor? Will Jane be all right?"

Mr Khan hesitates. "If we can find her a new heart, she has an excellent chance of recovery."

What?

Dad squeezes my hand, his knuckles white. "Our little girl needs a heart transplant?"

"As soon as possible. It's lucky she's so common." Mr Khan waves his hands in a placatory manner. "What I mean to say is that Jane has a very common blood type."

Dad swallows. “That’s good, is it?”

“Very good. When we get on to tissue typing, it will be easier to find a donor. It’s essential we get a good match.” He flips through my medical notes. “O positive, see? Very average indeed.”

Average. That just about sums me up.

Fifteen years old and I’d never done anything memorable in my life until the day I fainted and fell off my chair during Mrs Ayodeji’s careers presentation. Woke up to find the whole class leaning over me – who knew Year 11’s supposed sex god, Raz Archer, had so much nostril hair? Even worse was the total over-the-topness of the ambulance journey: blue lights flashing, sirens wailing and a good-looking guy in a green jumpsuit taking my pulse. If I hadn’t been *mortified*, I’d probably have enjoyed that bit.

Three days later, I’m still stuck in this hospital bed, sucking in air like a dehydrated goldfish. Dad must have been worried because he even got on the phone to my mother, recalling her from darkest Wales.

As my parents converse in worried whispers, *not even arguing*, I consider the disturbing fact that not one thing about me is remarkable.

A British standard pear-shaped body: size twelve on the bottom and ten on the top. Khaki-coloured eyes which are neither green nor brown. Average mousy hair, way overdue a cut and highlights but I haven’t sorted out a hairdresser here yet.

Talk about plain Jane, even my name’s boring.

I pull off the oxygen mask to stare at my parents. “Am I going to die?”

Mum opens her mouth but Dad gives her a warning stare. “No, love,” he says. “You’re not going to die. And when you’re better, we’ll go on holiday – anywhere you like. Barcelona, Venice, New York; we could go to Disneyland, swim with dolphins . . .” He sounds like an advert for the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Bollocks. I really am going to die.

I’m going to die at the age of fifteen. I’ve achieved nothing in my life and even my roots need doing.

1

There’s someone else in the bed with me.

Slight problem – I don’t have a clue who it is. This isn’t even my bed.

It smells weird and the mattress is super thin. But before you start putting two and two together and making twenty-seven, stop! I didn't get totally smashed at some party and crash at my best mate's house. I've only just started at a new school so there's no best mate yet, no sleepovers.

Who the hell is it? I keep my eyes shut and listen to the even breathing behind me. The mattress dips as whoever-it-is fidgets, making my bum sink into the middle. I grab onto the edge of the bed, trying not to roll back.

Ow. *Ow*. Something tugs on my arm and a stabbing pain shoots through my chest. I open my eyes to see Peppa Pig curtains and a Winnie-the-Pooh mural running around the walls. Not to mention a massive drip sticking into my left arm and loads of wires hooking me up to some sort of monitor. I try to lift my head but dizziness swoops in like a tidal wave and I sink back onto the pillow.

Now I know where I am, meaning I must have made it through my heart surgery. Phew. I'm not normally a drama queen (my mother doesn't leave room for anyone else) but it's a huge relief to think I'll make it to my sixteenth birthday. Even if this is a hospital bed though, it doesn't explain why there's someone in it. I was pretty rough when I was brought in but I vaguely remember the little girl in the opposite cubicle telling the nurse she'd wet the bed. I seriously hope she hasn't got into mine.

I clear my throat which feels dry and scratchy and say, "Go back to your own bed."

There's a pause and then whoever-it-is next to me gives a muffled sniff.

"Hey?" I say. "Are you crying?"

"Don't be stupid. Of course I'm not crying."

No *way*. I recognise that voice. She was the one doing the running commentary throughout my time in Intensive Care. "Lie still, don't panic, go back to sleep, blah, blah, blah." All the bog-standard phrases student nurses have to learn before they're let loose on the bedpans and the junior doctors.

"Why on earth would I be crying?" She sounds well posh. Maybe she's not a nurse but a junior doctor. The ones you hear about on telly working a three-million-hour week or something. What's she doing in my bed? Did she come into work totally knackered, find the nearest unconscious patient and whip the curtains closed so she could have a quick snooze?

“Aw. Were you on call last night?” I say sympathetically.

“God’s sake. Stop talking nonsense and go back to sleep, Jane,” instructs the voice.

I’m desperate for a drink of water but my eyelids weigh a ton. Maybe just another ten minutes. I snuggle back down into the rubbery pillow.

“You’ll feel better next time you wake up,” she adds doubtfully. The mattress springs up as her weight disappears.

I roll onto my side to fill the space and next time I wake, she’s gone.

2

I open my eyes, totally disorientated to find I’ve switched beds again – I’m in a sunny side-room with pale-green walls and a distinct absence of Winnie-the-Pooh. Suspended between floor and ceiling is a bunch of sad-looking deflated halogen balloons with “16” in shouty metallic print. On the bedside cabinet, a pile of opened greetings cards confirm my suspicions.

No way. I’ve even missed my bloody birthday.

I take an experimental breath; my chest is super sore. Peering down the front of my nasty hospital nightie, I’m relieved to see the wound’s covered by a white dressing. Somewhere underneath, my new (second hand) heart beats unassisted.

How weird is that?

The door swings open and Mr Khan, the heart specialist, appears, followed by a huge entourage.

“Good to see you with us at last,” he says as his minions straggle into the room. “How are you feeling, Jane?”

“OK, I guess.” I hardly recognise my hoarse voice. “My chest hurts.”

“That’s understandable.” He nods to the junior doctors. “We have to break the ribs to get the old one out and the new one in, you see.”

Ew. Too much information. I zone out from the enthusiastic discussion around metal retractors and chest drains, tuning back in for the end credits. “You had us worried, young lady, it took quite some time to wake you up but I think you’ll do just fine. Take it easy for the next couple of weeks – we’ll soon have you home.”

“Where’s my dad?” I say, seeing his red fleece slung over the arm of the chair.

“Perhaps he’s gone to get a cup of tea with your mother?”

Mum’s still here? Jeez, I hope the truce is ongoing.

Mr Khan scribbles on the chart at the foot of my bed. “Any questions, Jane?”

Only about a million.

I take a deep painful breath. “Can I ask about the donor?”

Mr Khan shakes his head. “All I know is she was a young woman. Car accident.”

I feel like I’m going to puke. Someone got killed in a car accident so I could live.

“How old was she? Can’t you tell me her name?”

“I’m sorry, I don’t know. But even if I did, I couldn’t tell you.” He taps his finger against the side of his nose. “Strictly confidential.”

The door bangs closed as he leaves, taking most of the doctors with him. Only one remains.

“Her name was Tilly, if you must know.” It’s her, the girl with the posh voice. She doesn’t look much like a junior doctor. She’s tiny with super shiny straight hair, killer heels and a gorgeous blue jacket I’ve long coveted from the window of Zara.

“How do you know?” I say, feeling mega scruffy in my horrible hospital gown. I’ll have to get Dad to bring me in some clean pyjamas.

“Oh, I know lots about her. I’ll tell you something else if you like.” Her straight dark brows scrunch together as she approaches the bed.

“Thought you weren’t allowed.” Is she really a doctor? She looks too young. Maybe some kind of social worker? Whatever she is, she doesn’t seem very professional.

The girl rolls her eyes. “God’s sake. Do you want to know or not?”

“OK, yeah. I want to know.”

“That car accident wasn’t an accident at all. She was *murdered*.” She taps manicured fingernails against her teeny hips. “Or should I say – *I was murdered*.”

Okaaay. I grab the call button and press firmly. “The nurse is coming. And my dad. Better get back to your own room, yeah?”

She smiles before perching her tiny arse on the edge of the bed. “I’m not going anywhere,” she says. “Not without you.”

“You reckon?” I suddenly remember something. “Hey! Are you the one who was in my bed the other day?” *Keep her talking until they come and rescue you.*

“On it, not in it,” she corrects, rolling thickly lashed blue eyes.

“On it, not in it. Gotcha.” There’s no sign of the nurse but through the window of my side-room, I see Dad ambling towards me. *Hurry up!*

The girl chatters on. “God, those plastic chairs are hard and there’s nowhere else to sit apart from the floor which is a total health hazard. I’m glad you’ve woken up. It’s been *sooo* boring, just watching you sleep—”

Uh-oh. I shrink back against the pillows as she places a perfectly oval fingernail over the dressing on my chest. “Mind if I have a quick feel?”

“Get off!” I screech, new heart pounding. “Dad. *Dad!*” I wave to get his attention, wincing as the pain shoots through my splintered sternum.

“Take it easy, Janey love,” he says, barging through the door. “Phew. It’s nice to see you awake.”

“Not you as well,” I grumble. “Can you get the nurse to take this girl back to her ward?”

“What girl?” Dad looks puzzled as he glances around the room.

“Her. *Her!*” I gesture towards the girl who’s watching us with an amused expression.

Dad puts his arm around my shoulder, mindful of the drip. “There’s no one here, Janey.”

“What? But she’s right there! Can’t you see her?”

“Don’t worry. It’s probably the stuff they’ve had you on, heavy duty gear. It can give you hallucinations.”

He’d know, if anyone would. He and Mum met as students at the height of the Manchester rave scene. *Madchester*, people called it. Mum did Drama (in her case, more of a lifestyle choice than a degree) and Dad did Geography (which, as everyone knows, means you end up working for an insurance company).

“You’re OK, love,” Dad says. “There’s no one here, I promise.”

“Except me,” sings the girl, dancing forward to wiggle her fingers in front of Dad’s face. I try to fix on them as the room tilts and blurs out of focus.

“How come I can see you and he can’t?” I sob, squeezing my eyes shut.

“Because you’ve got my heart, of course,” she says. “Duh! Don’t you get it? I told you, I’m Tilly. You owe me big time. And I’m going nowhere until you get off your fat backside and help me.”

It’s just as well Dad’s already run to get the nurse because if this is the drugs wearing off, I seriously need a top-up.

No one goes around telling me I’ve got a fat arse.

Especially not a size eight dead girl.

3

God knows what they gave me but when I come round again, woolly and headachy, it’s growing dark. Dad’s on one side of the bed and my mother sits opposite, reading my birthday cards. I seriously hope none of my mates have written anything rude.

“Hey, Mum,” I whisper, lifting my head. *No way*. The posh girl – Tilly – is frowning at me from the bottom of the bed. Dad was right about the side effects of the medication.

She’s just a figment of your imagination. I blink super hard but she’s still there, knees drawn up daintily to her chest and a fingertip to her lips. She’s pretty realistic for a hallucination.

“Not one single word,” she orders. “OK, maybe I shouldn’t have broken the news like that but I’d no idea you’d freak out. Do you realise how much time we’ve wasted with you being off your face? *Don’t* answer that. If they think you’re bonkers, they’ll never let us out of here.”

I shake my head. *She’s not real*. If I ignore her, maybe she’ll go away.

Mum leans across, silver bangles jangling, to stroke my brow. “However did you get yourself into this state, sweetheart? Heart failure at your age?” She slides a sideways look at Dad. “Has he been encouraging you to eat meat again?”

“Mum, you know I haven’t been vegan since I was twelve.”

“Yes, just after your father went over to the dark side. Well, no wonder your chakras are shot to pieces, not to mention your arteries. It’s a shame you slept through your birthday because I made you a cake. Substitute the eggs and butter for beetroot juice and the recipe works just as well.”

“Never mind.” Dad gives me a wink. “I’m sure the nurses enjoyed it.”

Mum dips into her hessian tote, producing various paper bags. “Let’s

see. I've brought you some jade for healing and a lovely piece of rose quartz to warm your new heart centre. Once they let you out, how about coming back to the commune for a little holiday? It's lovely in Wales just now and an organic, macrobiotic diet will do you a damn sight more good than these silly drips and drugs."

The imaginary Tilly yawns, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed. "Doesn't she *ever* shut up?" she asks, rising gracefully to lean against the radiator. "*Don't* answer that. We need to convince them you're not losing the plot."

Figment, figment, figment, I tell myself but the temptation to answer is too strong. "Am I losing the plot?"

The replies come from all sides.

"No, love. It's just side effects from the meds." (Dad)

"Of course not. It's just that no one else can see me. Totally inconvenient." (Tilly)

"Maybe a little bit, sweetheart, but they do say it runs in families, don't they? What about poor Granny Ursula on Dad's side?" (Guess?)

I nod. Assuming this *isn't* drug related and I really am being haunted by the ghost of my heart donor, there's a good chance mad Granny Ursula is the only one who'd believe me.

"I'm so thirsty. Could you guys go get me a drink?" I croak, hoping Dad'll take the hint and take Mum with him. "I might go back to sleep for a bit."

Mum looks disappointed. "I thought we could do some karmic chanting together. Or a visualisation of healing silvery light . . ."

"Maybe tomorrow," I say. "My throat's a bit sore for chanting."

Dad comes to my rescue. "We'll get you some juice. Do you want anything else?"

Only my mind back.

Tilly watches as Dad frogmarches my mother from the room. "He must have the patience of a saint."

"Oh, go away," I say. No one gets to slag off my mother except me.

"No can do."

I glare at her. "What do you mean, 'no can do'?" If I've imagined you being here, I can just as easily imagine you *pissing off again*."

“You think you’ve imagined me? Don’t flatter yourself, sweetie. I’m really here, worse luck.” She leans forward to place a freezing cold hand over mine.

I flinch as the hairs on my forearm lift. “No way. Like Dad said, the drugs are messing with my head. You’re just a figment of my imagination.”

“I’m not a figment!” Her voice rises as I close my eyes. “And stop ignoring me, it’s totally rude.”

“It can’t be rude to ignore you, if you’re Not. Even. Here.” I start to hum but it doesn’t drown out the outraged squeals of fury.

“You all right there, love?”

Dad stands in the doorway, a jug of orange juice in his hand.

“I’m fine.” I avert my gaze from Tilly’s furious face. “Where’s Mum?”

“Trying to convince the WRVS ladies to ditch their entire stock of freeze-dried Nescafé and substitute it with herbal tea.”

“I bet that’s going down well,” I say.

Tilly glares, first at me and then Dad. “Can’t you get rid of him? We need to make plans.”

“No,” I say.

Dad shoots me a worried glance.

“Then you’d better shut up and listen,” she says. “You’ve got to convince them you’re not bonkers. Don’t let them hear you talking to yourself.”

“Ha! You’ve just admitted it,” I say, as Dad rushes out of the room again. “I was talking to myself, not you. Because *you don’t exist*.”

4

Next morning, they confiscate all the happy floaty drugs and wheel in a psychologist called Dorothy instead.

Mum approves. She recognises a kindred spirit in Dorothy; they obviously frequent the same sort of shops to buy their wafy, tie-dye skirts and crappy crystals.

“Let it all out, darling,” she says, bending to kiss my forehead and almost knocking me unconscious with a dangling tribal pendant made from solid silver and turquoise. “Come on, Jeff. Let’s leave them to it.”

Once my parents have gone, Dorothy twiddles her beads in a supportive manner as I ramble on.

“I think I’m going mental. The girl who died – I feel like she’s still here,” I confess, while Tilly dances around the bed, tearing at the roots of her shiny hair and shrieking: “For God’s sake, shut up, Jane!” at intermittent intervals.

Dorothy inclines her head. “That’s understandable. We call it survivor guilt.”

“You don’t get it. I feel like she’s really, *really* here.” You’d think working in the Transplant Unit, Dorothy might have had some previous experience with this kind of thing. Tilly seems too robust to be a figment of my imagination. She isn’t even see-through. I’ve tried just ignoring her, I really have, but unless I hide under the bedclothes, she’s everywhere I look.

Dorothy pats my hand. “It’s OK to feel your donor’s still here with you, sharing your life. In some ways, she always will be.”

“I seriously hope not,” I say, as Tilly glowers from her favourite spot near the radiator.

“It’s quite normal,” persists Dorothy.

“It’s not normal to see your heart donor everywhere you go, though?”

“Well, no. But that’s not happening? You don’t see her everywhere you go?” Dorothy looks slightly alarmed, as does Tilly. She springs from her radiator to my side.

“Do you *ever* want to leave this hospital?” she shouts, pushing past Dorothy to grab me by both shoulders. “Or would you prefer to be carted straight off to the loony bin?”

I try hard to focus on the right person as two pairs of anxious blue eyes stare back, awaiting my response.

“No,” I say. “I don’t.”

“Perhaps it would help to meet up with another transplant patient?” Dorothy suggests. “There’s an outpatient clinic this afternoon. I could introduce you to one or two of the younger ones.”

“Good idea.” Tilly clearly approves. “There might be others like me.”

I can kind of see her logic. If all transplant patients are being stalked by the ghosts of their dead donors, I can get a few tips on how to cope with her ladyship. And a better idea of how long this situation might last.

Because of the risk to my immune system, the ward sister won’t let me go down to the clinic but Dorothy offers to bring one of the patients up to

the ward. I change into clean pyjamas and wheel my drip down to the day room. From the pink sofa, I've got a clear view of Dorothy approaching with a tall guy in his twenties.

"This isn't going to work," says Tilly, her eyes dull. "There's no one with him."

"Just because you can't see them, doesn't mean they're not there," I humour her/myself. "Maybe only the recipient can see them?"

"I'm dead, sweetie," she says. "Doesn't mean I can't spot another ghost when I see one."

"Could be a good thing," I whisper. "Maybe it means you won't be here forever."

"What, like I'm just part of the usual post-op regime? Seven days on ICU, three weeks before you get discharged? How many weeks before the ghost of your unspeakably generous donor ascends the glittery escalator to heaven, Jane? Four weeks? Eight?" Tilly's voice rises higher. "Or maybe *never* unless you do something in return, like bloody well help her find out why she was murdered!"

"Jane, this is Ryan," Dorothy interrupts. "He's here for his six-month check-up."

"I guess you're still pretty immunosuppressed so I won't shake hands," the tall guy says in an American accent. "Dorothy tells me you're having a little trouble adjusting."

I nod. "It's pretty weird but since my transplant, I feel like there's someone with me all the time."

"Not weird." Ryan sinks into the opposite chair with a reassuring smile. "After my surgery, I felt a new presence close to me at all times."

Wow. No *way*.

I widen my eyes at Tilly. She stands up, circles him slowly and then gets up close and personal with the whole jazz hands thing like some hyperactive drama kid from *High School Musical* but he doesn't flinch.

"This presence," I say, peering round Tilly's tiny denim backside which is right in my face. "Who did you think it was?"

Ryan inclines his head reverently. "The Lord Jesus Christ. I made some poor choices before my surgery but He taught me to be grateful for my second chance at life."

“Are you sure it was Jesus? Not just . . . somebody else?” Maybe Ryan’s donor had a beard, sandals and a really sick sense of humour. “Did you actually *see* him?”

“No but I felt him.” He taps his chest with a beatific smile. “Here inside my new heart for always.”

“What a giggle.” Tilly returns to sit beside me. “Maybe I should have done that – told you I was the Virgin Mary or something.”

“I don’t think the Virgin Mary ever had a pair of Victoria Beckham jeans,” I say.

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HEART AND SOUL by Sue Cunningham

SYNOPSIS

Sixteen-year-old Jane wakes from an emergency heart transplant to find she's being haunted by the disgruntled ghost of her donor. Trust-fund teen Tilly can't rest in peace until she exposes the conspiracy behind her untimely demise but Jane is unconvinced.

Was Tilly *really* murdered? Or just the victim of a tragic car accident?

When Tilly refuses to depart until she gets answers, the unlikely partnership embarks on a journey to uncover the truth.

BIOGRAPHY

Sue Cunningham lives in a Manchester man cave with her husband and assorted teen sons. She won the WriteMentor Children's Novel Award 2020 and has been long/shortlisted for other awards. When she's not writing (or treading on bits of Lego in bare feet or tripping over electric guitar cables), she works for the NHS.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I loved the concept and subject matter – it felt fresh and original and it really made me laugh! Characterisation is great – the mum and Tilly especially. Really wanted to read more. Commercial, funny, can imagine the cover. LOVE.'

'Strong concept. Compelling voice of Jane and I like the way the relationship between her and ghost Tilly is portrayed. Feels believable even though it is a ghost story. Nice to have a modern, sassy ghost story.'

'Not all pitches/synopses live up to the writing, but here I could see how this story could go and I felt I'd really like to read it.'

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EVOLANDIA

By K L Kaine

1. The Storm of Black Butterflies

The Chrysalis Queen peered through the portal, past the swirling stars and smoky galaxies, into the forbidden Universe. Somewhere, her next victim was walking, talking, breathing . . . unaware that this was their last day to enjoy such indulgences. This would be the eleventh child in eleven years to join her collection. And yet the curse burned as black as ever, suffocating her realm, withering her creatures. She sighed softly, and her wings fluttered, raining down a haze of tiny scales. Perhaps this year, she would find the precious child who would lift the curse. Suddenly, her antennae twitched and her black eyes gleamed. A buzzing had caught her ear.

Which to start with? Sabre-toothed rabbit hearts, spider-monkey intestines, or octopus brains?

Hearts, guts, or brains.

Decisions, decisions.

Most visitors found the museum's Spirit Collection creepy, with its rows and rows of pickled animal specimens in glass jars on cold metal shelves, paling into ghosts of themselves in amber fluid. The chemical tinted air made people's stomachs turn.

But Luca Braithwaite was no visitor. She'd lived with her two paleobiologist mums and sister, Zoe, in the basement flat of the Natural History Museum all her twelve years. So she didn't bat an eyelid at having a Diplodocus skeleton watching as she did her homework, or a giant panda replica to hang her coat on.

Luca eyed the jars of preserved animal parts and lamented the lost potential for mischief. A rabbit heart snuck into a head-teacher's desk drawer. Intestines looped around the reception desk like a Christmas garland. Brains fired by catapult at museum visitors lined up to make a complaint.

Luca sighed and picked up her cleaning cloth. She was already inches away from being grounded for the whole summer for using her flying-windmill kick on Brenda the Biffer. For once she'd better stick to what she was here to do. Chores. Rabbit hearts, she decided. She sprayed the jar with cleaning spray and started rubbing.

As she worked, she glanced out the window at the families trickling out of the museum, and felt a pang. Not that being grounded would make much difference. It wasn't like she had any friends to hang out with. No, it would be another dreary summer of being dragged to mind-numbing microfossil exhibitions and soggy archaeological digs in Devon, eating squashed egg sandwiches.

Worst of all, she'd have to put up with her mum's and Zoe's yabbering about ancient bits of rock as if they were the most exciting thing in the universe. She rolled her eyes, rubbed the glass jar more vigorously, and the fleshy blob inside wobbled a bit. She lifted her head and glanced over her shoulder at the opposite shelves.

Zoe had – obviously – already finished cleaning *her* shelves. The jars gleamed in the spotlighting, carefully ordered by estimated date of existence and aligned to within a micromillimetre of each other. Zoe had even taken the liberty of correcting some of the notes on the little cards. No doubt the curator would send her a box of chocolates to thank her.

Luca looked back to her own shelves of jars, still higgledy-piggledy and caked in dust. The curling script on the info cards meant nothing to her, and the jars might as well have been full of blancmange. She hadn't inherited her mums' brainiac gene, like Zoe had. But what really baked her noodle was that she didn't even have the excuse of being the younger one. Nobody could believe it when they found out Luca was the *older* sister, by one year and one day exactly.

Luca allowed herself a little smile. Because she had a plan. And if she could pull it off, for once in her life she would be the one getting patted on the back by her mums. But she didn't have much time. She needed to get her chores done pronto and get started.

She looked back at Zoe's shelves, then at hers.

It would take hours to clean everything properly. But a little rearranging . . . Well that would be much quicker. She cocked her ear at the door and

listened carefully. No one was about.

Grinning, she wrapped her arms around the giant jar of spider-monkey intestines and hauled it to the floor with a clink. Then she went over to Zoe's shelves, grabbed a jar full of piranha fish skeletons that glared at her with big black eye sockets and clacked their sharp teeth against the glass as she lifted the jar, and slid it onto her shelf. She swapped over several more and her shelves were starting to look really good, when she heard the buzzing.

She froze, rag in one hand, cleaning spray in the other.

All the insects in the specimen collection had been dead for hundreds – even thousands – of years. Nothing had any right to be buzzing. She crept among the aisles; shelves upon shelves stuffed with bloated fish and bug-eyed rats. She jumped when she found a very much alive black butterfly crawling along one of the shelves, but the sound couldn't have been coming from that.

Finally, she found the source of the buzzing in the top outer corner of an open window, like a strange, grey growth. It looked a bit like a bulbous, upside down rose, the size of a football, with papery petals. But from its pouting mouth came no delicate perfume. Instead, out crawled a black and yellow nugget of pure evil.

Luca hated wasps.

She stayed frozen as the wasp took flight and swung through the air, eyeing her with its alien mirrored eyes. Her fingers tightened around the trigger of the cleaning spray bottle still in her hand, and her eyes flickered to the doorway.

Zoe insisted the family have a 'no kill' rule. And she didn't just mean catching mice in humane traps and scooping spiders up in little tubs. It meant sparing disease-ridden houseflies, biting mosquitos . . . and wasps.

But Zoe wasn't here.

"Come on," Luca murmured. "Come closer. I dare you."

The wasp hovered in front of her face, its twiggy limbs hanging down. Luca inched the cleaning spray upwards until it was level with the wasp . . .

"Take that!"

A spray of mist engulfed the wasp, which buzzed louder, then spiralled erratically, sputtering like a wounded fighter jet. It launched itself towards

her, its stinger aimed at her neck. Luca tried to leap out of the way, but the creature was too fast.

“OW!” Luca screeched as the stinger pierced her skin. She smacked the wasp hard, crushing its tiny body. It tumbled stiffly to the ground.

But as Luca pressed her hand to her throbbing neck, a much louder buzzing filled the air, making the metal shelves vibrate and the glass jars rattle.

Wasps streamed out of the nest, scenting the murder of their sister. Shrieking, Luca squirted out death clouds of spray, coating the insects with a burning mist of chemicals. She coughed as the acid drifted into her own eyes and mouth.

“WHAT ON EARTH IS GOING ON IN HERE?”

Luca looked up through stinging eyes to see Zoe and both her mums standing in the doorway, gaping. Zoe was wearing her “There’s no Planet B” T-shirt and holding a half-finished climate protest placard, while MumKay and MumJess glittered in glamorous evening gowns, MumJess’s Swedish height towering over MumKay’s compact Singaporean frame. It was MumKay, hands on hips, who had spoken.

Luca dropped the almost empty spray bottle and kicked it away as the last of the wasps tumbled to the floor.

“They attacked me!” she said, gritting her teeth against the pulsating pain in her neck.

Zoe hurried over and knelt down beside the scattered corpses, then laid the crushed one delicately on her palm. The chemicals were eating away at its delicate limbs. “Poor thing. It only lashed out because it was in pain.”

MumKay and MumJess joined her in cooing over the twitching hate nuggets. “Aww, poor things.”

Luca rolled her eyes. “Hello? I’ve been stung here?”

Zoe’s lip trembled, and she started blinking furiously. “But they’re dead. Look at them. They’re so small . . .”

Luca felt a prickle of irritation. “They’re only wasps! It’s not like they do anything useful.”

“You don’t *know* that they don’t do anything useful,” said Zoe, gently touching the wasp’s delicate wing. “And anyway, they have as much right to be here as we do, whether *we* think they’re useful or not.” Suddenly,

Zoe frowned. She looked over Luca's shoulder at her no-longer-perfectly-ordered shelves, and then at Luca's.

Uh oh, thought Luca.

"Did you . . . ?" She glanced over at Luca, who made an urgent slashing gesture across her neck. Zoe's eyes widened, then she clamped her lips shut.

"What?" said MumKay, narrowing her eyes. "Did she what?"

"Nothing," squeaked Zoe. Luca stared at the ceiling.

MumKay eyed the shelves. "Why are these jars . . . ? Ah-ha!" She spun towards Luca. "You swapped them over, didn't you?"

"No . . ." Luca squirmed.

"I don't believe it." MumKay shook her head. "Is it really so hard to clean a few jars?"

"Sorry," muttered Luca, looking at the tiled floor. She could feel the exasperated gazes of MumKay and MumJess burning into her.

Zoe mouthed, "Sorry."

MumKay shook her head. "We don't have time for this now. MumJess and I have to get going soon or we'll be late for our talk about the discovery of the Arctic Dinosaur Nursery. Let's get this mess cleaned up, stat."

She picked up a dustpan and brush, MumJess grabbed a rag and Zoe started moving the jars back to their correct homes. But when Luca tried to help, she bumped one of the larger jars, and it rocked precariously, threatening to topple and smash, spilling octopus brains all over the floor. Zoe yelped and grabbed it, carefully settling it back into place.

"Thank goodness!" said MumKay, hand on her heart. "Well done, Zoe." She turned to Luca with a dark look. "You'd better just wait somewhere out of the way. I think you've done enough for one day."

Luca slumped over to a bench at the side and hugged her knees as she watched her family clean up her mess. They moved like a well-oiled machine, while Luca sat like a useless lump at the side. She fought back tears and clenched her jaw, more determined than ever to complete her plan.

For biology they'd been asked to create an animal anatomy picture, and she'd had the most brilliant idea for creating a horse image, showing the animal's bones, organs and muscles in three different sections. Best of all, she was going to make the whole thing out of "nature". Leaves, twigs,

little pebbles – it was a stroke of genius, even if she did say so herself. Mr Threadgold would give her a gold star and a special certificate of commendation, and her mums would probably frame it and put it on the wall. They would beg her forgiveness for being so blind to her magnificence. Zoe would bow to her genius and plead to be her apprentice in the exciting new field of scientific art. She had it all planned out and had even collected all the materials already. True, her assignment was already a teeny weeny bit late, but all she needed was a few hours to put it all together and then glory would be hers.

By the time Zoe and her mums had cleared up, Luca was feeling a lot more buoyant again and had almost forgotten about the sting in her neck. She shrugged when she saw Zoe had even cleaned Luca’s shelves of jars to a sparkle – front and back. Luca’s moment was coming, she didn’t need to be jealous any more.

“Right,” said MumKay, nodding in satisfaction at their handiwork. “Time to go. You can see us to the main door.”

She gestured towards the doorway, and Luca bounded out.

Hintze Hall was the grand entrance to the museum. It was vast, with two storeys of tall sandstone arches rising to rows of skylights that flooded the space with airy sunshine. Decorative columns carved with tiny mice and monkeys framed alcoves and balconies, with exhibits, artwork and info cards spotlighted in every nook and cranny.

They descended the imposing staircase at the rear, passing the stern-looking marble statue of Charles Darwin. Luca always thought he looked like he was waiting for his train. Which was late. They didn’t notice the black butterfly flutter in after them, and settle on a rib of the blue whale skeleton suspended overhead.

MumKay looked at her watch, then looked at Zoe and Luca. “We’ll only be gone a few hours. Stick close together. You can’t be too careful.”

MumJess rolled her eyes. “They’ll be fine.”

Luca raised an eyebrow. “Why wouldn’t we be fine?”

“Oh, MumKay’s got some silly worry stuck in her head. Apparently having an IQ of 129 doesn’t stop you falling for bat-doodoo conspiracy theories.”

“Some conspiracy theories are true,” said MumKay. “I thought you of all people would have an open mind.”

“The problem with keeping your mind too wide open is that your brain can fall out,” retorted MumJess.

“What’s the theory?” asked Luca.

“Oh, nothing,” said MumKay.

“Ooooooh, tell!” said Zoe.

MumKay sighed. “Look, it’s just a journalist who thinks they’ve found a pattern in . . .” She shifted uncomfortably in her high heels. “Children who have gone missing from around here.”

“A serial kidnapper?” said Luca.

“It’s not just that. There’s something really odd about it—”

“Wait here, I’ll get the tin foil hat . . .” said MumJess.

MumKay scowled at her. “This journalist reckons that one child has gone missing on the same day each year for the last ten years. The first year it was a one year old. The second year it was a two year old. Then a three year old, and so on.”

Zoe frowned. “What do the police say?”

“They say it’s a load of nonsense, like it is,” said MumJess.

“Wait a minute,” said Luca. “Wouldn’t that mean it’s an eleven year old next?”

They all turned to look at Zoe.

Who happened to be eleven.

“I’m sure MumJess is right and it’s just coincidence,” said MumKay, clearing her throat. “But you know. You can’t be too careful. So stick together. And stay inside.”

Luca glanced around the hall. There were about a million dark corners a person could hide in just in this room, let alone the rest of the museum.

“Oh, and Luca?” said MumKay.

Luca felt her shoulders tense. What now?

“Mr Threadgold called today and told me your biology assignment is already a week late. If it’s not in tomorrow, you fail.” MumKay’s voice almost choked on the last words. Braithwaites didn’t *fail* subjects. And *biology* of all things.

“It’s fine,” Luca muttered. “It’s under control.”

“It’d better be,” said MumKay. “Or I’m going to insist Zoe tutor you.”

Luca looked at her in horror. “You wouldn’t!” She could already feel the shame burning her ears.

“Honestly, I don’t see what the big deal is. You two are always in each other’s pockets anyway.”

“I’m older than her!”

“Fine, one of *us* will tutor you, then.”

“No!” said Luca. “I don’t need help. I can do it on my own.”

She stood stiffly while her mums hugged her goodbye. She turned her back as Zoe embraced them with gusto, and headed out through the arches at the back of the hall. The picnic area beyond was full of patio tables and metal-legged chairs. Dippy the Diplodocus skeleton stood proudly in the middle and more exhibits surrounded the seating area. Movement from the overhead balcony caught her eye, and she squinted upwards. The museum was closed now, so all the visitors should have left . . .

A pigeon fluttered across the ceiling, and Luca exhaled. Just a pigeon.

One of the tables was covered in huge bits of cardboard and black felt markers. Zoe would be leading the climate revolution before she’d finished school, thought Luca bitterly as she sank into a chair at the next table, where she’d dumped her rucksack earlier. Meanwhile, Luca might as well live at the bottom of the ocean, or shoot herself into space, for all anyone cared.

She rubbed her eyes. They were still burning from the chemical cleaning spray. The sting in her neck had reduced to a dull ache.

She tugged out her art paper and the pile of stuff she’d collected from the museum grounds over the week. She had twigs for the horse’s skeleton, coloured pebbles for the organs (she’d searched for hours for ones in the right shape) and dried grass for the muscles. She’d printed out three pictures to work from – she wasn’t going to just throw down something in the right kind of shape, *no siree*. She was going to get everything scientifically accurate. She had thought of *everything*.

She carefully laid everything out, but her eyes flicked back to her rucksack.

Well, there was no point trying to focus on an empty stomach, was there?

She pulled out her lunchbox and unclipped it. It yawned wide open

on its hinge, revealing both halves packed solid with food she had lovingly prepared herself. Cold pizza slathered with mayo and jam; crisp and pickle sandwiches; a tub of cereal medley with sprinkles, popcorn and gummy bears; a banana with a sachet of brown sauce for dipping; twelve chocolate bourbons; half a cucumber. And that was just the top layer.

She cocked her head at the food and narrowed her eyes. Something was missing. There were only *six* chocolate bourbons, instead of twelve. Had she miscounted? She tutted to herself. She would have to pay more attention next time.

Zoe came through from the main hall as Luca was demolishing a bacon and marmalade roll.

“That’s disgusting,” she said, plopping herself down at Luca’s table.

“Better than eating burgers made of gravel.”

“Pea protein is hardly gravel.”

“What has Team Braithwaite got planned next for saving the world? Thatching our own toothpaste? Pressing our bedsheets out of used toilet paper?” She poured herself a beaker of orange juice and took a swig.

“You’re a Braithwaite too, you know.”

“Look,” Luca said stiffly. “I have important things to be getting on with, so if you could just make like a tree-hugging weirdo and hippy-hop out of here – that would be marvellous.”

“But I thought we could hang out. We could race relay around the dinosaur eggs, or take our pogo sticks into the earthquake simulator . . .”

“I can’t.”

“*Please?* It’s no fun without you.”

“Tough.” Luca scowled, then felt a squeeze of guilt at how crestfallen Zoe looked. She squashed the feeling and refused to look at Zoe’s puppy dog eyes. Eventually Zoe scraped her chair back and slumped over to her own table.

Luca reluctantly put her lunchbox aside and started arranging twigs, carefully checking her guide picture. She’d never realised how pleasing the curves of a horse skeleton were. Soon she found herself lost in the task of delicately placing each twiggy bone and the hours galloped by. She wanted to make sure it was perfect before she started sticking anything down, and she was just stretching the creak out of her back, admiring her progress,

when a voice spoke from close behind her ear.

“Not bad.” It was Zoe. She was standing with her head cocked to the side as she assessed the picture. She pointed. “That one’s a bit wide to be the radius.”

Luca leaned over her work and spread her arms out protectively, trying to block it from view. “Go away.”

“Why? I can help.”

“I don’t want your help. I want you to go away.”

“Come on, Luca, why don’t you ever want to hang out with me any more?” Zoe stepped closer and accidentally knocked the table, causing Luca’s orange juice to teeter.

“Be careful!” cried Luca.

“Sorry!” said Zoe, but as she lunged for the orange juice to steady it, she tripped on the metal legs of a chair and went crashing into the table instead, upturning it and sending Luca’s carefully constructed work scattering across the mosaic tiled floor.

“Nooooo!” cried Luca.

She stared at the carnage in horror. Hours of work, ruined. The paper was soaked with sticky juice and already disintegrating. Her neck started throbbing afresh.

“Oh, sorry,” said Zoe. “That wasn’t important was it?”

Luca felt rage bubbling up in her gut. Did Zoe *have* to make it her job to make Luca’s life a complete misery? Her one chance to finally do something right, to feel like she was really meant to be part of this family . . . but *no* . . . that was too much to ask.

Suddenly, she exploded in a volcanic surge of anger.

“You ruin everything!”

Zoe took a step backwards.

Luca was shaking, blood pumping through her ears. As Zoe stared at her in alarm, Luca shouted at the top of her voice:

“I WISH YOU’D NEVER BEEN BORN!”

There was a clap of thunder.

Luca looked around, blinking. Her angry words echoed between the stone walls.

A clap of thunder? Inside?

“What was that?” Zoe said in a shaking voice.

Luca felt weird. Like there was a sudden electricity in the air. The muscles in her feet were twitching. “I don’t know.”

Zoe’s eyes widened and she raised a trembling hand to point behind Luca.

Luca turned around. Black smoke was streaming in under the arch that led to Hintze Hall. It wasn’t drifting lazily on a breeze, but surging with an urgent purpose. As it raced towards them, Luca realised it wasn’t smoke. It was butterflies. Thousands and thousands of black butterflies.

She screamed and grabbed Zoe, dragging her sister in the opposite direction, weaving between the tables and chairs. But the butterflies were everywhere, a blinding tornado of paper-cut wings and electric-shock antennae. Luca found herself blinded, and stinging from a hundred tiny bites. She stumbled to her knees, shrieking as she felt Zoe’s hand being pulled from her grasp. The butterflies were grasping hold of Zoe with their tiny feet and trying to pull her away.

“NO!” Luca screamed, desperately trying to hang on.

“Luca!” shrieked Zoe. “Help me!”

Luca cried out as Zoe’s fingers slipped from her grasp. The butterflies lifted into the air as she shrieked and flailed, then carried her back towards the arches. Luca chased after, leaping to try to grab Zoe, but she was just out of reach.

The black curtain of wings bore Zoe into the main hall, and sprinting after them, Luca watched in disbelief as they flew in a synchronised stream towards the main doors, then doubled back and flew straight into the gaping maw of the suspended whale skeleton. And vanished.

Popped out of existence.

Taking Zoe with them.

It was a skeleton. Luca could see both inside and outside of the jaw bones. But the butterflies flew Zoe in through the mouth and never reappeared on the other side of the bones.

The last thing she saw was Zoe’s eyes wide in terror as she screamed Luca’s name.

Then silence.

Luca stood for a second, panting, heart pounding in her ears. Then

she sprinted across the hall. There was a double staircase over the main entrance, with an upper landing that allowed people to watch all the visitors milling around below. It also gave a face to face view with Hope, as the whale skeleton was called. If someone was crazy enough to jump from the balcony, they might just be able to get far enough to pass through the whale's mouth, and follow Zoe.

Luca bolted up the stairs, skidding around the curves, and was on the landing in seconds. She launched herself at the balustrade, scrambling on top of it, and was just about to leap . . . when a hand reached out and yanked her back.

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EVOLANDIA by K L Kaine

SYNOPSIS

When her little sister, Zoe, is snatched away, Luca chases her across the Universe to Evolandia, a world of creatures stranger than fiction. Luca must crack riddles, befriend monsters and have tea with philosophical rats on her rescue mission. But Evolandia is overshadowed by a suffocating curse. Only if Luca trusts her head and her heart, can she save Zoe and the creatures of Evolandia, and maybe even find her own place in the world.

BIOGRAPHY

Brought up on David Attenborough documentaries, Katja finds the magic and mystery of the natural world utterly mesmerising. Half Singaporean and half German, she has explored the world on aeroplanes and through her microscope, meeting orangutans, sting rays, water fleas and other friends.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I liked the intriguing and rather gory spacey introduction and the way it contrasted with the domestic (but also fascinating) setting of the museum. Family set up is fun and readers will really relate to the sibling competitiveness and bickering! And I like the promise of the race across the universe to rescue her sister.'

'I was immediately drawn into Luca's story. Strong setting of the "normal" museum combined with the fantasy sense of menace was so well done. Nice family set up with the gay mums and "perfect" younger sister. Dialogue between sisters was well observed and rings true. Wonderful, visual writing which lends itself to film/TV.'

'Definitely a creepy setting, full of potential. I do like the role of the butterflies. That black butterfly is definitely menacing!'

Contact: katja@katjakaine.com

PLANETDOWN

By Victoria Benstead-Hume

REKKONER

It's the eve of planetdown and I'm out of time.

I push the acrid labmeat across my plate, figuring out what the dreck I'm going to say. Come on, Jakob, just ask him already. I turn to my father, who is hunched over his plate.

"Could I—" But the words turn to lumps of solder on my tongue. "Could you pass the salt?" I finally mumble, hiding under my curtain of hair.

My father doesn't move a finger.

Tomorrow our spaceship lands for the first time in a thousand years, bringing with it the opportunity to put things right. I just need to prove to him that I'm not a waste of space.

I've thought it all through. I'll go with him on his expedition and find a new food source that's max-useful that even he'll be impressed. It'll restore balance to the ship, feed everyone and solve all our problems.

Easy.

Or, more likely, I'll die out there.

First though, I've got to get him to agree to take me. I know why I'm stalling. Until I ask there's still the hope he might say yes, which I cling to like an extra ration of food.

I sigh as a golden beam of artificial light falls on the distant salt pot, taunting me. He'll never agree. I lean over and take a few precious grains from the smug pot, sprinkling them over my dinner. When my father doesn't react I sneak a few more.

My stomach is liquid and I can barely bring myself to eat the sulphurous meat, cutting it into little pieces and pushing it round my plate. I'll never get used to the taste no matter how many benefits it's supposed to have.

Next to me, my younger brother Nikolai licks his plate clean, desperate for every scrap. I know, I know. I should be grateful we've food in our bellies. It's more than most, but right now food is far from my thoughts.

The three of us sit in awkward silence on the floor at the low table. The skin of our living spaceship warms my crossed-legs through my grey overalls. Nikolai rolls onto the floor, shoulder blades knifing through his worn shirt. He presses his lips to the inner hull and whispers. He likes pretending he can talk to our ship. He's probably lonely. Aren't we all? I stab a quivering hunk of labmeat, trying to underlook the guilt crawling up my throat, and then let it slide off my fork. When planetdown is over I'll spend some proper time with Nikolai. I swear.

At least everything seems warmer during the golden hour. Even the scuffed walls of our small home come alive under the last rays of our artificial star. Too bad it doesn't have the same effect on my father.

"What do you think it's like?" Nikolai's words interrupt my thoughts. "D'you really think the planet's flat?" He stares up with bright hopeful eyes.

"Not sure," I reply with a grin that doesn't remotely match what I'm feeling. "They say it'll just look that way compared to Oyster. Gonna find out pretty soon."

Our spaceship, Oyster, is a miracle of bioengineering. Imagine living inside an egg, but it's ten kilometres long and you're able to walk over any part of the inner shell. A perfect, living, breathing ship that protects all twenty thousand of us from the dangers of deep space. To think that Oyster was started in a Petri dish is absurd.

"Are you feared of landing?" Nikolai asks. His voice turns small and quiet.

"Course not." I give a hollow chuckle. "We won't crash. Impossible."

The last thing I want is for Nikolai to feel frightened so I plaster a bright smile on my face. But I've barely slept since planetdown was announced last month. The truth is I'm terrified of going outside and leaving the safe confines of our ship – who wouldn't be? An utterly alien planet. Anything could be out there.

Everything we know about planets comes from scraps of stories. Stories Eldma once told me and now I tell to Nikolai when he can't sleep. Tall tales of jungle planets, ice planets, glowing moons, endless seas, strange creatures and towering mountains. It's impossible to know what's true,

but the stories I love the most are the ones about our long-abandoned homeworld, Earth.

I must have a death wish wanting to trail after my father on an expedition. But how else can I gain his forgiveness?

My father, finally realising we are talking about something important, snaps out of his daze to deliver a well-worn lecture.

“This planet,” he begins. “It’s vital to find new plant species to combat the food shortages. If we can find something that grows quicker with fewer nutrients . . . we’ll solve all our problems.”

He fixes me with a solid glare as if somehow it’s my fault. I flick my thumb across my fingertips in an effort to calm myself. People say I look like him, but with his dark brows, deep worry lines and a nose that’s too big for his face, I don’t see the resemblance.

He continues, “It may be the difference between life and death. We can’t close ourselves off forever.”

He drops his fork with a clatter, furrowing his dark eyebrows and wiping his pale, greasy hands on his dirt-stained overalls.

I take a deep breath. This is it, my chance. Just bloody say it. My heart thumps hard. I press my palm against the ship’s inner hull for courage. If I concentrate I can feel the slow dull thump of Oyster’s pulse like a tickle against my skin. This is something I’d never admit to anyone, but I like thinking she can feel me. I guess I’m not that different to Nikolai.

“I want to help out.”

There. It’s done.

He’s got to agree. He said it himself, the expedition is vital. My heart’s going even faster, palms sweating. I can’t even bring myself to look at him.

“There’ll be plenty for you to do, Jakob,” he replies, turning back to his food.

“You mean that? I can go with you?” I try hard to keep the smile from my face, but I can’t hide it.

Then there’s a long silence during which I could’ve counted the spikes of grey hairs that stand out amongst his unruly beard.

He clears his throat, excessively. “That’s not what I’m saying. Everyone has a role to play.”

His voice is steady and calm, so why does it fill me with dread?

“You’re better suited to something less . . . crucial.”

There it is.

Like a slap—worse than that. At least the sting from a slap would soon vanish. His words crush all the hope from me. I let my hair fall, hiding my face. I clench my fists, nails digging into my palms.

“Please. I won’t let you down.” I hold my breath.

He turns and actually looks at me. I force myself to hold his gaze, willing him to change his mind, a lump forming in my throat.

“All you do is let me down.” He thumps his fist on the table to emphasise his point. “You think I want you with me, sliking up something this important?” He lets out a bark of laughter. “Can’t risk it.”

I inhale sharply and stare down at my hands and the deep purple crescents my nails have made, blinking back the hurt and pain. My own father thinks I’m a failure. He’ll never forgive me for what I did. No matter how hard I try, nothing will erase the past. I was such a fool to think I could. If he knew the ache in my chest thinking about it – the guilt – nothing will ever make that go away.

“Clean this up,” he grunts, as if I’m one of his farm-hands, gesturing at the dirty plates. “I need to check my pack.”

He steps to his room, slamming the door with a bang. We probably won’t see him again all evening. My shoulders slump. I know from bitter experience there’s no point trying to change his mind. What can I do but swallow my feelings until they’re black crumbs deep in my stomach? Turning back to my plate, I force a forkful of noodles in my mouth. Ugh. The lump catches in my throat. Why does everything taste of bioplastic?

Nikolai rests his head on my arm. “You okay, Jakey?”

I smile and skuffle his fair hair. “Course.”

“We can have our own axe-er-dition!” Nikolai sounds out proudly. “For chocolate!”

I put my arm round him and squeeze him close. At least someone in the family cares about me. He watches me prod my food with ravenous eyes that could bite off my fingers. Somehow he’s still thin as sticks though he never stops eating. I scrape my leftovers onto his plate, relishing his squeal of joy as he digs in. Honestly, I’d go hungry every night of the week to make him happy.

No matter what my father says I'm going to find a way to help, a way to put things right. Prove myself to him and make things better for Nikolai. This is my chance and I'll do whatever it takes.

Nikolai helps me wash the dishes in the water basin, blowing bubbles as I stare up at the familiar view of our ship's interior. The upside-down fields of withered corn flare orange under the late rays of our artificial star.

Safe. Cosy. Enclosed.

Tomorrow all that changes.

Scrow. There must be some other way I can get on that expedition.

I drain the dirty water, plug the basin up again and watch as clean water seeps through the porous membrane to refill the bowl. Magic. Perfection.

Mam comes in from work, heavy with the scent of disinfectant. She wearily removes her smock, stained with the faint brown marks of old blood, and hangs it by the door. Her pale hair is tied back in her favourite bright yellow headscarf – the one with only one hole.

“Busy out there!” Her brown eyes smile. She's like Nikolai, always bubbling with enthusiasm. “You should see all the gear they're preparing. Where's your father?”

“Packing.” I can't bring myself to tell her what he said.

I glance up through our roof. Upside down on the far side of the ship, workers rush through final preparations, trundling carts full of supplies along the main pathway and harvesting the last of the blighted wheat. The artificial weightpull means every inch of Oyster's interior is put to use. If a surface isn't crammed with houses then it's used for growing food or manufacturing goods. At the park a group of old people are huffing through an exercise class – arms stretching overhead towards our artificial sun – as shifters rest their loads to watch. Kids chase each other round the spindly trees in the orchard. Our safe little bubble is about to burst and it seems impossible that everything will be ready in time.

Mam sits at the table and beckons me over, pushing her bag under my nose. She unties her headscarf and shakes out her short hair.

“A late birthday present.” She rubs her reddened hands together like she's trying to restrain herself from unwrapping it for me. The constant hand washing at Medik leaves her skin cracked and dry.

“But you already got me something . . .”

My birthday had been last week and they gave me a huge cake that must have taken months to save for. I can still practically taste the thick, sugary icing. I don't need anything else.

Nikolai squirms closer, leaning against me.

"You want to help?"

He nods and together we draw out . . .

A rekkoner. I stare down. And keep on staring, unable to speak. It can't be. I must be dreaming. These things are rarer than wood.

"Woah!" Nikolai's eyes widen, staring mesmerised.

I stroke the dented black case and scuffed screen. Such good condition. On the back someone has scratched the letter A.

"How the dreck did you get it?" I ask in a whisper. "You have to take it back. It's too much."

"Don't worry about that," Mam says quickly. Her eyes shine.

My hands tap nervously as I wait for the rekkoner to turn on. Nothing happens so I stab the switch again. The screen stays dark.

What lies inside?

"Think you can fix it?" Mam asks, raising an eyebrow in challenge.

I sluck in air through my teeth. "Dunno, might give it a try." I grin.

It's not like I spend every minute of my spare time fixing rekkoners for rich people who are too dumb to do it themselves. I hold it up to the light, watching the reflections dance off the surface.

I rise and lope the few steps to my snug, smiling madly, feet slipping on the ship's inner hull where it has worn smooth over the years.

My small room's more like a cupboard, with little space for anything else but my hammock, a few clothes hung on pegs and my crate of tools, but I love the dim interior. I grab my tool crate and return to the dining table where I can work in the light. I sit back down and crack my fingers.

Unscrewing the rekkoner-back, I place it on the table. The silicon boards are corrosion-free, no real damage, so I start cleaning the intricate components.

Nikolai opens the inner hatch of our beehive, which is embedded in the lower wall of our house. The other side is open to the fields, allowing the bees to come and go as they please. An irresistible waft of honey fills the air accompanied by the steady drone of busy worker bees, until he shuts

the hatch again. A bee sits in his hand, cleaning her fur with its front legs. Nikolai licks honey from his other hand as he watches the bee smoothing down the iridescent purple stripes that cover its fat body. I smile. I don't know which he loves more: the honey or the bees.

“Look, it's well past bedtime! Don't pet them!” Mam tuts at Nikolai. “Into your hammock, cheeky.”

Nikolai scampers away, his bee taking flight when he trips over his feet. “But . . . I'm not tired.”

Mam rolls her eyes. “Nikolai. Bed. Big day tomorrow.”

He groans and carefully returns his bee back to the hive, which whirrs happily.

As he drags his feet behind Mam towards his own room, his complaints turn into excited chattering. He suddenly rushes back, throwing himself at me. “Love you, Jakey.”

“You too.” I squeeze him tight, swallowing the sharp pang of worry about what might happen tomorrow before he dashes off to bed.

I patiently clean the circuits of the rekkoner. My fingers prise out the old chemical sparkcell, replacing it with a self-charging, biological one. That should do it. I'll have to wait half-an-hour for the spark cell to come online but then it'll be up and running.

I drum my fingers on the table. The cavernous spaceship interior is almost dark, the artificial sun dimmed to a pale orb, revealing thousands of distant pinpricks of other homes and the network of Oyster's glowing orange veins that snake over the whole ship like fine lace.

I stare at the mildew speckled walls, my father's ornamental houseplant that's older than him, our kitchen shelves that are now empty in preparation for planetdown. Our home's too quiet and my father's words echo over and over again, “*All you do is let me down.*” I need a distraction.

I grab my farspeaker out of my tool crate. Last year Kay and I spent weeks building them. It's embarrassing how obsessed we've been. I mean, we even grew the bio-plastic ourselves just so the cases would fit our hands perfectly. And I wonder why Kay's my only friend.

I press transmit. “Kay? Kay? You there?”

A crackle of static. Then finally a mumble. “Sorry, packing.”

“Ugh, don't remind me.”

I wedge the farspeaker under my chin so I can talk whilst working on the rekkoner.

“Shaky about tomorrow, huh?” she asks.

“As if!”

“You’re not going to die.”

Kay can always see through my bravado. She knows me too well.

“Yeah? Well, doesn’t matter because he said no.”

There’s a pause. “We’ll just have to find another way to get outside and have fun.” She laughs loudly, deep from her belly.

Fun? That’s not how I’d describe it. Typical Kay. I really don’t understand her sometimes. She’s my complete opposite – fearless and funny with dark brown skin and lean muscles that gleam with health whilst I’m pale as steam and catch every bug going. In a ship where populations have interbred for two-thousand years, our appearances are extreme.

“Anyway.” I clear my throat. “That’s not why I called. You’ll never guess what I got for my birthday—”

“You *already* told me about the cake. In great detail. Didn’t save me a slice though.”

“A rekkoner,” I continue, underlooking her taunts. “You believe that?”

“Serious? Two presents. Fancy!”

“I can’t get it to boot . . .”

“Ha! You need me.”

Kay runs through different solutions and I pretend to follow her instructions, grateful for her company.

“I can’t figure what’s wrong,” she finally says. “Wait! Did you forget to let the bio-electricity charge up?”

“Of course! Dreck, I must be tired to forget something that simple.” I smile.

“Don’t beat yourself up over it,” she chuckles. “You’re way too hard on yourself.”

“Thanks, Kay,” I add quickly before reluctantly saying goodbye.

I jab the power button and the rekkoner finally boots to a welcome screen.

An electric current shivers up my spine. I’m greeted with a single vid.

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WATCHME.mp4
decoding complete . . .
alexis@jones-tablet:
~/home/alexis/.aaa/.private/cache/.diary $
vidplay -vol 100 watchme.mp4
vidplay SVNr1.0-rowk-4.3-5-.2
timestamp 07-11-2089 14:22:34
#####
starting playback . . .
initiating transcription . . .

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The screen snaps onto a recording of a middle-aged woman. She lies propped on pillows and blankets staring at the camera. Her body is so thin you can see the stark outline of ribs at her chest. Her arms are twigs and dark circles ring her eyes.

My name is Alexis Jones. Whoever finds this – if anyone finds this – heed my warning: we never should have landed. It crippled us. Our bodies can’t take it. Our ship can’t take it. The darkness has come. The crops have died. Our food is gone. We have nothing. We brought this on ourselves and sealed our tomb. Our ship is doomed.

She pauses for a long moment.

I can’t go on much longer. It’s almost the end. Don’t know the last time I ate . . . weeks, I think. My body is hollow. And all around me my friends and family are dying. If they’re not dead already.

A tear slides down her cheek. With great effort, Alexis pulls up the bottom of her shirt, arm trembling to reveal an unnaturally concave stomach. She looks like a corpse.

It's because we landed and went outside. Landing drained the ship of energy and brought the endless night.

We have no choice now. We're trapped – doomed to darkness and misery . . . The lights have failed. Everything is dark. No crops grow. I thought maybe the creatures we gathered on the planet might save us. But by the time they've matured we will be long dead.

Alexis gasps for breath, eyes widening, and reaches a bony hand to her throat. The skin is pulled taut and you can see her pulse throbbing at her neck, veins bulging underneath the pale, thin skin.

I don't know if any of us will survive. We took too much from our ship and now we've paid the price. Too complacent.

Thought that nothing could harm us.

God how I longed to see the sky. Feel the fresh air. But the cost . . . Ethan. I'm so sorry. My love.

She talks slowly as if each word is a mountain to be climbed, her eyes glisten with tears.

Hundreds are dying. Thousands. Slowly getting weaker and weaker. Paying for one simple mistake. I ask myself again and again, how can I fix this, but I get no answers. It's too late anyway. There's no way off this damned ship. No escape.

I should have listened to the warnings.

I only hope a few of us survive – that the children survive. If a miracle somehow happens, if you are watching this, whatever you do, don't repeat our mistakes.

Her eyes bore into the camera.

Don't land. Don't—

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#####  
corrupt file  
terminating playback . . .
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PLANETDOWN by Victoria Benstead-Hume

SYNOPSIS

When Jakob discovers his vast, living spaceship is dying, he's thrust into a race against time to save his little brother and everyone on board from starvation. Pitted against his glory-hungry childhood rival, Roman, they compete to find food on a nearby dusty planet. Roman becomes increasingly erratic, blaming Jakob when they fail to find anything edible. Jakob must find the strength to stand up to him if they've any hope of survival.

BIOGRAPHY

Half plant-geek, half writer, 100% noodle addict, Victoria has been longlisted for Mslexia and Write Mentor novel competitions and is currently studying with Golden Egg Academy. She has an MSc in Ecology and lives in Brighton. She once cycled the length of Vietnam in search of the perfect bowl of pho.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I found myself really feeling for Jakob in the face of his father's condescension – and wanting to know what happened that set up that dynamic (congrats on introducing this intriguing breadcrumb trail for us to follow). I was also touched by the observations on Nikolai, the humanity of his relationship to the bees, and hooked by the format-change to Alexis's revelations.'

'The sense of peril and claustrophobia comes across strongly in this extract – and I was intrigued by the concept and depiction of the living, breathing ship – this felt original. I also really like the transmissions – reminded me of *Alien* . . . !'

'This raises lots of questions which is a good thing. What did Jakob do to make the father so disappointed? The space setting is very interesting and enables exploration of lots of different issues.'

Contact: Victoriabhume@gmail.com

SCRAP THE BAD WOLF

By Paula Thompson

Chapter 1: Scrap's Disguise

Scrap was a wolf. He knew he was a wolf because his fur was grey and scraggy. His teeth were sharp and pointed. And his snout was long and sniffy.

So far, so wolf.

But Scrap couldn't quite shake the feeling that something was missing. Some vital wolfish quality that just – wasn't.

Take this evening. He'd risen at dusk, like all the other young wolves. Then he'd lined up to track the scent of old-lady perfume through the woods. They'd skirted the misty meadow and ended up at the training ground where Moonclaw was waiting.

'Come along, class,' said Moonclaw briskly. 'None of that snuffling and snarling please. Take your positions and we'll begin.'

Scrap nudged his way into the clearing. A line of floral dresses and frilly caps were laid out on the dirt. One set for each of the twelve young wolves. His heart sank. This could only mean one thing. They were disguising themselves as Grandmothers again.

Scrap sniffed out the plainest outfit he could find. He stood behind it. Moonclaw flicked her tail. They were off!

Snorts and grunts filled the clearing as the wolves squirmed into the Grandmother costumes.

Moonclaw weaved her way between them. 'Who can tell me why this exercise is so important?' she asked, stopping in front of the group.

They all jostled forward. 'Disguise is the best line of defence against Girls in Red Coats,' they chanted together.

'Exactly!' said Moonclaw, her eyes gleaming. 'If you can master this ancient skill, you'll soon be Big Bad Wolves. No Girl will ever get the better of you.'

The wolves nearest Scrap began to nudge each other. Gruff and Pouncer, the youngest of the pack, hopped from paw to paw nervously. They'd all heard the stories about Girls. Girls were dangerous. Especially for the untrained wolf.

'Do come along Scrap,' barked Moonclaw. 'We haven't got all night.'

Grimacing, Scrap flattened his ears into the floppy cap. He wrestled with the billowing nightgown. He felt ridiculous.

'Look at me!' cried Pouncer, doing a twirl. Her dress fanned out as she spun. 'Let's see yours, Gruff!'

Gruff pulled the lacy cap over his head. 'Do my eyes look big in this?' He grinned, making his eyes round like two full moons.

Pouncer giggled. She tied her own cap under her chin with a big green bow.

Scrap fumbled with his nightgown in panic. The others were all in their disguises now. He stuffed his furry limbs into the costume as quickly as he could. But somehow his head got stuck in an armhole. His cheeks burned.

The other wolves guffawed as he twisted this way and that. Buttons popped. Seams strained. But whichever way Scrap wriggled, he just got into more of a tangle.

In the end, Moonclaw had to rip the costume off him with her teeth. Scrap looked down at his paws. He didn't want to see the flicker of disappointment on her face.

Hot tears pricked his amber eyes. They threatened to roll down his snout. When he was sure nobody was looking, he ground the stupid human dress into the earth with his paws.

The others shoved roughly past him. Scrap could hear them chatting excitedly on their way to the woodcutter's shed.

'Did you see the way I did up those buttons?' asked Gruff proudly.

'I know. It was awesome!' replied Pouncer. 'The fastest ever! I don't think even Moonclaw recognised us in those nightgowns.'

Scrap's fur bristled. He couldn't face going to the shed with them. He hung back as they put away their disguises.

One by one they trotted out of the shed and followed Moonclaw across the clearing towards the woods. Scrap waited until their excited yaps and yelps faded away, swallowed by the belly of the forest. He sighed a gruffly

sigh. Unhappily, he curled up against his favourite gnarled trunk and rested his nose between his paws.

Hot, angry thoughts bubbled up inside him. Just what was the point of all this? He was three seasons old and he'd never seen any Grandmothers. No axe-wielding woodcutters. And certainly no Girls in Red Coats. It was time to face it. There was no place for the traditional Wolfish Arts any more.

Why was he the only one who could see that?

Chapter 2: Something in the Woods

The moon slid a slow arc across the night sky. It made silhouettes of the trees along the ridge. From his hiding place beneath the oak tree, Scrap could hear the pack getting ready for supper. The first howls drifted through the trees as wolves from every corner of the forest made their way to the Hollow. He pictured them licking their chops.

Scrap ducked into the shadows as Skulk loped past. The bigger wolf's stomach grumbled, sending a small deer darting for cover. The startled animal burst through a thicket. It skidded to a stop in front of Scrap.

For a moment Scrap and the deer stood nose to nose. Neither knew quite what to do. Scrap was so close to the trembling creature he could hear it panting. He could see the terror in its wide, brown eyes. This was the bit when he was supposed to pounce. Scrap knew that. He arranged his lips into something like a snarl. He raised one paw awkwardly in the hunting position, like they'd been taught. And then – he just stood there.

The deer stared at Scrap, its nostrils flaring in surprise. Scrap gave an apologetic shrug. That was all the deer needed. Quick as an arrow, it scampered through the trees to safety.

Scrap let his paw fall to the ground with a flop. Who was he trying to kid? He didn't do menacing, no matter how hard he flexed his claws or bared his fangs. No, that wasn't quite right. He could howl and growl with the best of them. He could have destroyed that deer with one strike. The fact was, he didn't much want to. And exactly what sort of a wolf did that make him?

'There you are, Scrap!'

It was his mother.

'What are you doing out here all on your own?' she said, frowning.

‘Supper’s almost over.’

Scrap peered into the shadows behind her. ‘Where’s Skulk?’ he asked.

‘Your brother is leading the Howling this evening,’ she said. Her voice seemed to swell with pride. ‘They’re swearing him in as Chief tomorrow night. Won’t you come and congratulate him?’

Scrap scratched his ears uncomfortably.

His mother’s clever eyes searched his face. ‘How was training today?’ she asked softly.

Scrap couldn’t help himself. ‘Why do we do it, Mother?’

‘Do what?’ she said wearily.

‘You know what! The training ground, the disguises – all of it! We’re never going to need it in real life. It’s so . . .’ his voice tailed off.

‘Oh, Scrap,’ his mother sighed. ‘We’ve been through this. The Arts have been passed down from wolf to wolf for generations.’

‘But that’s not a *reason*,’ he insisted. ‘What if we did things a different way? We could change things. Be a different kind of wolf?’

His mother shook her head. ‘It’s how things have always been done,’ she said firmly. ‘Besides, whatever would your father have said?’

Scrap lowered his head. Everyone knew the fearsome Greyfang would have been ashamed to have a son like him.

‘Come on.’ His mother motioned towards the trees with her head. ‘There’ll be nothing left but dry bones if you don’t hurry up.’

Scrap nodded to show he would be along in a little while. He watched his mother stalk back into the shadows, her tail swaying behind her.

*

He didn’t know how long he lay there. A pinkish glow on the horizon told him the hours of darkness would soon be over. He twitched his nose nervously. Morning was no time for a young wolf to be alone in the woods.

A sudden flash of red flickered between the trees. A not unpleasant meaty smell reached his nose. Then the metallic after-pong. The fur along his spine prickled. Only a human could produce a whiff like that! Scrap sniffed again. Sugary with a hint of spice. A female! The red shape was getting closer, the smell even stronger. He crouched, poised like a coiled spring. Could it be?

Hardly daring to look, Scrap peered out from behind his tree.

Chapter 3: The Girl

The Girl was not fully grown. She was skipping cheerfully along the path. Scrap could hear her humming some kind of human tune.

He flitted from tree to tree so she wouldn't notice him. There was a spot up ahead where the path almost met the trees. He crept to a broad oak and ducked behind it. All he had to do now was wait for the Girl to pass right under his snout. He held his breath. *Here she comes!* She was almost close enough to touch.

His heart hammered in his ribcage. Scrap knew Girls were sent into the woods on mysterious errands. And they never did as they were told. When Girls and wolves met . . . Scrap shivered from the tips of his pointy ears to the end of his scraggy tail. Well, let's just say it never ended well for the wolf.

This Girl was wearing a red hoodie. A rucksack was slung over her shoulders with a loaf of bread poking out of the top. She wasn't very tall and Scrap could keep stride with her easily. Still, he knew enough of Moonclaw's teachings to understand the danger. Girls were cunning creatures. He paused near the edge of the path, gnawing his lip.

It was quite light now. Mother, Skulk and the others would be fast asleep in their dens. That's where he should be. Curled up with Mother. Far from danger. What was he thinking chasing a human through the forest?

He took one last look at the Girl. Then, sighing, he turned back towards the track which led to the Hollow. At once a hot rush of shame flooded his chest. He remembered Moonclaw's disappointment. He pictured the scornful faces of Gruff and Pouncer. Most of all, he thought how proud his mother sounded when she talked about Skulk.

None of them thought he was a proper wolf. Well here was his chance to prove himself. Imagine their amazement when he padded back to the Hollow with an actual Girl between his jaws! They might even make him Chief Wolf instead of Skulk. His chest fur puffed up at the thought.

The Girl was only a few steps ahead now. She was easy to follow. A bright flash of red in the murky forest. All he had to do was capture her.

Suddenly the Girl stopped to study some crocuses that were growing in clumps at the side of the path. Ah-ha! The element of surprise. Now was his chance to pounce.

Scrap took a deep breath. He crouched on his hind legs. And launched himself towards the Girl.

Chapter 4: Scarlett

Scrap soared through the air. It was the biggest leap of his life. He gritted his teeth. He stretched out his front paws. He almost had her!

Without warning the Girl stooped to pick a flower. Scrap's eyes widened in surprise. It was too late to stop now. He hurtled right over the Girl's head, missed her completely and landed belly-up in a clump of crocuses.

Scrap tried to right himself. He gasped. The Girl was coming over! He scabbled to his feet. She was holding out a hand for him to sniff. Scrap backed away, his ears flattened to his head. He forced himself to look at her face. To his surprise, she was smiling. She had rather a nice smile.

'Poor doggy,' she said. 'Are you hurt?'

'Er – no,' said Scrap, hoping he didn't sound scared.

'Lost then?' she asked.

'No!' he replied indignantly. He tried to think how Skulk sounded when he was angry. 'Um. Grrr,' he tried as fiercely as he could.

'Oh, you *are* hurt!' cried the Girl.

Scrap cocked his head in confusion. This wasn't how it was supposed to go. But she hadn't attacked him yet. That was good. Maybe there was still a chance he could capture her.

'If only I had some doggy treats or something to make you better,' said the Girl, rummaging through her rucksack.

'Actually,' said Scrap, scratching his ears nervously, 'I'm not a dog.'

'What?' The Girl frowned, her hands on her hips.

'It's just, you keep c-calling me a dog,' he faltered. 'And I'm not. I'm a wolf.'

He puffed up his fur to make himself look bigger.

The Girl looked him up and down. 'Yes, yes of course you are,' she said doubtfully. 'Well, as long as you're okay . . .'

Scrap watched in dismay as the Girl hoisted her rucksack back onto her shoulders. She couldn't leave now! He felt his chance slipping away.

Think, Scrap. Think.

He remembered the crocuses. ‘Don’t forget these!’ he cried, plucking a sprig of crushed flowers with his teeth.

The Girl beamed. ‘Oh, what a good boy!’ she said. And she actually patted his head. It was all he could do not to nuzzle into her hand. He gulped. *Don’t fall for it.* The sooner he got her back to the Hollow the better.

‘I know where there are more flowers like those!’ he blurted. A plan was forming in his mind. ‘I can show you, if you like?’

‘That’d be great,’ she said. She thrust her hand out. ‘I’m Scarlett by the way.’

‘Er – Scrap,’ said Scrap, clasping her hand. It felt small but determined in his paw. This was a dangerous creature, he reminded himself. He had to be careful. It wouldn’t do to end up like his father. Greyfang had gone hunting one night and never returned. Mother never spoke about it. But Scrap knew it had something to do with a Girl.

‘It’s – um – this way,’ he said. And he led Scarlett towards the trees and the track that went to the Hollow.

‘Great. I love exploring!’ she cried. ‘What do you do in your spare time? Do you have any hobbies? Sometimes I collect frogspawn. Do you ever do that? I’m going to be a scientist when I grow up. Or a Zumba teacher. Ooh look a bluebird!’

Scarlett was very talkative for a small human. Scrap trailed behind her. He felt quite exhausted. And wasn’t *she* supposed to be following *him*?

Without warning, she stopped and scrunched up her face. Scrap waited. What on earth was she doing now?

‘Nope. No crocuses here,’ she announced, peering at the thick branches. ‘It’s way too dark for flowers to grow under the trees. Everyone knows that.’

‘If we could just go in a bit further,’ said Scrap desperately. This wasn’t going to work if she kept making silly comments.

‘Ooh blackberries!’ cried Scarlett, making Scrap jump. She began plucking the juicy fruit from some brambles growing nearby. ‘Yum,’ she giggled, popping them into her mouth one by one. She held a plump berry out for Scrap.

He wrinkled his nose.

‘Go on,’ Scarlett laughed. Her mouth was stained purple. ‘Granny always says you should try everything once.’

‘Granny?’ Scrap was instantly alert. ‘Is she here today?’

‘Oh no,’ said Scarlett. ‘Today is her roller derby day.’ She began ticking the days off on her fingers. ‘Monday is sky-diving. Tuesday life-drawing. Wednesday go-carting. Thursday hula-hooping. And Friday roller derby.’

‘She sounds – er – busy,’ said Scrap, sniffing the air cautiously.

‘She is,’ Scarlett replied through a mouthful of blackberries.

‘OW!’ Scrap yelped. A sharp pain shot through his back paw. To his alarm, his hind leg buckled beneath him. Scrap crumpled to the forest floor.

Chapter 5: Be Prepared

‘What is it?’ Scarlett rushed towards him.

‘I don’t know,’ Scrap yowled. ‘My back paw. It’s hurt.’

‘Can you walk on it?’ asked Scarlett.

‘I don’t think so.’ He winced.

Scarlett took the injured paw in her hands. ‘Hmm,’ she murmured.

‘What? What?’ cried Scrap, not daring to look.

‘Oh dear, oh dear,’ said Scarlett, shaking her head gravely.

‘Just tell me what’s wrong with it!’ howled Scrap, rolling on the ground.

‘Keep your fur on. I’m only trying to help,’ said Scarlett indignantly. ‘It’s a thorn. If you must know.’

Scrap twisted round in dismay. Sure enough, a barb as long as one of Skulk’s fangs was lodged in the soft pad of his paw. He grimaced.

‘Well there’s nothing for it,’ said Scarlett. ‘I’ll have to deal with this myself.’

‘What? No!’ Scrap wriggled away from her. ‘I’m sure if I just carry on . . . Ow, ow, ow!’ He gasped. The pain seared up his leg. It was no use. He slumped back down.

‘Well you can’t stay there,’ said Scarlett briskly. She had her hands on her hips again. Scrap gave another howl of pain. Ignoring him, Scarlett crouched behind him.

‘What are you doing?’ Scrap whimpered. Could this be a sneaky trick? Just when he’d begun to trust her.

‘Shh,’ Scarlett soothed. ‘I’ll be as gentle as I can.’

Scrap squeezed his eyes shut. Scarlett gripped the end of the thorn between her thumb and forefinger. ‘Ready? One, two—’

When she got to three, she tugged. Hard. Scrap sucked in his breath as the thorn slid from his paw. He began licking his wound at once.

‘Wow! No wonder it hurt,’ said Scarlett, holding up the thorn in amazement.

Scrap turned his paw this way and that. ‘Thanks,’ he murmured. ‘Where did you learn that stuff?’

‘Always be prepared,’ said Scarlett, patting her rucksack importantly. ‘That’s the first rule of exploring. Everyone knows that.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Honestly, for someone who lives in the woods you don’t know much about survival skills do you?’

Scrap gritted his teeth. He’d never met anyone quite so bossy. Still, he had to admit she’d done a pretty good job. His paw still stung. But at least he could walk on it.

‘Oh no you don’t,’ said Scarlett firmly. ‘You need to rest.’

She plucked a picnic rug from her rucksack and spread it on the ground. Scrap glanced around uneasily. His paw was throbbing. A little sit down couldn’t hurt, could it?

He sank gratefully onto the blanket. It was soft and fleecy.

Scarlett tore a chunk of bread from the loaf in her rucksack. Scrap’s stomach gave a low rumble.

‘Help yourself,’ said Scarlett, spraying crumbs everywhere.

Scrap didn’t think he should accept food from a Girl. But he was so hungry after missing supper. He nibbled at the crust Scarlett held out for him.

The pair sat on the blanket munching bread and blackberries and listening to the birds twittering. Scrap had to admit it was quite nice. If he could ignore the Girl.

‘You’re so lucky,’ sighed Scarlett.

Scrap cocked his head. ‘Hmph?’ he mumbled through a mouthful of crumbs.

‘Look at this place.’ She spread her arms wide. ‘If I lived here, I’d never want to leave.’

‘Don’t you have trees where you come from?’ he asked.

‘Granny has a window box,’ Scarlett replied. ‘And we share a garden with the flat below. But it’s not the same.’ She turned to him with glistening eyes. ‘And you get to share it with all the other wolves.’

Scrap gulped. ‘Other wolves?’

‘Yes, silly! If you’re a wolf, you must live in a pack. I’ve read all about it.’

‘Well . . .’ Scrap swallowed.

‘So how many are there? Do you have brothers?’ Scarlett clasped her hands in front of her chest. ‘Or sisters? Or both?’

Scrap looked at his paws. ‘I’ve got a brother,’ he said quietly.

‘Oh, you lucky thing! I mean, Granny’s great and everything but the flat can get pretty quiet when she’s out doing her clubs.’

‘Aren’t there any other children you could play with?’ asked Scrap curiously.

‘Not really,’ said Scarlett.

Scrap noticed her smile drop. He wished he could do something to bring it back.

‘Er, shall we carry on looking for those crocuses?’ he suggested.

‘Oh yes!’ She brushed the breadcrumbs off her lap and began rolling up the picnic rug. ‘It’ll be like a nature walk,’ she said brightly. ‘And I love those.’

‘Okay,’ said Scrap, surprised to find he was wagging his tail.

It was easy to forget he’d made up the story about the flowers. That there weren’t really any crocuses growing in this part of the woods. He imagined handing Scarlett over to the other wolves. He pictured Skulk’s snarling face. He shuddered. Better to pretend they really were on a nature walk. The truth was too awful to think about.

Chapter 6: Trouble

The woodcutter’s shed peeked out crookedly from between the trees. Scrap’s stomach lurched. They were at Moonclaw’s clearing already. It was just a short walk from here to the Hollow.

His hurt paw gave a twinge. He gnawed his lip. It had been kind of Scarlett to help him like that. He glanced at her. She was muttering something about badger tracks and scribbling furiously in a spiral pad. He sighed. She might be a bit (okay, very) annoying. But she wasn’t evil or dangerous. Or any of the things he’d grown up believing.

‘Look at this!’ she cried, pointing to a cluster of toadstools. Her eyes were bright with excitement.

And that's when Scrap knew. He couldn't hand Scarlett over to Skulk and the others. Not now.

His tail sagged between his hind legs. So that was that. His chance to be big and bad was over. The best he could do now was to get Scarlett out of the woods before the pack woke up. He limped over to her.

'Does it hurt very much?' she asked, ruffling his ears.

'Not too bad,' replied Scrap.

'I expect your mum and dad will be very worried,' she said.

Scrap's fur bristled. 'I can take care of myself,' he said gruffly.

'It's lucky we met though,' she continued breezily. 'If it wasn't for me, you'd still be rolling around on the ground with a thorn in your paw.'

Scrap's tufty brows knitted together. Who did she think she was? Marching into the forest and refusing to be captured. Confusing him with her picnics. And her first aid. And her *niceness*. And now she was talking about his family. When she didn't know anything about it.

'You should go,' he mumbled. At least he could get this bit right.

'But what about the crocuses?' asked Scarlett. 'And we haven't even played I spy yet.'

'No!' Scrap snapped.

Scarlett's mouth closed in surprise.

'Look, I'm sorry about the flowers,' said Scrap more gently. 'I made a mistake. But you need to leave the forest. Now.'

'But we were having such a nice time!' she cried. 'And what about meeting your family?'

Scrap turned away. 'Trust me,' he said. 'It's best if you go back to your grandmother. I'll walk with you. Just to the edge of the forest.'

'Well, I don't see why you have to be so moody about it,' grumbled Scarlett. But she fell into step beside him. For once she was quiet.

A shadowy movement at the edge of the clearing caught Scrap's eye. His blood froze. A grey shape was slinking through the trees. He'd know that grizzled fur anywhere.

Skulk!

SCRAP THE BAD WOLF by Paula Thompson

SYNOPSIS

Scrap isn't just a bad wolf – he's a terrible one.

Scrap isn't like the other wolves in his pack. He'll never be big and brave like his brother, Skulk. Or a fearsome leader like their father, Greyfang. He can't even disguise himself as a Grandmother properly. All he knows for certain is that Girls in Red Coats are bad news. Until a Girl named Scarlett enters the woods . . . and Scrap's world is changed forever.

BIOGRAPHY

Paula is a copywriter and former newspaper journalist. She has recently graduated with distinction from the University of Winchester's MA in Writing for Children. Her poetry and short fiction has appeared in the *Caterpillar* magazine. She lives in Winchester with her husband and two daughters.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Oh my goodness, this is adorable! A cute and funny idea, making us see wolves, fairy tales, and Little Red Riding Hood in a new light – and also neatly showing how preconceptions can be so wrong (very timely).'

'I loved seeing the wolves getting into the grandmother outfits, and – particularly – Scarlett's deliciously deadpan comments about her roller derby granny, her ambition to be a Zumba teacher, and play I Spy with a wolf! Here, your concept intrinsically provides humour, and the reader gets on board for the ride you have set up.'

'Strong comedic voice is pitch perfect for the age range. Using animals as characters gives a universal appeal so is good for co-ed market. Scrap's sense of otherness and not fitting in is handled sensitively and with humour and warmth.'

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THE RISE OF RAYNE SEAWING

By Cara Lovelock

Chapter One

Rayne Seawing crouched low on the old tin roof and scanned the huts beneath her. Curling sea mist seeped up through the lane's wooden planks and a salty breeze rattled some shutters further down the lane.

There was no one in sight. It was a perfect night for keeping secrets.

Rayne leant over the roof edge. 'All clear,' she whispered into the darkness.

Silence.

A seagull cried out and Rayne caught her breath. Had someone disturbed it? A flutter of wings beat into the sky from beyond the sea wall. Was that a light, flashing in the distance?

A jolt of panic surged through Rayne and she scoured every dark corner. 'Ma?'

'I'll see you tomorrow, love,' replied Ma, in the faintest whisper, from underneath Rayne's lookout.

'I'm not sure . . .'

 Rayne trailed off. She heard Ma send out a kiss and reached out to close her fingers around it. Holding the kiss to her, she watched Ma's silhouette dodge in and out of the shadows, heading towards the harbour.

Rayne always dreamed of spending the night secretly hidden below deck with Ma on Captain Jake's fishing boat. They would wait for the first glimmer of light and then set sail out of the harbour. But Ma had never allowed her to go along.

With her lookout duty over, Rayne released a sigh and felt her muscles relax. If Ma had been next to her, she would have said, 'It's in the hands of the stars now, Ray.'

Rayne leaned back on the bumpy, corrugated tin roof and looked

up at the heavens washed with twinkling starlight. She scanned for the rough outline of her favourite constellation – Pegasus, the winged horse who raced freely through the darkness. She shouldn't stay up on the roof any longer than necessary – but on such a crisp autumn night she knew the islanders would all be tucked up in their warm huts. With no lights sneaking out from their tightly-drawn curtains, the stars were just right for charting.

Tracing her fingers along the sky, she soon found the first star of Pegasus. 'Those magistrate men in the Boat House think that the stars are just dead rocks floating around in space. But we know differently, don't we, Pegasus?' Rayne spotted the second star; others quickly followed. 'Three. Four. Five!' She felt the familiar delight that charting the stars gave her. 'Draw a square for the body.' She smiled, realising she sounded just like Ganny.

Her grandmother always said stars which sparkled were very much alive, just like people. 'Those with lots of life in them always sparkled brightest,' Ganny insisted.

'Six. Seven. Eight. Nine . . .' Her fingertip found the last stars in the constellation. 'Down his front legs. I see you, Pegasus.' Rayne put her hand to her brow and saluted, like a sailor to her captain.

Of course, it was best to navigate a ship by the position of the sun and the distance to the horizon, but Rayne and Ganny agreed the stars' wisdom should not be ignored. Rayne's fingers brushed over her lips, checking she hadn't spoken those thoughts out into the world. She knew well enough never to talk about Ganny's teaching.

The wind picked up. At the end of the lane, the sea thundered against the high wooden walls of the floating island.

'Storm's coming,' she whispered. 'You'll keep Ma safe, won't you?' she asked Pegasus, wondering if the fortress-like sea wall would be strong enough to stand the hurtling squalls for another winter. It was murmured around the lanes that last year's repairs might not hold. 'And you'll keep Ganny and I safe too?'

By spring, Rayne knew the waters would have calmed. Only then would she be able to cross the world and find a place that might let her learn to navigate a ship. All she had to do was pester Ma until she said yes. Then, Rayne would slip silently out of their hut at night – just as Ma had

done – to set sail by first light, leaving the floating island for the first time in her life.

With any luck, she'd soon be charting the stars far out in the Atlantic Ocean. Rayne was determined to practise whenever she could. Ganny said that navigation by the stars had to be done right, or you'd be lost at sea. The small issue of not having a boat sturdy enough to cross the oceans was a detail Rayne ignored – if Ma had found a way to dive without a licence, she would find a way to sail the seas.

The east wind gathered strength and a howling gust swept down the lane. Up on the roof, Rayne shivered as the salty breeze sent strands of her hair whipping across her cheeks.

Clang. Clang. Clang!

The Lighthouse Keeper's bell tolled a dark warning – storm curfew was in place and everyone had to batten down the hatches. Rayne checked the lane one last time, and hoped Ma would be all right sleeping on the boat in the harbour through the night.

On the wooden path that ran around the outside of the hut, Rayne heard feet shuffling. She'd recognise that walk anywhere. Metal chinked as a ladder came to rest against the tin roof.

A figure climbed towards her. 'Ray? You've been too long!' Crinkled, sun tanned hands gripped the end of the ladder and a mop of grey curls appeared, followed by deep-sea eyes. Ganny. Ma always said Rayne had the same blue eyes and unruly curls as Ganny, and the same water lines and dirt on her clothes as the mysterious Scavenger girls. 'Get yourself off me roof,' she whispered. 'Quickly!'

The smell of Ganny's fish stew seeped out the kitchen window below and made Rayne's stomach grumble.

'But I hardly ever get to do this,' replied Rayne. She wanted to say the words out loud – *Star Gazing* – but knew she couldn't risk it. 'Can't we have tonight's lesson up here?'

Ganny shook her head.

Rayne paused to give one last small salute to Pegasus. 'Till next time.'

She closed her eyes, held her breath and imagined herself hurtling across the waves in a shiny sailing boat, sheets billowing, racing the horse that was flying through the night sky above her.

Ganny tutted with impatience and checked their neighbour's windows. 'People gonna see you and my ladder. In you come. Curfew's been called.' Ganny beckoned her to scoot down the roof, and then without waiting for Rayne she disappeared, as did the ladder.

Rayne's stomach roared and she reluctantly slid across the roof on her bum. She flipped onto her belly and let her legs dangle over the edge, giving her toes time to find the kitchen windowsill.

Out over the sea wall, somewhere to the south west, a rumbling of chains drummed over the sound of the waves.

Rayne froze mid-dangle. Although she had heard the lowering of anchors a thousand times before, these ones sounded different. It was louder than the chains of a fishing boat or summer trading ships. Only a very large ship with very large chains could have made that sound. She leaned forward and strained her ears, but now all she could hear was the whistling winds and thundering waves.

Splash.

An anchor had dropped.

A chill of recognition rushed through her. She knew that sound – dark, ugly, heavy. A few years ago, she'd heard ships' anchors like these – back when the island had been invaded by pirates.

'Ganny,' Rayne called down quietly. 'Did you hear that?' A fresh tremor passed over her, that had nothing to do with the wind. 'It sounds like . . . trouble.'

Chapter Two

Rayne waited and listened, dangling over the edge of the roof. Maybe she was wrong. Maybe she had misheard. Then . . .

Splash.

Rayne shuddered as if she were entering the icy North Sea.

Another rumble and clatter of chains on wood.

Splash. Then another. *Splash.*

Rayne hastily lowered herself down till her toes, then both feet, found the windowsill.

Splash.

'Ganny – something's wrong. There are ships. Lots of them. *Different*

ships.’ With her feet securely on the kitchen ledge, Rayne turned and studied the lane that led down towards the sea wall. ‘They just laid anchor.’ She gripped the top of the window and swung her legs inside, slipping into the hut.

‘I didn’t hear a thing.’ Ganny tapped Rayne’s sludge-covered welly boots that had come to rest in the clean steel sink. ‘Out.’

‘Are you sure?’ Rayne sat on the worktop, the warmth of the kitchen flushing her cheeks.

‘Ray, there’s always ships out there.’ Ganny tugged at the wellies and Rayne grabbed the worktop to stop herself being pulled off with them. Ganny had them off and threw them into the hallway beyond the kitchen. ‘And it’s not the season for trading.’

Rayne dropped herself to the polished wooden floor of the galley kitchen, while Ganny closed the window, and pulled the curtains tightly shut.

‘Exactly!’ protested Rayne. She knew in her bones that something was wrong, and Ma might not be safe out in the harbour.

Ganny put a warm arm around her shoulder and kissed the top of her dark curls. ‘Come have stew. Ma’s going to be just fine.’

‘Ma shouldn’t sail if there’s strange boats out there,’ said Rayne. ‘What if she gets caught?’ She wanted to add, *What if she gets lost at sea? Like Da?* – but Rayne couldn’t voice the question for fear it would come true.

Instead, she reached up to the kitchen shelf above the dining table and took down the Old World radio that Ma had found out diving after Da had gone missing, barnacles still attached to the black handle. Rayne turned the rusty, broken dials. It didn’t work any more, but she like to imagine the music that would have flowed out of the radio when it was new, it calmed her somehow.

Ganny tutted and took the radio out of Rayne’s hands, carefully placing it back where it belonged, as though it was made of the most fragile glass. ‘Your Ma will be fine. After all those questions last month, this leaving-at-night plan is far better, none of that lazy lot will be watching the fishing boats this time of night.’

‘They might be pirate ships, they might have divers going out to scavenge Old-World Norwich. If Ma is seen diving . . .’

‘That watery mess of a city has been picked clean, let them waste all their oxygen trying to find something.’ Ganny’s confidence made Rayne relax a little and she realised that she didn’t exactly know where Ma was diving.

‘Where’s Ma gone diving then? If there’s nothing down there.’

‘Best you don’t know and best you stop begging her to find Old World technology like that radio. You think you could trade for some sort of training and she thinks she’s giving you hope.’ Ganny shook her head. ‘But you know that no one is going to give a girl from this out-of-the-way island an important ship job, only those on the main land get them jobs.’

‘That’s why I’ll find the *other* navigators!’

Ganny tutted and turned back to the streaming pot on the hob.

Rayne scrunched a face at Ganny back in annoyance. ‘I’ll find them one day. Ma understands, even if you don’t.’

Ganny reached for the pepper and sprinkled it into the broth. ‘You should leave your Ma out of your childish dreams; those *other* navigators are more than just women who guide a ship. The Female Navigators are the most trusted and revered leaders. They steer not only a ship, but a crew. You my child, have more to learn than just stars. You’re going to get us all in trouble trying to find those women. Mark my words.’

‘We’re going to be fine,’ said Rayne. Although, if she was honest, she was trying to convince herself just as much as Ganny.

Rayne knew that the only way she would ever get to navigate a ship was if she found a way to get to the southern hemisphere and find the Female Navigators. The magistrates said it wasn’t safe at sea – too much violence around, they argued. Only the very best kids got to be selected to sail the seas. But in her bones, Rayne felt that the Main Landers with all their crops and meat just wanted to give those jobs to their sons. It had taken months to persuade Ma to even think about helping her.

Ganny ruffled Rayne’s hair and ladled steaming broth into two earthenware bowls while singing a sailor’s shanty tune.

There once was a sailor lost at sea,

He followed the whales and they set him free . . .

Rayne knew the words to all of the shanty songs. Ganny always sang them when she needed to calm herself. Dumplings bobbed on top as

Ganny placed the bowl in front of Rayne.

Rayne took a big gulp of fish and dumplings, the taste of the sea exploding in her mouth. 'I have to go and tell Ma about the ships,' she said, between mouthfuls of mackerel. 'I'm the lookout, I should have heard them earlier.'

'It'll just be the fishing boats coming in. Fish gotta be fished. If you go running about, you'll draw attention.' Ganny fixed her with a steely look. 'I want your word, Rayne Seawing. That you'll stay here till her return.'

Their tin roof creaked under the oncoming gale. Thunder rumbled overhead and the rain hammered down. There was no chance of Rayne getting out of the hut that night. But, if the storm had cleared in the morning . . . maybe she could go then.

'All right then,' she muttered, crossing her finders under the table.

Her mind was set, at very first light, she was going to take a look at those ships.

Chapter Three

Rayne woke with a start. The storm had drilled down on the tin roof all night making it nearly impossible to sleep. She had banged her head on her pillow six times, like the fishermen did, to tell her brain to wake before dawn, but as she pulled herself up to look out her bedroom window, she realised . . .

First light was long gone.

The storm winds had passed and the rising sun had washed the lane in a warm red and orange light. Rayne shuddered at the sight – *Red sky in the morning, sailor's warning*. At least an hour had passed since first light.

She was already late.

Rayne scrambled into her denim dungarees and stripy top, grabbing her jumper as she quietly opened her bedroom door. Her room was at the front of the hut next to the kitchen. It did have its advantages; she didn't have to pass Ganny's bedroom to get out. Her breath fogged in front of her as she closed the front door.

Rayne struggled with her tangled, inside-out arms of her sea-green and sky-blue Aran jumper. Icy, damp mist pierced her bare arms as she pulled the jumper over her head. Bottle Top Lane was deserted and she prayed

the other lanes would be too. Ganny had a way of knowing everything that happened on the island and she needed to see the boats before Ganny realised she'd broken her promise.

Deep, murmuring voices echoed down the lane as Rayne turned the corner to the sea wall. Fishermen and cabin boys had gathered at the wall facing the glittering sea. They should have left in their fishing boats by now, but having seen something out at sea, they had stopped their early walk to work. What were they all doing?

Rayne pushed through the men and pulled herself up the sea walls to look over it. A couple of cabin boys next to her muttered to each other, worrying what this could mean. Far out, nestled close to the horizon, six large sailing ships waited. They had no flags flying. It wasn't a good sign; the Island Alliance rules were that all ships must be identified and registered. Rayne had been right last night, they were wrong' uns. And it filled her with dread, anxiety rolling in her stomach.

'Maybe they're a new sort of pirate,' she heard one of the men say.

'But they got no skull flags,' replied another.

'Them not from the other islands either,' a young cabin boy stated. 'And it's not the Sea Gypsies – no ribbons.'

Rayne agreed. Sea Gypsies would have had colourful ribbons flowing from the front of the ship, around a wooden carving of a woman. Rayne wondered what the magistrates would do about this unidentified fleet. She looked closer. Instead of a woman, there was a three headed serpent carved into the front of each ship – their heads were painted a shimmering gold and silver. Rayne recognised the symbols from somewhere. But where?

'The Harbour Master has been informed,' a bearded fisherman called to the crowd. 'No one's going to be invading us again any time soon, keep your peace.'

'What if they're Sea Witches?' someone cried out.

Rayne strained her eyes, desperately trying to see if the ships could be a fleet of Sea Witches, as the Island Alliance called them, or Female Navigators as Ganny had named them. Could the ships possibly be the ones she had been hoping to find? If they were, she wouldn't have to cross the world to find them. Rayne rubbed her eyes against the harsh winter sun. She didn't have time to stare at the ships any longer. She backed away,

pushing herself through the anxious mob.

If they are Sea Witches, she thought, it's the best news ever. I need to tell Ma.

Even though she had told Ganny she wouldn't go to the harbour, Rayne needed to know if Ma had sailed at dawn or not. Trying not to draw attention she scurried left on Wall Lane, the lane that circumnavigated the island, then up Buoy Lane – the road cutting through the middle of the island.

Once there was no one in sight, she ran.

The island was three miles in each direction and by the time she reached the red and white lighthouse, her lungs were screaming out for air. She leaned back on the large brass plaque with the heading *Norwich Floating Island* and took in large gulps of cool salty breeze. Her eyes rested on the plaque.

Once upon a time, this place had filled her with pride.

When the fishing boys taunted her about the weird women in her family at least she could always shout back that her great-great-grandad on Da's side was a Builder. Until Da was lost at sea and she never mentioned it again. Now, the plaque was covered in dirt and she used her sleeve to give it a quick scrub. Her eyes scanned it as she cleaned.

The island was built by the great Ship Builders of the Old World long ago when the North Sea began to flood the land of Old East Anglia. The Norwich Builders were the very first to collect the floating plastic and discarded fishing nets.

She ran her fingers over the inscription. *If only my great-great grandfather hadn't signed the treaty and given the Island Alliance the right to rule over the island. The Alliance sent ruthless magistrates to 'guide us' and none of them ever cared about the islanders. If the island was free of them, Ma would be able to dive and I could stay here with Ganny and be a Navigator.*

Rayne breathed deeply, gathering all her strength before continuing her sprint towards the harbour.

Finally, she reached the arched entrance to the harbour and stopped to rest, legs aching, side twisted in a stitch. The harbour was built outside the island on the other side of the sea wall. She hadn't visited in months. Would Eddie be in the Boat Yard this early? She had been avoiding him since she'd left school.

There were three evenly spaced entrances in the wall. Rayne was in

front of the third one, closest to the fishing jetties. The magistrates were meant to watch the harbour but they were a lazy bunch and were never up at this time.

Even so she hesitated.

Children weren't allowed in the harbour without a good reason or a chaperone. She peeked around the thick wooden wall. No magistrates or Boat House men in sight. Where was everyone? Rayne realised that they were probably all on the other side of the island watching the strange boats.

It was as safe as it could be.

In the harbour, jetties jutted out at right angles from the harbour lane. An eerie silence met her as most of the large fishing boats had left already.

Captain Jake's fishing boat, with Ma hidden below deck, was normally moored at one of the outer jetties with the other smaller fishing boats, away from the big sailing ships and next to the Boat Yard full of boats waiting to be mended. Rayne crept along close to the wall, trying to shrink into the shadows. Her stomach flip-flopped as she realised that even if they hadn't sailed already, it was going to be almost impossible to tell Ma about the mysterious ships or give her a good luck cuddle out in the open like this. She cursed herself for not waking before dawn.

Concern quickened Rayne's pace and she hurried to Jake's mooring. She looked around. No one. She gave a small inward sigh of relief for getting to the harbour unnoticed. But, even as she started to check the remaining boats in the harbour she knew that Captain Jake and Ma had already set sail. She hurried up and down, but their boat – *The Maywater* – was gone. She stood on the jetty and wrapped her arms around her stomach. *Sail safe.*

A sharp, irritated voice shocked her from her thoughts. 'Can I help you?'

Rayne spun around; ready to run. Behind her, standing in the shadows of the wall, was a young man she had never seen before. As he strode towards her, she noticed his blazer and the crest on the pocket. It was all she needed to see to know she was in trouble.

Magistrate.

THE RISE OF RAYNE SEAWING by Cara Lovelock

SYNOPSIS

Mortal Engines *meets* Waterworld *with a female STEM protagonist.*

Rayne dreams of being a navigator but she has never heard of a girl being selected. When Ma and Ganny are arrested for teaching Rayne the forbidden knowledge of Celestial Navigation, she sets out to free them and uncovers a deadly conspiracy. Rayne is faced with a terrible choice – save the floating island before everyone is drowned or rescue her family and sail away.

BIOGRAPHY

Cara lives in Suffolk and writes when the kids sleep. The idea for *The Rise of Rayne Seawing* came after the family camped in their garden and taught themselves the constellations. Cara was a WriteMentor 2020 mentee, selected for a DHH agency event and had an honorary mention in UV2020.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I love the title. I was immediately drawn into this atmospheric story. Rayne comes across as a determined, brave and likeable heroine and I would want to read more. Great comp titles which immediately place this in the market and demonstrates the author's knowledge.'

'I really enjoyed this sample; the writing is engaging and the atmosphere builds expertly. Love the setting, so unique and brilliantly drawn throughout the opening chapters. Rayne is a great central character too – I was immediately drawn to her.'

'The writing is evocative and effective. The writer really conjures up a strong sense of place and atmosphere right from the off. I felt I was on the roof with the storm coming! Intriguing world.'

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LIE OR DIE

By Ali Clack

Things I've learned about reality TV:

There are three parts: Pre-production, Production and Post-production.

Hot Head Cameras, lights & action. A million Insta followers. All that glamour and glitz.

At no point did anyone mention murder.

1. The girl code

I get it. I'm a crap friend. I violated the girl code. I've apologised till my throat hurts.

Kissing your best friend's ex is a shitty thing to do. I deserve to be punished, hundred per cent.

But is it *really* worth killing me over?

Staring into Thea's eyes, I beg her to judge me for the person deep down she knows I am, not on what she thinks of me right now. Desperation oozes from every pore as my last minutes tick by.

'I'm sorry,' I mouth, my voice catching in my throat.

She throws me a look, her perfectly painted lips pursed in a hard line. *Shit*, if I thought for one second she still fancied JB, I never would've opened my big mouth. But they were over, like Kim and Kanye over, she's made that very clear. And it was weeks ago, I mean, get over it already. It's not like I shagged him or anything. It was just one stupid kiss.

How many times is she gonna make me pay for it?

My eyes sweep the crowded room, taking in my fellow Citizen's expressions. It's too late, nothing I can say is gonna change their minds. No one will look at me. Losers. My head's too mushed to think of any clever words to throw out as a last defence.

I should have known it would end like this.

I hold my head up and stick out my chin, channelling strong and defiant. No way they're gonna see it get to me. It's unbearably hot and I ignore the sweat trickling between my shoulder blades.

Thea's first, smugness tattooed over her face as she raises her arm, her polished pink nails reaching up towards the ceiling.

'Guilty,' she says, subtext slapping me round the face. She casts an expectant look around the other Citizens. One by one they vote, raising their hands in a Mexican wave of guilty votes, unanimous in their decision to end my stupid life.

The Judge clears his throat, and the room falls to an expectant hush.

'Kass Kennedy. You have been found guilty of murder. Your fate is sealed. Death by the electric chair.'

Whatever. Does he have to sound so damn pleased about it? The overcrowded room is suffocatingly stuffy, and the smell of boy BO mingles with Lynx Africa and Dominos. Someone open a window already.

'And as she is dragged kicking and screaming to the electric chair.' The Judge turns back into the Narrator, his tone wobbling with anticipation. 'She screams . . .'

I sigh dramatically, making the most of my last moment. 'Innocent.' I pull a pissed off face at Thea. 'I'm a Citizen.'

'Oh. Bollocks.' Thea humpfs back into the sofa, knocking into squashed up bodies. 'I was bloody certain you were the killer Mafia.'

The living room fills with chatter as the remaining Citizens in the game talk excitedly, each one expressing their dismay in varying degrees of drunken frustration. This is so lame. A bunch of school kids squeezed into one small lounge on a scorching hot summer's evening playing a stupid game. And this is pretty much as good as it gets. Mafia, pizza and if we're lucky someone sneaks a bottle of vodka or Sourz. Whoopy-bloody-do.

The thing about this game is even those you trust will throw you under the bus, aka the electric chair, with a smile and a *Love you!* Last round, poor Sean Tyler was executed because Thea felt his arm move during the narration. He stormed out vowing never to play again until we all grow the hell up. To be fair he had a point – but as we're at his house it was all a bit awkward.

Toby MacPhee is staring at me, a stupid grin plastered all over his

equally stupid face. Knob. He is so Mafia, I can tell by the way he keeps scratching his nose every time he says he's a Citizen. But I'm out. If no one could be bothered to believe me then why should I help them win?

The Narrator, Lewis, total badass and BFF number two, begins again, intoning with a seriously deep, half-wasted vibe. 'Night falls.'

The remaining players shuffle themselves back into a circle around Lewis. He's in his element, directing and controlling while not getting involved with the politics of the game, like a piss-taking reality TV voice over. Five innocent Citizens left and one serial-killing Mafia, the tension in the room is full-on knife cutting. At Lewis's command they fall quiet and close their eyes. I've totally lost track of his story, something about a haunted house and an axe murderer – it all got a bit fuzzy around the third round. Frowning at Thea's bent head, her face hidden behind a tumble of silver curls, I embrace the rush of resentment.

Hot, bored and sober, I can't be bothered to see how this plays out. I attempt to get up off the floor in one graceful movement. It doesn't work. Halfway up I lose my balance and fall sideways, just missing the side table. The drinks wobble and clink as if mocking my clumsiness. Damn, why can't I just once be willowy and elegant like Thea?

Ignoring Toby MacPhee's snorting, I head quickly into the kitchen, helping myself to a packet of crisps and a J2O. The bottle opener has done a runner, probably hidden under the empty packets of popcorn and squashed pizza boxes.

'I get why they killed me.' I freeze immediately at the sound of the stupidly sexy voice behind me. I've been avoiding JB all night in an attempt to keep Thea happy, and to be fair, I thought he'd left. 'But you?' JB continues. 'You're never Mafia.'

He's got that right. All the times we've played this game, I've never pulled out the Mafia card. Always an innocent Citizen, *never* the killer. It was this law of probability argument Thea used against me tonight – twice.

'I guess I have a guilty face.' I mutter. My throat does a funny double gulp thing so I raise the J20 to my lips. Shit, the top's still on. I lower it quickly hoping he doesn't notice the tragedy that is me, and try not to focus on the muscles bulging underneath his proper tight Nike T. He reaches for a J20, mango – same as me.

‘Great game,’ he says, picking up the bottle opener right in front of my eyes. ‘Can’t get the hang of it. Always out first.’

I smile a cringeworthy smile of agreement. The premise is pretty simple – eight innocent Citizens, two serial-killing Mafia, find them before they pick you off one by one – it’s hardly chess. The whole point is you have to figure out who is lying and get them out before they get you. I guess JB hasn’t got the hang of the subtleties of the game. It doesn’t matter, he’s way too fit to fret the small details.

There’s a small *thwunk* as he pops the lid from his bottle, throwing it casually into the air. It lands on top of the bin. He takes a slurp then fills the bottle up with Smirnoff. Waaaay too smooth. ‘Vodka?’

‘God no,’ I say. That feeling of vomit-stained guilt is still lodged in my stomach after our last heavy night, and the drunken kiss which I’m pretty sure only happened because I was so pissed I fell on his lips. I know everyone says it, but I am *never* drinking again. My end-of-year-twelve celebrations are definitely over.

JB does a sexy chuckle thing, swirling his bottle like a pro. Is he remembering it too? Best to adopt a *not bothered* attitude. His voice floats over me like a warm breeze, covering my skin with little pinpricks. I’ve no idea what he’s saying, I’m too busy swimming in those blue lagoon eyes and I’m in danger of drowning. Somewhere between the eyes and the rock-hard abs my thoughts mutiny. Screw the guilt, so what if I fancy him? Thea dumped him, don’t forget. She broke up with *him*. As far as I’m concerned, he’s fair game. Why can’t this Cinderella go to the chuffing ball and party all damn night if she wants, and with who she wants? I lean in closer, cocking my head to one side, pretending to be totally into what he’s saying.

What is he saying?

‘Matt and Simon totally freaked out last time we played, proper full-on fight, cos Matt was Mafia and lied right to Simon’s face,’ he says. ‘Not gonna lie, Mafia and Vodka. Baaad combo.’ His arms rest on the kitchen counter behind my back. I lean back a little so we’re touching. His skin feels warm through my cami. ‘One of these days someone’s gonna do some serious harm.’ He swigs from the bottle, and I try a flirty giggle thing which comes out more like a snort. I quickly chug at my bottle. *Bottle top, again, damn.*

I try to swallow my embarrassment and grab the opener.

‘We don’t need to worry though,’ he says. Flirty giggle must have worked as he leans in closer. ‘Always the first ones killed.’

‘Always,’ I whisper. The sweet mango of J2O blows across my face and I remember the feeling of his soft lips on mine. He’s totally invading my personal space and I don’t care. If I just move my lips a little closer . . .

‘I knew it.’ A scream of delight comes from the lounge. I literally jump like a guilty person.

‘Sounds like Thea’s caught the Mafia.’ JB steps back and the moment’s gone. ‘She’s so into this game and to be fair, she’s good.’

Needing something to do, I ping off the bottle top and take a huge swig. I’ve somehow forgotten how to drink and almost choke. To complete my humiliation JB reaches over and smacks me on the back.

‘Thanks.’ Not sure what to do next and desperately aware we are really close, I raise my packet of ready salted up to my chin. ‘Crisp?’

‘Don’t mind me.’ Lewis is leaning in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed. His lips are squeezed together in an almost smile which, if you can read him like I can, means he’s a little more pissed off than he’s letting show and he’s reading way too much into this. His thickly lined eyes flit from JB to me and back again.

‘Game over.’ He spins on his heel. ‘And we’re leaving.’

I follow Lewis out of the room as guilt suckers to my skin, limpet like and just as slimy.

‘Nothing happened.’ I adopt a pissed-off manner to hide my shame.

‘Girl, I have eyes. You were totally perving.’

‘Was not.’

‘I don’t blame you, he looks hot in that T-shirt.’ Lewis smiles. ‘Way too small for him though. Totally cheating.’ Smile gone. ‘What the actual fuck, Kass? You are playing with fire.’

I say nothing, just stare at my feet like I’m four again and have just been caught nicking Hobnobs from the biscuit tin.

‘Good job I found you and not Thea.’

‘I don’t know why, it’s not like she still likes him.’

‘Yeah, cos that matters.’ Lewis gives me his despairing look. ‘When will you learn? This is Thea. And we love her.’

I pull a face. ‘Yees we do,’ Lewis says. ‘Remember the time your mum found weed in your bag and Thea totally owned it so you wouldn’t get grounded? And who totally called out Erin Deragon on that slapper story rumour of you? Or the time that . . .’

My hand signals for him to stop. ‘Okay. I get it.’ My mum still refers to Thea as ‘troubled’ after the spliff incident.

Lewis frowns. ‘You may not like each other much right now but you always have each other’s back. Sisters before misters any day. And you know our girl is totally weird when it comes to anything to do with loyalty and friendship stuff.’

I totally get it and now I feel bad all over again. Thea’s having a crap time at home, ever since her mum ran off with Mr (*I wear Lycra even in winter*) Rogers, the clichéd well-old personal trainer, leaving her and her sister to cope with her devastated (*not able to pull off Lycra any time of the year*) dad. We’ve been treading lightly for months.

Lewis is still talking. ‘Being stuck in this dump of a town is bad enough but what I don’t need this summer is you two ruining my holidays with your boy-bickering. Enough already. You need to pick your battles and JB is not one of them. We need to get you a chastity belt and throw away the key.’ He pulls a face. ‘Think of the chafing.’

‘Ewww.’ We giggle. ‘And the VPL.’ He stops giggling. ‘Seriously though, find another boy to crush on. This is not cool. What would Taylor say?’

‘Mind your own business?’ Do I look like I need a Taylor Swift-ism right now?

‘“It’s Time to Go”.’ Lewis gives me his dreamy Swiftie look. ‘*Evermore*, bonus track.’

‘Uh, what about, “We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together”?’ I say, not sing. ‘That was me being Thea, by the way.’

Lewis wags a finger. ‘“You Need to Calm Down”,’ he grins. ‘Before there’s “Ba-ad Blood”.’

‘And I’m the sad one,’ I say.

‘Taylor always says it best,’ he sighs. ‘Totally nailed it.’

‘Look at me,’ I say. ‘Lewis.’ I give him my most serious face. ‘No-thing happened.’

‘Whatever.’

‘Leew-is,’ I say. This is so not worth the drama if Thea finds out.

Lewis mimes locking his lips and throwing away the key. He pulls me to the front door. ‘Not gonna lie, it didn’t look like nothing.’

I’m about to launch into a massive justification of my actions when Thea bounds over, her cheeks flushed prettily pink.

‘We won!’ she says. ‘When I say *we*, it was totally me, not gonna lie, they were useless. No clue who was Mafia.’

‘Toby MacPhee?’ I glare a *shut your mouth* at Lewis.

‘I didn’t think he had it in him to be a killer.’ She takes out her phone and poses for a selfie, lips pursed, fingers held up in a victory sign – one triumphant Insta posted. ‘How did you know?’

‘Just a hunch.’ I’m not about to tell her about that *oh so* obvious tell-tale tic Toby has every time he lies. I have this weird ability to tell when someone is lying. In theory I should be the queen of this game. The thing that really pisses me off is I’m crap at lying. Can’t do it. I get all twisted up and tongue-tied. Then I do stupid things, like full on admit to my best friend that I kissed her ex, when in reality it wasn’t a big deal and I should have just shut the hell up.

Stupid, stupid idiot.

‘Where were you?’ Thea’s face is one big suspicious question. ‘You disappeared.’

‘Kitchen.’ I refuse to look at Lewis, who’s humming “Look What You Made Me Do”.

‘Great narrating, Lewis,’ she says. ‘Loved the chainsaw, totally gross.’

‘Thought it was an axe,’ I say.

‘Maybe if you paid attention you wouldn’t get fried.’ Thea’s head’s back in her phone. ‘It was genius.’

‘Of course.’ He flicks his blue hair in one easy move. ‘Totally channelling my Tarantino.’

‘More like your Walt Disney,’ I mumble.

‘Bi-atch. Ooh look, there’s JB,’ he says in a sing-song voice. Luckily, Thea is too full of the win to notice the insinuation.

‘Hi, JB,’ she coos, phone gone, daintily sweeping her curls from her eyes the way she does when she fancies someone, which is weird cos she hundred per cent said he was boring as hell and kissed like a trout.

‘Great game. So sorry you got killed so early.’

‘My bad,’ JB smiles. ‘Well played, Thea.’

‘What can I say?’ She gives him a long look which I recognise instantly. It’s her go to full-on flirt, her secret weapon. I’m confused, why flirt with him when she’s not interested? She’s definitely launching an attack his way and I get the distinct impression it’s for my benefit not his. ‘I’m a natural.’

‘You really are.’ He smiles a smile so dazzling even I can’t miss the subtext. ‘See you around.’

Awkward.

‘Cool narration,’ JB says. Lewis beams a reply.

‘Bell end.’ Lewis says, beam extinguished as soon as JB walks away. ‘I don’t know what you see in him.’ He ushers us out the door and I can’t tell if he’s talking to me or Thea.

2. One battered sausage and two pickled eggs

The problem with living in a tiny town is there is nowhere to hide. Everyone knows everything about everyone, and everyone does the same old bollocks day in and day out. The only way to avoid death by monotony is to escape, and the only way to escape, imo, is to keep your head down, work hard and get a uni place far, far away.

In order to achieve said plan, you need a job. Luckily, Rocks Fish & Chips had two openings, so at least the total crappiness is cancelled out by working with Lewis.

‘SIXTY NIIIIINE,’ Dave screams over the fryer, vanishing back into the fish stinking steam in fits of laughter.

Lewis nudges me as I wrap what seems like the hundredth piece of battered cod. He gets it too, counting down the months till he leaves for London Film School, or to be honest, anywhere else but here.

‘One battered sausage and two pickled eggs,’ he says. ‘That’s one rocking Thursday evening.’

It never gets old. I’m giggling so hard the saltshaker has taken on a life of its own.

‘Steady on,’ he says. ‘Don’t wanna give the guy a heart attack.’

Closing the wrap, I hand the warm parcel to old Mr James.

‘You two young ladies take care now,’ Mr James says, tottering away.

Lewis stops wrapping abruptly and turns to me. ‘What part of this,’ he waves his hand over his body and face, ‘spells vajayjay?’

Curling my hand around my chin and tapping my mouth with my finger, I take a long look at my friend. ‘Hmmm. Could it be the emo eyes and the blue spikes jutting out from your cap, or maybe the black nail varnish you’re not supposed to be wearing, that confused the poor old guy?’

‘Look like Yungblud, live like Taylor.’ Lewis catwalks behind the counter complete with a fierce runway turn under the multicoloured neon signs. ‘At least I’ve got style.’ He adjusts his apron and checks himself in the mirrors. ‘Just sayin.’ He smiles an Oscar-worthy smile at our next customer. ‘How can I help?’

I pull another sheet of wrapping and lift a battered cod from the shelf. He’s so right. Even in his work uniform, complete with gold embroidered saluting cod cap, he manages to pull it off. Lewis has the kind of style that’s made for a bigger world than here, and a personality that is *waay* too big for some two-bit Essex back road where nothing ever happens. He’s the character everyone will be talking about in ten years. I’m gonna have to work harder if I am ever going to shine. More Billy Eilish than Ariana, I’m not trying to hide away, more like I’m here but no one seems to notice. The more I try to push to the front, the more I disappear. Thea was just like me until year eight. We were two wallflowers hanging off Lewis’s bright pagoda, happily blossoming beneath his shade. Then she hit puberty and, like the predictable butterfly-cocoon analogy, spread her dazzling wings and flew into the sun, leaving caterpillar-me alone with no clue how to build a cocoon. I’m still waiting for my metamorphosis. I’m starting to wonder if this is it.

A fly crashes into the industrial bug zapper with a sharp snap and crackle.

‘Soo,’ Lewis says. ‘Spoken to Thea?’

‘Nope . . . You?’

‘Yes actually, I have,’ Lewis says. ‘Cos that’s what best friends do. Talk. And forgive each other.’

‘Shouldn’t you be having this conversation with Thea?’

‘I have.’ He stops wrapping. ‘What they don’t do is bicker over some meat head neither really wants but is determined not to let the other have.’

‘That’s not what’s going on.’ That’s *so* what’s going on, but I’m not about to admit it. The three of us have been together since preschool. As close as siblings, we fight hard and forgive . . . eventually. I guess it’s Lewis’s turn to be peace maker.

‘What *is* going on, exactly?’

‘Nothing.’ I slam the pickled egg into the paper a bit too hard and it rolls off the counter and onto the tiled floor with a pitiful squelch.

‘Tragic,’ Lewis says. ‘Bit like your love life.’

‘Sod off.’ I scoop up the egg and throw it in the bin. ‘And another thing. NOTHING happened. It was one kiss, one time.’

Lewis’s hands fly up in surrender. ‘Whatever you say. But for god’s sake sort it out.’ He turns to the next customer. ‘Can I take your order, my lovely?’

‘My two besties dressed all in blue. So cute.’ Speak of the devil. Thea’s standing two back in the queue, phone poised in the air. All traces of last night’s bitchery have gone but there is still an underlying *something* I can’t quite put my finger on. I’m not sure if it’s coming from me or her.

‘You **HAVE** to get me one of those T-shirts with the little fish logo.’ Thea leans on the counter.

‘Fuck o-off,’ sings Lewis, not even looking up.

‘What can I get you, missy?’ I say in my best cockney accent, as we play dodge the elephant in the room. It’s not the best game and I hate that there is tension between us, but I’ve no clue how to make it right. Thea points her phone in my face.

‘You had better not be filming,’ I say.

‘Stroppy.’

I push my palm over the phone camera. ‘Why would anyone care?’

‘It’s not about caring, it’s about sharing.’ Thea reverses the camera, pushing her lips together. ‘The key to staying relevant is to keep sharing.’

‘Chips?’ She’s immediately got my back up. Maybe this elephant is a little too big for the room.

‘God no. I have news.’ She taps her phone. ‘Need to speak, like now.’

‘Thea Anne-Marie Holland, we finish in ten. You need to wait. Go share fabulously . . . outside.’

‘This is life changing, guys,’ she says. ‘**HURRY THE HELL UP.**’

*

Ten minutes later we're standing in the car park behind the fish and chip shop, staring at our phones. It's late, ribbons of red streak across the sky like a fanfare, celebrating the promise of a sunny tomorrow.

'God, you two stink.' Thea screws up her nose while still managing to look dainty and glam.

I hug myself self-consciously. Lewis wraps his arms around Thea, smothering her within his six-foot frame until she begs for mercy.

Grappling out of his grip, she waves her phone in our faces. 'Take it seriously, guys.'

I zoom in to Thea's message. I'm tired and stink of fishy grease, and the clammy summer evening's not helping. Blurry words pull into focus.

CASTING CALL
Big Brother meets MAFIA

**We are looking for CONFIDENT,
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contestants (17–18) to take part in this
EXCITING NEW reality TV game show.**

BIG CASH PRIZE.

Do YOU have what it takes to survive?
Email audition@pinkponytv@gmail.com

'What am I looking at?' Lewis says.

Thea hops from foot to foot. 'The way out of here.'

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LIE OR DIE by Ali Clack

SYNOPSIS

Tricked into auditioning for reality television show, *Lie or Die*, by her fame-hungry friend, 17-year-old Kass finds herself competing in a murder-mystery game, based on the popular party pastime, MAFIA. When the housemates start dying, the game becomes a fight for survival.

Ten strangers trapped in a television studio.

Forty-two remote cameras.

Five dead bodies.

One rule: Trust no one.

Kass must catch the killers or die trying.

Reality just got real.

BIOGRAPHY

After university, Ali moved to London to pursue a career in television. She worked on a wide range of shows from *Teletubbies* to *Friends*. She now writes YA and lives in Essex with a houseful of teenagers. She can often be found freezing on the side of a rugby pitch.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I loved the opening and its nice punchy start. Nice surprise of it being a game – good misdirection. Well observed minefield of teenage politics and humour. This sounds real. Strong characters with believable voices. Reality TV will chime with YA readers. Modern day *The Hunger Games*.'

'I love a closed-set mystery with the bodies piling up – it's inherently a ticking clock and the stakes are high.'

'Really enjoyed the entry/positioning line and the concept. Commercial and appealing mash up (reality TV show and murder!). "Reality just got real" is a whip smart positioning line. I wanted to read more and can see this having a lot of appeal for the YA reader.'

Contact: alison.clack@yahoo.co.uk

THE BELONGSONG

By Emma Norris

Chapter One

Mayu

It's Father's fault I stole his kayak. He should have let me go foraging, or taken me with him to the Whale Graveyard. I love it out there; the seagrass meadows are so shallow you can see the enormous humpback skeletons from the surface.

I twist the shaft of his double-blade paddle in my hands, and strike out along the edge of the reef, leaving the floating village behind me. Beyond the wide strip of jagged, black lava rocks and orange-yellow corals, the wildsea's waves smack against the reef wall, and white froth and seaspray bursts up, showering me with a cooling mist.

If I catch something, Father will have to listen to me.

The gap in our reef – the Bite – looms ahead. It's the only break in the vast necklace of reef that surrounds our village, where the turquoise calm of our shallow lagoon meets the darkdeep waves of the open ocean. Churning whitewater between me and the freedom outside.

I paddle hard, my arms, my shoulders, my whole body working to pick up speed and keep the kayak's bow under control as I skid into the heaving waters. For the millionth time I wish Father had built me my own kayak, because his is far too long for me. The cockpit is too wide and the seat too low, so I slide about, my sides banging into the hard bone edges of the kayak. Thrusting my blade deep, I sweep the surface each side of the boat, in short, deep strokes, pushing through the resistance. A wave lifts the kayak's bow, swinging me in towards the rocks on my port side. I backpaddle frantically on the other side, seaspray spattering my face, leaning my weight to starboard. The boat turns, and I push forward, heading south through the gap once more.

My arms cycle as I lean into my stroke, and with a last splash that soaks my arms and face, I am spat out of the Bite, lunging into the rippling wildsea. A big grin spreads across my face, as I let the kayak bump and sway in the wavelets.

I am out, in a kayak, alone. For the first time in my life.

The rising sun peers over the horizon, throwing its orange-yellow light across the sky. I turn my back on it and head west, following the outer curve of the reef. Huddled in the middle of our lagoon, our teepees and kabins are dark silhouettes, like weird dorsal fins on the backs of our anchored rafts of kelpweed. I should be there, on our float, weaving food baskets and nets, and repairing the holes in kelpsuits and booties. Chores I have been doing for six moons, while my big brother and sister get to go foraging.

I want to be a hunter. Father should trust me. I may not be able to walk or swim, but I can kayak better than anyone my age and I have never capsized, not once in nearly thirteen years.

As I scoot along the bubbling surface of the deep, a splash in the distance catches my eye. I veer in closer to the reef. Ahead, two harpoon-lengths away, a dark shape darts along the cliff wall, a few feet beneath the surface. It's big, whatever it is, perhaps a jackfish or barracuda. I reach into the cockpit, shifting the harpoon I swiped from Father's kabin up onto my knees. I can't believe my luck. I paddle towards the gliding fish, and as I get closer it stops and turns upright, looking at me from beneath the surface.

It's a seal.

Flipping spinefish! What's it doing here? No animal ever comes near our lagoon. They're terrified of humans. I have only ever seen a bobbing head in the distance, or lifeless carcasses, brought home by our hunters, ready to be skinned and chopped.

The spotted grey seal curls around and darts away through the blue, whirling and gliding. I dig my blade into the water and set off after it, but it's too fast.

"Wait!" I shout.

It stops again, rising to the surface, and a sleek-furred head and snout pop out.

"Oort oort oort."

It's barking at me. Like it's telling me off.

I back-paddle frantically to stop the kayak from shooting on past, and lift the sleek harpoon up to my shoulder, keeping my eyes on the animal. The seal duck-dives, its two fan-like tail fins flick up out of the water, and it zips down, disappearing into the gloom below. I twist round, scanning the surface, hoping to see it reappear, but it's nowhere to be seen.

Mayu

That's strange. I thought I heard my name. I look around, but there's no one here.

"Oort."

The seal's head pops out of the surface right next to the kayak. It's so close I could reach out and touch it. She snorts – it snorts, I mean – and a puff of seaspray fritters away on the breeze. Father's harpoon is raised in my hand and I tighten my grip, ready to thrust it forward. Our hunters say seal hides are difficult to pierce, but I have to try. A full-grown seal would feed half the village and I am sick of limpets and mussels.

The seal rolls onto her back and lifts her tail flippers up before me.

"You're beautiful," I say out loud. I've been thinking it from the first moment I saw her, gracefully gliding through the water. The whiskers each side of her soft grey muzzle tremble, and she snorts again, her big, round eyes looking directly at me, her nostrils closing to slits. I can't believe this is happening, that the seal isn't afraid of me, and is bobbing there, right in front of me, as if waiting for me to speak.

This is my chance to prove myself.

"Oort!" Her bark is sharp and she rolls sideways in the water, so I see all the grey spots.

I can't do it. I imagined myself harpooning a snapper or a coral trout. Not this furry faced cutie.

"You should go, or I'm going to have to harpoon you."

As if she understands, the seal drops under the surface and swims west, towards the open ocean and away from Churuuk, away from our vast necklace of reef, our lonely atoll smack in the middle of the open ocean.

I float for a moment, wiping sweat and seaspray from my face, and slide Father's harpoon back into the kayak's inner hull. I probably couldn't have caught it, even if I'd tried. Even our best hunters only catch a seal two

or three times a year. I sigh heavily. Going home empty-handed is not an option so I set off again, my mind still on the seal.

*

I've been cruising along, and not seen a single fish. I'm going to regret letting that seal go and I should have brought a line and hook and bait, anything to make sure I don't go empty-handed. Our village is starving. Everyone is out from dawn till dusk, hunting or trawling or foraging and we're all desperate for meat. Our stores are empty, the shoals have disappeared, and our boats have to sail out farther and farther each day.

My stomach rumbles. And I hear something else.

Voices – I hear voices. I look up and see that I have followed the curve of our atoll all the way round the outer edge, to the north-west segment. I'm three kenu-lengths away from the Slab, the only section of the reef that is flat, like a shelf. Inside the lagoon, our village's foragers, mostly younger than me, are milling around in the turquoise shallows. Faint splashing sounds drift across as sleek heads pop up, suck air and dive back down again in the desperate search for shellfish. In the distance, a huddle of kayaks, open kenus and coracles bob gently on the turquoise calm, anchored together.

If someone sees me my escape will be over.

The tide is low, so the Slab is ankle-deep in seawater and the rocks around it rise a couple of handspans above the surface. I slide myself down, lying low in the cockpit of the kayak. I wonder whether to quietly paddle away with my hands, or stay still, but somebody whoops and a figure clambers up on to the Slab.

It's Tonny, the son of one of our trawlermen. He has his back to me, thank the skies, hitching up his mottled green trunks. I'm surprised he's not wearing a wetsuit, even a shortie keeps you warm when you're diving.

A movement off to my left catches my eye, among the wildsea's bubbling waves – a dark shape gliding under the wavelets, heading towards the outer edge of the Slab. I rub the salt from my eyes. A curved triangle pierces the surface, and another rises beside it.

Dorsal fins. On rounded backs.

I gasp.

Dolphins. Two dolphins.

“Hey, Mayu! What are you doing here?” The boy on the Slab faces me, his body silhouetted against the blue sky, his short black hair sticking up like a sea urchin’s spines. I sit upright, gawping from the delighted boy to the dorsal fins and back again, lost for words.

“I caught an octopus!” He doesn’t seem to have noticed the fins. He’s only eight, so catching an octopus is a really big deal. “I’m so hungry, I could eat it raw!” He brandishes the still-living octopus high in the air, the large, orange body and writhing tentacles dangling, and, without waiting for a reply, swings round to face the lagoon again.

Something streaks past my kayak, below the surface. It’s a seal, heading straight for the dolphins. Another whistle trills and one of the dolphins pops his entire head up above the surface. I’ve heard of this, but never seen it – it’s called a spyhop.

What in Sapphire’s seas is going on? Is it the same seal? Is it attacking the dolphins? What are they doing so close to our reef?

You shouldn’t be here!

The voice is like the voice that called out my name, earlier. I look around me, wondering who’s speaking. It was a female voice but only Tonny is close by, and he’s calling out to his fellow foragers.

A whistle rings out and one dolphin dives, showing a brief flash and splash of a tail fluke, before shooting towards the Slab. It’s going so fast I think it’s going to crash into the volcano’s wall, but moments later the surface erupts, a sleek body bursts up, leaping clean out of the water, soaring over the Slab in a huge arc. I can’t take my eyes off it. It soars through the air, its silver-grey flank glimmering in the sunlight. Droplets of spray rain outwards as it arrows towards Tonny, still stood waving his prize in the air.

“Watch out!” I shout.

Tonny swings round, alarmed, as the dolphin passes over his head. Its beak is wide open and closes round the head of the octopus, snatching it from the boy’s grasp. The young forager collapses backwards. The dolphin’s smooth body twists, and it flops sideways onto the lagoon’s surface, hurling a fountaining wave into the air.

Shrieks pierce the air and I paddle to the Slab, desperate to see what is happening. The young foragers splash away from the swirling patch of whitewater made by the dolphin’s bellyflop, heads bobbing and arms

thrashing. Gripping the sides of the cockpit, I lift myself higher and spot the clear form of the dolphin standing out against the white sands that fill our volcano's crater. It glides forwards with the momentum of its leap, and turns back sharply.

The dolphin arrows back towards the Slab again. It springs out of the water, sailing over the coral strip, the stolen octopus dangling from its beak. I duck, tucking myself low into the kayak till I hear the splash of the dolphin's return to the wildsea. I scan the bubbling whitewater as it calms. Neither the seal nor the dolphins are anywhere to be seen.

That was amazing. We all know dolphins have been stealing fish from our hunters and trawlers, but they've always done it out in the deep, they've never come this close to Churuuk and they've never come into our lagoon.

Back on the Slab, Tonny is picking himself up off the rocks, his dusty brown back covered in scratches. A few foragers are heading towards him, but most are still rushing to their boats, splashing and screeching.

"Tonny? Are you all right?" I call.

He doesn't answer.

"Hey!" shouts a voice.

Another figure is clambering up onto the Slab. It's Connol – a tall, thickset teen in a deep red kelpsuit, son of one of our best hunters. He walks past little Tonny to the outside edge of the Slab, raises his arm and points. "It's you! You did this!"

The thickset teen whips round to face the lagoon again. He shouts to the scattering foragers, his back to me, his right arm swung back to wag his finger my way.

"It's the Half-fish. Mayu. She did this!"

Chapter Two

Mayu

"Hey!" I can't believe what I'm hearing. I haven't been called a Half-fish for years, not since I was a littler. I back-paddle away from the Slab, and Connol's stabbing finger, unsure whether to stay or go.

"Father was right," shouts Connol, still facing away from me. He's yelling across the lagoon, where two kayaks are skimming towards us, side by side. "I didn't believe him. I thought he was mad . . ."

It's my big brother and sister, their dark green kelp-covered kayaks leaving two v-shaped white wakes in a curving trail behind them. They have raced here, so I guess they saw the commotion.

Kyro slides up to the ledge, puts a hand onto a nearby rock and leaps out of his kayak, splashing into the Slab's ankle-deep water. His curly black hair is dripping wet, but he lets it hang over his thick black eyebrows. He'll make light of this, it's Shana I want to flee from. She's such a sea turtle – she's so sharp she could crunch coral. She glides in next to Kyro and holds onto his kayak to stop it rebounding away. The current on this side of the Slab is pushing me in towards the rocks, so I have to keep back-paddling against the swell.

“Did you see the dolphin?” I call out. A dolphin entering our lagoon is a much bigger drama than me nicking a kayak.

“So, you're admitting it, are you?” growls Connol.

“Don't say a word, Mayu.” My brother's frowning glare says it all. *What are you doing here? You're supposed to be at home. Shana's going to bite your head off.* He bends over Tonny, one hand on his shoulder, muttering to him quietly while Connol backs away, watching.

Shana's eyes flick from me to Connol. I feel my face and neck getting hot and it's not sunburn. Connol's hostility towards me is horrible, but Shana's tongue-lashings smart worse than a jellyfish sting.

“He needs to go to the Hub,” Kyro says to Shana. “Some of these scratches are deep.”

“Take my kayak,” says Shana to Tonny, climbing out on to the Slab. “It's faster than your coracle.” She keeps her back turned to Connol, who steps back like he's afraid of her too.

I look back the way I came, wondering if I should just slink away home. But that would be silly. I've been seen and there's no getting out of this. I swallow hard. I was so busy thinking about taking some great catch home, I didn't think about what Father would do if I stole his kayak and returned empty-handed.

Little Tonny stands, his bare chest and knees streaked with red scratches, and steps into my sister's kayak. He wobbles, and sits down with a thump, but his eyes light up when Shana passes him her paddle. Kayaks are only for teens, so he smiles shyly at us all, says a whispered thank you,

and sets off with a splash.

As soon as he's gone, my siblings turn to face Connol.

"She's cursed us," says Connol, taking another step back.

Kyro stands, still clutching his paddle. "Narc off, Connol."

"You don't want to see it. But she's right there – she sent the dolphin. Look at her. She has guilt written all over her face."

Connol looks at me, but doesn't look me in the eye. He scans the water, his expression horrified. My throat has closed up. I can't make sense of what he's saying about me and I don't understand the disgust on his face. His family lives at the northernmost edge of the village, while we're anchored the farthest south, and though he's never had much to do with me, he's never been mean to me either.

"She only looks guilty because she nicked Father's stealth kayak," says Shana, narrowing her eyes at me.

"I haven't got one, have I? I had no choice."

"She's a Half-fish," insists Connol. "There's no denying it now. Everyone saw the dolphin."

"Shut up." My good-natured brother steps forward, pointing his paddle blade at Connol's chin.

My mouth drops open. I've never seen Kyro threaten anyone.

"Go home, Connol." Shana gets out onto the Slab, holding the retainer ropes for Kyro's boat. Their weedgreen kelp suits cover them to their wrists and ankles, for deep dives into jagged nooks and crannies. She stands beside our brother, fiddling with the seal-tooth on her necklace. They look like twins, both tall and slim, with short, dark hair, only Shana's is straight. Somehow, I ended up short, and rounded, like that seal I saw earlier.

Connol wobbles.

"You're getting landsick," says Shana. "Go home and tattle to your father. We know you want to."

Kyro puts his hand on his stomach and sucks air in and out, in a long, slow puff, a sure sign that he's feeling sick too. We're all used to the ocean's sway – the stillness of the rock is unnatural, like the world has stopped and the ocean has frozen.

"Everyone saw," hisses Connol. He splashes to the edge of the Slab and dives into the lagoon.

Kyro and Shana watch him front crawl towards the huddle of anchored watercraft. They turn to me, their eyes firing their dismay.

“Don’t start. I’m going – all right?” I lift Father’s paddle and sweep Father’s kayak towards home.

“Oh no you don’t!” Shana dives headfirst into the water between me and the reef strip. The stern of Father’s kayak jerks and I’m swung round sharply.

“Hey!” I shout. “Get off!”

Shana surfaces beside me, reaches up to the deck, and grabs the retainer rope from where it’s coiled on the yellowed sealskin.

“D’you think I’m going to let you swan off into the wildsea?”

“Why not?”

“Why not? Because you can’t swim, that’s why not. Because it’s not a calm lagoon out there. Because you could be capsized by a wave.”

“I’ve never capsized.”

My big sister swims back to the Slab and hands Kyro the rope. “You’re not allowed out on your own, Mayu. I can’t believe you took Father’s stealth kayak. That’s a wealth of at least seven sealskins, dozens of whale ribs, two full jawbones and eleven moons of Father’s hard graft. What if you’d scraped it on the rocks? What if it sank?”

“What if Father finally built me my own kayak?” I should have one by now. My siblings’ kayaks are sealed with giant kelp leaves, so they’re not as fast or light as Father’s, but at least they have one.

“He hasn’t got time, Mayu, you know that,” says Shana. “Get back in the lagoon.”

“It’s not just about the kayak. You could have drowned,” adds Kyro.

I glare at them both, so angry I’m tempted to just flee. But I know Shana would chase me down. All she ever does is boss me around. You’d think she was the eldest, not Kyro.

“You’ve no idea what you’ve done, Mayu.” Shana stands, waiting for me to obey.

I know exactly what I’ve done. What I don’t know is why Connol’s blaming me for the dolphin’s poaching. But there’s no point arguing. I bring the kayak up sideways against the Slab with expert figure-of-eight twirls of my paddle. Kyro comes forward, crouching to hold the boat firm against the Slab’s outer wall.

Getting out of a kayak is much harder for me than getting in. I have knees like everyone else, but my leg bones bend, like the cartilage in a shark. My arms are incredibly strong, stronger than many adults, because I use them to kayak *and* walk. I place my hands each side of the cockpit, elbows high behind me, and lift myself onto the back of the kayak's deck. I grab my left leg by the knee and lift it out, placing my foot onto the Slab, quickly followed by my right foot. I drop off the boat with a splash, yelping as the cold sea rushes up the trouserlegs of my kelp wetsuit.

Shana glides Father's stealth kayak across the Slab and waits for me on the lagoon side. No one speaks.

I handwalk myself forwards, my hands sliding along the slimy rock, my legs floating in front of me and for the first time in my life, it occurs to me that my overlong feet and webbed toes are rather like the tail-flippers the seal showed me.

"Hoy hoy!" calls a voice.

We all look up. Bina, Tonny's little sister, is labouring towards us in Shana's kayak, a small coracle bumping along behind her on a tow rope. Kyro steps forward, guiding the prow in, and the seven year old clammers out awkwardly, with my brother's help.

"How's Tonny?" I ask.

"He's fine," says Bina. "Shakarla put some cream on his scratches. He's mostly annoyed about his octopus."

"Thanks for returning the kayak," says Shana. "You didn't have to. I could have swum home."

"I did have to. Er, Mayu?"

"Yes?" I lift myself up to sit on a high, smoothish rock, so I don't have to crane my neck to look up at them standing over me.

"Hervo sent me. He says you're to come to the Hub. Now."

"What?" I brush pieces of slimy weed from my dripping hands, and look up to see Kyro and Shana exchanging a knowing glance. My stomach lurches and it's not stillsickness.

I was so busy worrying about Father, I forgot I have disobeyed our Headsman, Hervo, too.

THE BELONGSONG by Emma Norris

SYNOPSIS

In an ocean world, fish are scarce, and the floating village faces starvation. Mayu wants to be a hunter, and Ragged Tooth, a whale shark, wants to protect his ocean home. When superstitious hunters accuse Mayu of colluding with Ragged Tooth to curse the food supply, Mayu learns she is the first aquatic human. Together, girl and shark must prove overfishing is the real enemy, before Mayu is exiled and the reefs destroyed.

BIOGRAPHY

Emma grew up underwater, catching sea creatures on Gibraltar's shores or suspended in a good story. As a child psychologist she became passionate about difference and disability, and wanted to immerse children in the beauty of an underwater world most can never see; a world humans are destroying.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I was excited to read a story featuring a non-able-bodied protagonist (and for this to only be mentioned towards the end of the extract, therefore it not being a defining characteristic). I liked the spirit of protagonist and got a real sense of their frustration at not being treated like their brother and sister.'

'The setting and world here are intriguing, and refreshingly different. The nature writing is lovely and well done; I enjoyed visualizing this watery existence – the kayaks, kelp suits, volcano etc – and I found myself really able to see the scenes that were created.'

'The writing is so engaging that it immediately transported me to the scene. Strong sense of place. Intriguing concept which feels timely and relevant. I really liked this one with its nods to Michelle Paver. The Ancient World setting has global appeal and reach.'

Contact: emma@zazikaya.com

JACK SWAN'S PHOENIX QUEST

By Andrew James

ONE

MERLIN'S DOOM

You might ask why this story starts with me and Merlin locked in the car.

The answer is simple.

It was the only way to save Merlin from certain doom.

See, I knew if I kept us in there for thirty-two minutes longer, traffic would pick up and we'd miss his *final* appointment at the vet's.

That's right.

You heard it here first.

My fathers, Dad and Pa, were trying to murder my best friend. The keeper of my secrets. The Watson to my Sherlock. The fried egg of my Haribo. Merlin. He's a basset hound and in case you don't know, that's a dog with big floppy ears. Floppy awesome ears, actually. They drag along the floor as he walks. Dad and Pa got him at the same time they got me, nearly twelve years ago – so we've grown up together.

Fortunately, my fathers crumble under pressure. They fall into the predictable *young man* mode where they say things like, 'This will be your own undoing, young man.' Or, 'When you're grounded, you'll only have yourself to blame, young man.' And, 'Young man, what have we told you about giving unwanted fashion advice? If your teachers wanted to know their hair was hideous and that the sight of their shoes burned your eyes, they'd ask.'

And once they realised I'd taken both their car keys, panic took over.

Dad tapped on the window to get my attention as if I couldn't already see him waving his arms about like an idiot trying to guide a plane to a

runway. I wound the windows down, just a smidge. ‘This isn’t funny, Jack,’ he said.

I wasn’t laughing.

Pa ran around the other side of the driveway. ‘You shouldn’t keep a dog in a hot car, Jack. It can kill them.’

I pursed my lips and raised an eyebrow. ‘And the vets were going to do what? Make him look more youthful with an ear-lift? I’ll take my chances.’

Grampa smushed his face against the passenger window. ‘My ice-cream sandwich!’ His grey eyes stared down to where a blob of ice cream melted into the seat from between two chocolate wafers. ‘Just pass it out,’ he said in a loud stage whisper. ‘They won’t even notice.’ He threw a thumb over his shoulder to Dad and Pa who were now standing either side of him, waiting eagerly.

‘Grampa.’ I shook my head. ‘I’m disappointed. What do you take me for? Walt?’ Walt is my younger brother. He’d definitely have fallen for the old ‘save my ice-cream sandwich’ ploy. Walt still believes in the tooth fairy, which is precisely why his teeth are only worth £1 each and mine are worth £2. Yes, technically the other £1 is hush money to not tell Walt the tooth fairy isn’t real, but still, know your worth, people!

Merlin was whining in the back, stretching to sniff the ice-cream sandwich, his seatbelt pulled tight. I reached round to unclick it.

‘Hey!’ Dad tapped on the window again. ‘Leave that on. If we have an accident, Merlin could get hurt.’

‘OK, Dad,’ I said. ‘Let’s get him there safe for his INJECTION!’

‘Don’t let him in the front, Jack,’ said Pa. ‘He’ll eat the ice-cream sandwich. Chocolate’s poisonous for dogs.’

I counted to ten to calm myself.

‘No!’ Grampa thumped on the window then ran back into the house at speed.

I climbed into the backseat to join Merlin. A normal eleven and three quarter year old might have rolled his eyes, but I have never been normal. Who would want to be? Instead, I have developed the single eyebrow arch. That’s right. Your ears do not deceive you. The trick is not to move your head or any other part of your face. Do not react at all. Move only a single eyebrow. It’s the sophisticated man’s eye-roll.

Dad gave me a sad smile. 'No one wants to put Merlin to sleep, but he's old. He's not well.'

I gasped and put my hands over Merlin's ears. 'He can hear you and he's not happy.'

Pa joined Dad and took his hand. 'He can't even make it to the garden in time for number ones.'

'Or number twos,' said Dad.

Merlin's ears pricked up and he stared deep into my eyes, arching an eyebrow. Well, who do you think taught me the eyebrow arch in the first place?

'Neither can Walt or Grampa, but you're not putting *them* down, are you?' I said.

Grampa reappeared at the front door holding the kitchen bin. He glanced over at me before shouting, 'Out of the way, boy! A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do.' And he ran down the drive holding the bin up like a gleaming metal battering ram.

Dad caught him around the waist just in time and Grampa dropped the bin, mumbling about his ice-cream sandwich.

'Just make another one,' said Pa, waving a hand at Grampa. 'There's enough ice cream for one more.'

Grampa's eyes lit up and he scurried off back into the house with a wide grin.

That was when my brothers appeared on the doorstep.

Harvey, or pancake number one as Gramps calls him, is the oldest. Gramps says the first pancake in any batch is always a bit funny, and I don't mean L-O-L funny. I'm in the middle and naturally I'm the favourite, though Dad and Pa would never admit it.

As usual, Harvey had his earbuds in and wasn't paying any attention. And as usual, Walt's finger was planted deep inside his nostril, rooting around as if he were searching for loose change. Honestly, he can't even be trusted to blow his own nose. His sleeves look like racetracks for slugs. I worry what will become of them. I'm sure Pa and Dad are just relieved to have a beacon of hope like me. I must bring them great comfort.

'Take Walt back inside, Harvey,' said Dad, but Harvey didn't move.

'Are you listening?' Pa shook his head and scratched his beard. 'Honestly,

sometimes I think you've inherited your grampa's selective hearing.'

He says this often and it is a great concern of mine. I mean, we're adopted, so we can't have inherited it, but who knew hearing loss could develop so early? Recently, to ensure this doesn't happen to me, I've taken to getting up thirty-minutes early every day in order to test my hearing in the bathroom through the repetition of musical scales and dramatic screaming. As of yet, I think I'm OK. And it's come in handy. Dad says that thanks to me, he'll never be late for work.

Pa marched up to Harvey and snatched the bud from his right ear, ushering them both back into the house. 'I'll phone the vet's,' he called back to Dad.

Victory!

'You hear that? You've won,' said Dad.

Merlin moved to the window and put a paw up against the glass, whining.

I took one of the car keys from my pocket and ran my finger over the unlock button. Then I stopped and looked up at Dad. There was a glint of something in his eyes. I looked at the clock. There were still seventeen minutes left before rush hour started. If I unlocked the car now, they might still be able to make it to the vet's.

I narrowed my eyes at Dad. 'Nice try, old man!' I pulled Merlin back onto my lap and whispered into his ear. 'You can't trust them.' And he snuggled, agreeing.

A small crowd of passers-by was gathering, and neighbours were on their doorsteps, all to witness my heroism.

'What's happening here, then?' said Norman, sauntering over from across the road. My fathers call him Sir Twitchalot, because he spends his days at the bay window, spying on the neighbours.

'Nothing, Norman,' sighed Dad. 'Just a silly game, that's all.'

I pressed my face to the glass. 'A game of MURDER!'

Merlin barked.

'You tell 'em, boy!'

He barked again.

'Shouldn't keep a dog in a hot car,' said Norman, shielding his eyes from the sun and peering in.

‘Yes, thank you, Norman,’ said Dad.

I tapped on the glass. ‘Careful, Sir Twitchalot. Once he’s finished with Merlin, he’ll move onto the neighbours!’

Norman frowned. ‘What did he call me?’

‘I think we’ve got it in hand from here,’ said Dad, politely waving Norman away.

‘All right, Jack?’ came a voice, and I turned to see Nosey Nelly from school peering in the other side of the car, her phone held up at me. ‘Locked in, are you?’ Nosey Nelly, whose real name is Eleanor Noseley, lives down the street.

I folded my arms and stared straight ahead as Merlin stretched and yawned. ‘Locked in through choice.’

‘Ah,’ she said. ‘Trying to kill the dog in a hot car, are you?’

‘Trying to *save* my dog, actually. Now, move along, nothing to see here,’ I said, and she snorted as she wandered off down the street. This whole palaver would be all over TikTok by teatime. She just can’t help herself. I was regretting not matching my belt to my shoes or learning how to switch the air con on without unlocking the door. I must have looked like a sweaty mismatched mess.

‘Booked in for Friday evening,’ called Pa, reappearing at the door and marching back to the car.

Friday. That meant two more days for Merlin. More time for cuddles. More time for hide and seek.

‘You’re just putting off the inevitable, Jack,’ said Pa. ‘It’s cruel to everyone.’

‘Merlin is my friend, my heart,’ I said, my voice breaking. I started crying. Sadly, I have not yet mastered the art of looking handsome whilst crying. I am what some people might describe as an ugly crier. It is a burden I must carry.

‘You know what?’ said Pa. ‘For acting so selfishly, you’re not going on the school camping trip.’

I shook my head in disbelief. ‘I don’t even want to go on that stupid trip! You were forcing me.’

Dad covered his mouth with his hand and whispered, but I could still hear him. ‘He’s right, remember? We got another letter about Jack

critiquing his teacher's outfits? You said it was the last straw.'

'Well then you're definitely going on the trip!' snapped Pa.

I squeezed Merlin tightly and inhaled his familiar scent. I needed the comfort. Parents are exhausting, aren't they? 'We'll run away. I mean it.'

'None of that would change anything,' said Dad. 'It won't save him.'

He was right. I needed to do more. Two days was nothing. It was then that inspiration struck. I needed to find a way to keep Merlin alive. 'Fine,' I said. 'We'll come out now.' The seventeen minutes had passed anyway. 'But I want you to know, this isn't over. I, Jack Swan, am going to find a way to save Merlin. I will go to the ends of the earth if need be. I'll sell your worldly belongings if that's what it takes, but this dog,' I pointed to Merlin, 'will be alive on Saturday morning.'

'You'd have to find a cure for death, Jack,' said Pa, solemnly.

'Then that, dear Pa, is exactly what I'll do.'

At that moment, Walt and Harvey came out onto the doorstep, each eating half an ice-cream sandwich. 'When's dinner?' said Harvey as Walt dribbled ice cream all over his T-shirt.

But before anyone could answer, a sobbing voice cried out from somewhere inside the house. 'Where's my ice-cream sandwich?'

Merlin let out a little cough and he shook his back legs out as if he was in pain.

I unlocked the car and Dad helped me carry him to the house. He was safe for a little longer, but I needed to get to work. I was on the clock. Forty-eight hours and counting.

TWO

THE BIG SUITCASE

Not many people can pull off penguin pyjamas on a garden lounger whilst drinking hot milk by the light of the moon, but that's what makes me so special. And I couldn't sleep anyway, not without a plan to save Merlin. Two extra days sounded like a lot, but I'd miss it all if I was on a school trip and Merlin would still be dead when I got home. So, now I had two problems: saving Merlin and staying with him. I stared up to the stars for inspiration. I followed clouds across the moon in hope of a solution. But by 6am, when neither came, I unlocked my iPad and googled *a cure for death*.

The first set of results was all about freezing people *until* there was a cure, but I'm not really a put-things-off-until-later sort of guy, you know, unless it's tidying my room, washing up or doing homework. The second page of results was all about vampires and romance novels, but I can't read romance, not since my heart was ripped, still beating from my chest, not three months before. More on that, later. The final set of results were just as useless.

They were all about drinking the blood of mythical beasts like unicorns, griffins, the Easter Bunny . . . but I didn't need childish delusions. I was going to find a cure for death.

Merlin was digging about in the hole where the old tree stump, AKA his favourite piddle spot, had been. He'd pined over it all month and had dug up quite a few bits: a doll's leg, an old tobacco tin and one of Harvey's football boots, amongst others. He limped over to me, some new find gleaming in his mouth, and dropped it on my foot.

'How kind,' I said, dangling it between my thumb and forefinger. 'Just what I've always wanted.' A string of drool ran off it and down my wrist as I held it up to the light. It was a wing bone, and a large one too, as long as my arm. And as the moonlight caught it, it shone all the colours of the rainbow. Merlin barked. It didn't weigh much and as I watched the light chase shifting colours all around it, I realised it was clean. Totally clean. As if it hadn't even been buried a day, let alone years. Merlin barked again, his eyes glued to the wing.

I shushed him and glanced up at my fathers' bedroom window, holding my breath. I counted to ten, because you have to give grown-ups time to get up and move, but no lights came on. It was still early. Merlin snatched his wing back and I released the breath I'd been holding. I put the iPad down on the table and we went back inside. A cure for death almost seemed impossible, so I had to remind myself that I'm Jack Swan – actor extraordinaire, undiscovered songbird, Olympian in the making. Well, I can jump quite far. Not so good at all the other stuff like running about and throwing things.

There was no way Pa was letting me stay home and I needed more time to find a cure, so there was only one thing for it; Merlin would have to go on the trip with me. But how do you hide a fully grown basset hound?

Merlin would indeed look stunning in my trilby hat and Dad's Armani sunglasses, but even if we made it onto the coach, we'd never pass Miss Dakin's headcount. On trips, she's obsessed with checking us off registers every five minutes.

Storm clouds filled the night sky, hiding the moon as thunder sounded and inspiration finally struck me. I was going to need the *big* suitcase. Sure, it would be difficult to drag around with its broken wheel and no, it didn't match any of my outfits, but sometimes sacrifices have to be made for the greater good.

In the understairs cupboard, the suitcase was wedged between dusty boxes and the old Christmas tree. I grabbed the handle of the case and yanked but it wouldn't budge. I tried again, but this time it gave way with unexpected ease and I slipped, the case landing on top of me. Merlin helped me back to my feet by licking them, which was weird, but I didn't hate it. There were baubles and tinsel everywhere, but it wasn't my job to put them away properly. It was Harvey's. So, I kicked the baubles under the hallway sideboard and stuffed the tinsel into the drawer. He couldn't continue through life doing half a job. He needed to learn responsibility.

Because I have the high arches of a dancer, I can move gracefully upstairs avoiding all the creaks. Merlin, however, does not have high arches. He favours more of a thump-and-fart-from-step-to-step sort of movement. I ushered him into my room with a head shake and a tut. He knew what he'd done. But now was not the time for distractions. I had plans to make, a dog to hide, adults to fool, a cure to find! I needed to prioritise. I needed outfits. After all, standards must be upheld in the face of adversity.

I laid everything out on the bed. We were arriving early, camping overnight and then returning later the following day. Two days, one night. I was going to need at least five outfits. You have to factor in costume changes before dinner. Never be seen eating the same meal twice in one outfit. That's my rule. Or is it never be seen eating more than one meal per outfit? It's something like that. You get the gist, right? At least someone does. Pa's forever whining about the amount of washing he has to do for me.

I had just packed everything into the case and put Merlin's blanket on top when there was a sudden knock at the door. I pulled the duvet over

the suitcase and tried to look innocent. You know, hand on hip, hair tossed back. ‘Yes?’

Dad popped his head around the door. ‘How’re you feeling?’

I shrugged, bit my lip and stared down at Merlin who was still licking the wing. You have to maintain the sulk and bank the guilt for a later date. You can never save up too much parental guilt. Remember, catch them in the right moment and they’ll buy you anything.

‘Well, don’t forget the coach leaves at eight. Your Pa’s left the rucksack out for you. Need help packing?’

‘No, thank you. I’m not an imbecile.’

‘Excellent,’ he said. ‘I’ll let your Pa know. It’ll be a relief’ after the tea tray incident.’

‘That was an experiment!’ I scoffed. You slide down the stairs on a tea tray *one time* and smash through *one* glass door and suddenly it’s an *incident*. ‘And I was trying to save you money!’ I called after him as he disappeared down the stairs. I was showing Grampa that an expensive and unsightly stairlift was unnecessary.

I ushered Merlin into the case, zipping it up, but leaving a gap for him to breathe, then I heaved it out onto the landing and down one step at a time. I’d need stealth if I was going to avoid my fathers’ questions about the big suitcase. I’d need to maintain a casual air of . . . well, subtlety’s not my strongest skill. Some of us were made to stand out.

As I neared the bottom, I could hear Pa arguing with Walt. I stayed still and listened.

‘Well, someone left it out and you were the last one using it. It’s totally ruined,’ said Pa and I peered around the banister to see the commotion. Pa was shaking the iPad about and rainwater was pouring out of it. I know what you’re thinking. That was me, right? True, but contrary to popular belief, there are times when the truth is unhelpful. And let’s be honest, Walt would still be alive after Pa’s rant . . . probably. If I got caught with Merlin, we’d both be dead!

Dad emerged from the kitchen and I panicked, freezing on the stairs with the big suitcase and Merlin’s tongue poking through the zip as he panted. He was clearly as worried as me. But before Dad could get near us, we heard a crunch and Dad cried out in pain.

‘Harvey! I thought you put those Christmas decorations away!’ called Dad.

‘I did it six months ago,’ said Harvey, rolling his eyes at Dad who, as I peered through the banister, was hopping about clutching a bloody, but sparkly, foot.

‘Christmas was *nine* months ago!’ said Dad.

Harvey looked confused and started counting on his fingers as he stuffed the last of his toast into his mouth and trudged back into the kitchen. Dad hopped after him.

This was my chance.

I took the last step and eased the suitcase down, grabbing my orange flat cap and red rain cape.

‘I’m off,’ I called out. ‘See you all tomorrow!’ But no one said anything. I breathed a sigh of relief, opened the front door, stepped out and closed it behind me, but someone else got to the front gate before I could.

Grampa had returned from his morning constitutional. *Merlin’s* morning constitutional involves him sniffing around the garden, peeing on everything and pooing in the corner. I leave it for Harvey to pick up as I think it gives him a sense of purpose. But it is because of this fact I have never gone with Grampa on his morning walk. If that’s what Merlin does, I think it’s time best spent alone for Grampa.

‘Off on the big trip, eh?’ he said.

I nodded. ‘Must dash.’

‘What’re you doing with that?’ He raised an eyebrow at the suitcase.

‘What?’ I said in my most defiant of tones. If in doubt, throw adults off with a mood swing that makes you look deep and sophisticated, because it confuses them.

‘Would a rucksack not be more suited to camping?’ said Grampa.

‘Wouldn’t it be easier to get the paper delivered?’ I nodded to the paper in his hand.

‘Touché.’ He smiled. ‘You’re only going overnight. Why do you need the *big* suitcase?’ He raised his chin and his grey eyes peered down at me over his long skinny nose and his forever-slipping-down specs.

I raised an eyebrow. ‘It’s like you don’t know me at all. Two days and one night means five outfits. Five outfits means many pairs of shoes, plus accessories. And I have to factor in weather changes.’

'I see.' Grampa eyed me suspiciously. 'Which outfits have you packed?'

He was onto me. Perhaps I'd forced him to stand outside one too many changing rooms. He did not share the passion for fashion my fathers and I do.

'Plum chino shorts and my flamingo shirt as day wear.'

Grampa nodded. 'But espadrilles in the forest?'

'I've switched them for my leather boat shoes.'

Grampa winced. 'Still, not very practical for hiking.'

'More waterproof than espadrilles though.'

He cupped his chin in thought. 'True, true. Evening wear?'

'Blue cashmere V-neck and checked slacks.' I lifted my chin so I too could peer down at him from the doorstep. 'With my boots,' I added.

'Your fathers would be proud. Perhaps,' he said, 'try rolling your sleeves up and climbing a tree or something. I think you need to get out more.'

'Very good,' I said, then I marched off, dragging the suitcase as it bobbed along the street on its broken wheel. When I heard the front door slam shut, I paused and looked back. I had done it. I'd snuck Merlin out of the house, right under my family's noses.

All I had to do now was hide him for the next two days. What could possibly go wrong?

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JACK SWAN'S PHOENIX QUEST by Andrew James

SYNOPSIS

Jack has 48-hours to cure death and save beloved basset hound, Merlin, from certain doom. Reluctantly enlisting ex-best-friend, May, they stumble onto a Phoenix quest and into the path of a cult hell-bent on claiming the Phoenix's life-giving powers for themselves. Can Jack and May overcome their differences in time to save Merlin? After all, who cares if Noah, the cutest boy in school chose May over Jack? Noah's dimples aren't that impressive anyway.

BIOGRAPHY

Teacher in collar and tie, writer in specs and pants, Andrew lives with his husband and Hugo the collie in Greenwich where he co-runs a successful writing group. Determined to bring more queer families and protagonists to children's literature, he is about to begin a PhD with that very focus.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'I really liked the voice of this one, my favourite of all the entries I read. Such a good emotional plot point – who wouldn't want to save their pet from death?! The LGBTQ+ rep was nice to see too, and I liked all of Jack's little quirks. He seemed like a fully formed character on the page – so engaging.'

'This has a fun and lively tone, and some good lines. I also like Jack's love of clothes and outfits – and that he has two dads!'

'I liked the energy of the opening paragraphs and the mission to save a beloved pet. Quirky and spirited main character.'

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THE LORD OF THE HAT

By Alex Atkinson

SOS NEWS

31 August 2020

SOMEONE'S GOT A BONE TO PICK WITH YOU

Police confirmed there is nothing humorous about the bone found on Serrett-on-Sea beach. It is an 'ulna', a human arm bone.

The grisly discovery was made by Gertrude O'Sullivan early on Saturday morning while walking her dog. "Junior loves nothing better than digging in the sand. I thought he'd picked up some driftwood, I got quite a shock when I realised he was gnawing on body parts."

Further investigations are being carried out and the beach will remain closed until further notice.

Chapter One

The ghost costume in the window quivered as the door to *Caring Is Sharing* slammed shut behind Torky. He hadn't meant to let the charity-shop door slam, but his hands were full and no one, not the girl flicking a duster at the shelves, or Gran, whose dodgy donation he was carrying, had offered to help.

At least he'd made it inside without being spotted by anyone he knew. Sheepishly, he put the stuffed squirrel on the counter and rang the bell.

He'd tried to tell Gran you couldn't exchange taxidermy for books, but as usual, she hadn't listened.

Gran didn't look up from the novel she was already thumbing, and the girl had disappeared behind the shelves, but the bell hadn't gone unnoticed. The stockroom curtain screeched across the metal rail to reveal the shop manager, Mrs Gertrude O'Sullivan.

She was a squat woman, never seen without an apron lashed to her waist and a pair of scissors dangling from a string at her neck. Experience had taught Torky never to haggle with her over the price of anything.

Mrs O'Sullivan's eyes narrowed. "Who brought roadkill into my shop?"

Torky looked at Gran. There was no way he was taking the blame.

Gran's whole body stiffened, and she shut *Murderous Minds*.

Torky edged away from the two women towards the 'junk' section of the shop. If he was careful, he might be able to sneak in there until the argument blew over.

"Who," said Gran, her voice low and threatening, "is referring to Little Robert as roadkill?"

"Little Robert?" whispered a voice close to Torky's ear.

Torky jumped, surprised to find duster girl next to him. She looked about the same age as him, eleven, maybe twelve at a push. She had messy black hair, several strands of which were caught beneath a yellow sticker on her T-shirt. A name was scrawled on the sticker, *Holly*.

Torky gave a pained shrug. He wasn't sure where to begin. Gran's house was stuffed with . . . well . . . stuffed dead things.

And they all had names.

"I'll have you know that squirrel is a collector's item," said Gran.

"Oh, it's a collector's item all right," said Mrs O'Sullivan. "A collector of fleas."

"How dare you!" Gran drew back her shoulders and straightened herself up to her full height, an impressive six foot one. "Little Robert is pest free."

Mrs O'Sullivan snorted. "I can see fleas jumping from here." She pointed to a black speck on the counter.

Gran bristled and Mrs O'Sullivan took up a wide-legged stance like a goalie.

This was his chance. Torky slipped between the clothes rails into the junk room.

It was a tiny, cluttered space he knew well. He visited all the Serrett-on-Sea charity shops regularly on the hunt for bargains. It had started out as a bit of fun, but since Josh left it had become an obsession. He had no talent other than for spotting a charity shop bargain. He knew that was never going to bring Mum home. But one day junk shopping might help him discover something he truly excelled in.

Okay, so it wasn't going to be the magician's cape, or the slingshot he'd found last month. It turned out he wasn't great at tricks and his aim was awful, but that wasn't the point. One of these days he'd find something he was truly good at and then life would be brilliant. Mum might hear about how talented he was and come home. She could turn her hand to anything. It was a shame he couldn't. Maybe that was why she'd left.

He sighed.

There must be something out there that he was good at. He just needed to keep looking.

The junk room was illuminated by one tall thin window and two dust-covered bulbs which cast everything in an eerie half-light whatever the time of day. It housed the flotsam and jetsam – shells, sea glass, stones, rocks, bottles and fossils – but also odd shoes, mismatched crockery, damaged toys, wonky furniture, even a one-legged plastic skeleton; all the stuff people with no imagination thought of as rubbish.

But nothing was rubbish if you could be bothered to learn what to do with it.

He breathed in the familiar smell of age and dust. Potential treasures lay all around him. The only difficulty was knowing where to start.

He turned to a bookcase piled with bric-a-brac and picked up a pale cloth-bound book. It was splattered with something that looked like dried blood.

“The victim was gutted by Viking raiders,” said Holly, swinging out from beneath a clothes rail. “On that very book.”

Torky blinked up at her. Most people took his shyness for rudeness and left him alone.

“I used to hang out in shops like this all the time with my best friend,”

explained Holly. She swallowed and then she added, “My old best friend. We’d find an object and make up a story about it.”

Torky had had a best friend too. But then Josh moved away.

He blinked. He could tell she was waiting for him to say something, but his mouth was dry and his mind blank. He wasn’t used to other kids being so friendly. What did she want from him?

“You probably think it’s stupid.” She began to scrape at the stain on the book with a black varnished fingernail.

She looked so dejected he suddenly felt determined to cheer her up. He slid a large brass ring onto his wrist. “This is a nose ring for a very angry bull.”

“Why’s it angry?”

“Because he lost his nose ring.”

Slowly, Holly’s mouth widened into a grin. She had very white teeth. “Not bad.” She tossed the book over her shoulder. It landed with a thud against an eyeless teddy bear, and she held out her hand as though he’d passed a test. “Holly Mirror,” she said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Torquil Hudson.” He shook her hand. “But everyone calls me Torky.”

“Because you talk so much?”

Everyone made that joke. It was a bad name for someone who wasn’t very talkative. Why couldn’t he be called Will, or Dave? Eager to change the subject, he looked at the duster wedged in Holly’s pocket. “Do you work here?”

Holly grimaced. “Mum’s at work, but she didn’t want me to be bored so she asked Mrs O’Sullivan if I could help out. Apparently, we’re related. I’m supposed to call her Auntie Gertie and let her order me about, but obviously, that isn’t going very well. I don’t like being told what to do.”

Torky nodded towards the raised voices coming from the other room. “That’s my gran in there with your aunt. She’s unbelievably bossy.”

“You’ve got to stand up for yourself,” said Holly. “No one else will.”

Josh had always stood up for himself, or at least he’d tried to. And if Mum was around, she’d stick up for him too. But he didn’t want to think about either of them right now because they weren’t here.

“You’re new, aren’t you?”

“Moved last week.” Holly didn’t meet his eyes. “Before you, the only

person I'd met properly was Auntie Gertie." She pulled an ugly face.

He smiled; the face pulling told him she wasn't going to mope about it, which was good because moping didn't fix anything.

Feeling more light-hearted than he had since Josh left, he lifted a pair of glasses off a metal jewellery stand and put them on. They were missing a lens and had a fake nose attached.

"What do you think?"

Holly laughed, grabbing a huge straw hat with a tatty pink bow tied around the brim. She rammed it on her head and picked up a thin candle holding it between two fingers like a cigarette. "Please address me as Lady Fontesque Montesque."

Holly reminded him a bit of Josh actually. He was always up for a laugh and Torky always felt more carefree for being around him.

Scrabbling through piles of wool and plastic jewellery, he found a box at the back of a shelf.

It was the length of an adult shoebox, but taller and almost weightless. He would have guessed it was empty if the lid hadn't been tied down with several strands of ancient looking rope.

He pulled the box into the light. It was midnight blue, so dark it was almost black, a colour he'd only seen in the night sky. It made his fingers tingle with anticipation and he held the box out.

Holly sniffed it. "I smell rotting brain," she announced, somehow managing to keep a straight face. "It's definitely the severed head of Igor the Irritable. Beheaded by Queen Ethelbum in the great battle of Serrett-on-Sea."

Torky laughed. "Why would someone put a head in a box?"

"Maybe it's cursed?" Holly wagged her eyebrows.

"Let's find out." He eased the rope off and opened the lid. The stench of fish and tangy seawater filled the room.

Holly made a retching noise almost as disgusting as the smell. But Torky wasn't going to be put off. This could be it, the item he needed to unlock his talent, to prove to Mum he was worth coming home to.

Holding his breath, he peered inside.

Sitting upright on a bed of purple velvet was a grey shaggy-looking hat with woolly horns. The material looked like the felt cushions in his room,

only hairier.

The smell disappeared and Holly let go of her nose, laughing. “Dare you to put it on.”

Although the fishy smell had gone, he wasn’t sure he wanted to put it on his head, but he also didn’t want the game with Holly to end.

Holly turned away and he hurriedly pulled the hat out of the box.

It clung to his fingers like sticky weed, but he couldn’t resist balancing it on his head to get a laugh. Friendships weren’t easy to come by. “Ta-dah!” he said, wiggling his fake nose.

Holly faced him and grinned. “Oh, it’s lovely. It’s like a Viking baby hat.”

Viking, hissed a low voice with a strange accent.

“Who said that?” said Torky, spinning around.

“Er, me?” said Holly, raising both eyebrows.

“Sorry,” said Torky, shaking his head.

Greetings! boomed the disembodied voice.

Torky leapt backwards, crashing into the one-legged plastic skeleton. The skull lurched forwards and he squealed as the rest of the skeleton followed, burying him and the hat like a sacrifice in a bony game of Jenga.

“If your mismanaged goods have injured my grandson . . .” Gran cried, striding into the junk room.

Torky sat up. Was Gran about to reveal she cared?

“I’ll sue you!” she finished.

Torky shut his eyes and sank back down amongst the bones until a small hand grasped his arm.

“Are you okay?” said a voice.

He opened his eyes to find Holly digging him out. Suddenly things didn’t seem so bad. “I think so.”

“What happened?”

“I’m not sure,” said Torky, looking around for the hat.

“It’s not about him!” hissed Mrs O’Sullivan. “Look at the mess. Look at my skeleton. Look at this.” She picked up one of the skeleton’s plastic arms and hooked the hat off the floor. “I’ve no idea what it is, but I doubt it started life looking like this.”

There was a hole in the top of the hat and one horn sagged to the left, but otherwise it looked the same as it had in the box. Torky opened his

mouth to tell Mrs O’Sullivan, but before he could she took a black bin bag from her apron and tossed the hat into it.

“Ruined!” growled Mrs O’Sullivan.

If it hadn’t been for him the hat would still be in its box on the shelf. Even a knitted Viking hat with holes in it had value and potential.

And then there was that voice . . .

“I’ll take it,” he said.

Mrs O’Sullivan glared at him.

“I can pay,” he said.

“He is not paying for that!” snapped Gran.

Mrs O’Sullivan thrust the bin bag at him. “Take it and leave. Both of you,” she said, glaring at Gran.

Torky picked his way towards the door over a sea of plastic bones, Gran striding ahead as usual.

“Bargain,” whispered Holly, pointing to the bag.

He couldn’t tell if she was joking or not.

“Did you . . . did you hear anything, back there . . . ?”

“Like you crashing into a skeleton?” said Holly.

He shook his head. “Never mind.” He didn’t want to ruin a potential new friendship by mentioning imaginary voices. He threw the bag over his shoulder. “I guess I’ll see you around?”

“Hang on.” Holly dived back into the junk room, reappearing with the hatbox. “It should come with the hat, don’t you think?”

He thanked her and added the box to the bag. It was one the nicest things anyone had done for him in ages. Now was the moment to ask if she wanted to hang out. Why was his heart hammering so loudly? “Look, do you want to . . . ?”

“Carry these,” said Gran, storming towards him, *Murderous Minds* and Little Robert clasped to her chest. Without asking, she opened the bin bag and dropped the items inside. “You can talk to your girlfriend another time.”

“She’s not my . . .”

“Let’s go. My bunions are killing me.”

Blushing furiously and frustrated he hadn’t got to exchange numbers with Holly, he followed Gran outside. She was ranting about how she didn’t expect charity to bite her on the bottom. Only she didn’t use the

word bottom, she said something much ruder.

Chapter Two

Serrett-on-Sea was bathed in bright sunshine. Everywhere he looked people were smiling. But trailing after Gran, bin bag over one shoulder, Torky felt the sun's rays like an unwanted spotlight.

Gran had called Holly his 'girlfriend'. Every time he thought about it his cheeks burned hotter. Why couldn't it be dark and rainy? Like his crushed soul . . .

As though his prayers had been answered, the sun disappeared abruptly. He looked up.

An ocean of dark and menacing clouds had gathered, and they'd brought company in the form of hundreds of circling crows. Other people were noticing, stopping mid-stride in the middle of the street to stare. A little boy in yellow shorts began to cry.

"A murder," said Gran, pointing knowingly with a crooked finger.

"A *what?*" said Torky, staring up at the sky full of black birds.

"A murder is the name for a group of crows," she said. "They gather in large numbers around sites where animals or people are expected to die. I do hope they're here for Mrs O'Sullivan." A slow grin spread across Gran's face as two jet-black feathers floated down like a warning.

He shivered at the thought of death-heralding crows, a rumble of thunder adding to his unease. The sound was so low it made his ribcage vibrate. The birds screamed and wheeled away and then the rain began.

Torky darted under the awning of Greedy's Takeaway, the rain pummelling the canvas and filling the gaps between the cobblestones with rivers of water. In seconds, his trainers were soaked.

"The perfect spot to pick up dinner." Gran dived inside Greedy's.

The smell of fried food reached Torky's nose. His stomach grumbled. He'd love a chicken parmo and chips, but Gran was more likely to return with mushy peas.

He put the bag down on the rickety table which held the wooden forks and napkins. The rain had stopped as suddenly as it had begun, the sun blazing down again, but he didn't have time to think about it because a howl of laughter froze him to the spot. He didn't need to

see the person to identify the laugh. It belonged to Seth Sharpe. It had haunted him through primary school and now it was following him to SoS Secondary. Only now he didn't have Josh to back him up.

"Told you I'd win!" said Seth, in his high, nasal voice. "Can you believe Jonny tried to take me on? I'm the volleyball champion. The king of balls!"

Dominic, Seth's ever-present sidekick, cackled. It was sudden and fake sounding, like a noise machine.

With a sinking feeling in his stomach, Torky turned around, wishing he'd worn a hoodie so he could hide his face.

"Is that Dorky?" Seth's voice was unnervingly close.

"Hi," he said, trying to block the view of the table.

Seth peered past him, sneering at the bin bag. "Been shopping?"

He was trying to think of a witty response when Greedy's door swung open, and Gran emerged carrying three paper bags. He wondered if he could get away with pretending not to know her, but then she spoke. "Come on, Torky. We haven't got time for you to stand around talking to your friends. Dinner will get cold."

He kept his eyes on the floor as Seth and Dominic slunk into Greedy's, sniggering.

If grandparenting was all about creating the maximum cringe factor, Gran was excelling.

"Okay?" She rifled through one of the bags and popped a chip in her mouth.

"Fine," sighed Torky, picking up the bin bag, trying to ignore the sound of a finger writing on glass. The letters were the wrong way round, but he could still read the word Seth had drawn into the condensation,

Loser.

Back at the car park, a small crowd had gathered to stare at the crime scene on the beach. The discovery of the arm bone had made the evening news, but right now there didn't appear to be much to see and Torky just wanted to get home. He pushed past several people to reach Gran's Ford Fiesta, which was parked in the middle of the pavement. The car had a ticket tucked under one wiper. Gran tore it off and shoved it in her bag, shouting to Torky to put everything in the boot.

He had seconds to clamber in before Gran pulled out of the car park, blaring the horn.

Hands sticky with fear, Torky clutched his seat and prayed for light traffic, only releasing his grip as they pulled up outside the crumbling Old Rectory.

“Home sweet home,” announced Gran.

There wasn’t much that was ‘sweet’ about it, but he was glad the journey had ended.

He emptied the boot and collected the food from where Gran had unceremoniously dumped it on the back seat. His stomach rumbled at the smell of chips.

Mr Finiky was waiting for them at the front door. He was Gran’s lodger. A retired schoolteacher who didn’t seem to like children. He lived in the first floor flat and grew peppery-smelling geraniums along the hallway.

“I’ll take those,” said Finiky, lifting the greasy food bags from Torky’s arms before Torky could stop him.

“Don’t gobble all the chips, Finiky!” yelled Gran.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Joyce,” said Finiky.

Gran grabbed a pile of parking tickets from the footwell of the car and shoved them in the recycling bin. A typical Gran way of dealing with problems: throw them away.

Torky trudged into the house and put the bag on the old church bench in the hallway. He saw Finiky running off towards the kitchen with the chips and was just about to follow him when Gran slammed a large can of Pest Kapow down beside him. “I don’t believe that old biddy in the shop saw a flea, but you can never be sure.”

If he argued, he might never get any chips.

“Fine,” he said.

After five minutes of spraying Little Robert, Torky’s eyes were watering and his breathing raspy. He left the can and the contents of the bag and went in search of supper, smelling of death and disinfectant.

A plate of soggy-looking chips and a pot of mushy peas were waiting for him on the kitchen table.

“Can I take this upstairs?”

Mr Finiky gave Torky a disapproving look, but Gran grunted, “Yes,” through a mouthful of battered haddock.

Fifty pairs of glass eyes watched Torky climb the stairs to his room carrying his food and the bin bag, minus Little Robert. His great-great uncle Horace had discovered taxidermy, aged ten, and stuffed anything that had recently stopped moving. From family pets like cats and dogs, to wildlife such as foxes, birds of prey, squirrels, even rats. Horace hadn't killed anything – he loved animals – but if it died and he found it before rot set in, it was fair game.

Torky had grown used to the creatures' bared teeth and unblinking eyes – Mum's job on a cruise ship, and her complicated love life meant he was often left with Gran for months at a time – but Jinx, his pet rabbit, had not. A nervous beast at the best of times, Jinx squealed with terror every time he put a paw in the hallway.

Entering his draughty bedroom, Torky threw the bag on the floor and put down his dinner. Jinx poked his head out of his hutch, eyeing the bin bag, whiskers quivering, nose twitching as though scenting danger.

Torky got Jinx a carrot from the stash in his bedside drawer and sat down to eat. The pot of mushy peas remained unopened.

When he'd finished, Jinx was still staring at the bag and hadn't touched his carrot.

"It's only a hat and a box." Torky tipped them onto the carpet. Jinx squeaked and shot into a pile of hay.

Torky laughed, dropped the hat on his head and stood up to face the mirror.

Immediately the sagging horn sat upright and the hole in the crown began to knit back together. Torky squealed as the hat band tightened, gripping his forehead, a feeling like rippling spider legs drumming a circuit around his hairline.

Scalp puckering with revulsion, he grabbed at the hat, but the wool pricked his fingertips as though filled with tiny barbs. He whimpered and let go, scrambling for the nail scissors on the chest of drawers, his breathing fast and shallow. If he couldn't lift it off, he'd cut it off.

Fingertips only inches from the scissors, the prickling shot inwards. It darted into his brain, paralysing his hands. He gasped like a fish out of water, his whole body shaking with the effort of trying to lift his own arm, his brain buzzing with unwanted input.

It was as though he'd been plugged into a giant battery. He could feel different areas of his mind, areas he'd never noticed before, firing up.

If his head were a light bulb, it would be ablaze.

By Odin's beard, I have improved your look, a female voice with a heavy accent echoed through his head.

Goosebumps flared along Torky's arms. "Who said that?"

Listen closer.

Shaking, Torky scanned the room behind him in the mirror, his eyes focusing on the dark corner next to the wardrobe.

Closer.

Torky's gaze returned to his reflection, his eyes travelling upwards until they reached the grey horned hat perched amongst his wild red hair like a cuckoo in a nest.

Hail!

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THE LORD OF THE HAT by Alex Atkinson

SYNOPSIS

When eleven-year-old Torky's junk collecting leads him to a magical hat, his dream of being special starts to come true. The hat grants him agility, strength and speed, all of which transform him into the school's sporting hero. It's just a shame the hat is also possessed by a killer Viking zombie. Can Torky fight off the cravings for flesh and destruction or is he destined to ravage his hometown?

BIOGRAPHY

Alex writes funny books featuring spooky monsters. She is a full-time child wrangler and dog flunky and occasional freelance writer. She lives in Hertfordshire, but dreams of deserted seaside towns, old houses, ghosts and zombies.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Strong sense of pathos with Torky's mum and Josh having left. I wanted to give him a massive cuddle! Well written without being mawkish. Nice easy relationship between Holly and Torky – two lonely kids recognising it in one another.'

'A good beginning – you've hooked me! I love the idea of a Viking zombie, and Torky having cravings for flesh and destruction. I'd like to read on.'

'Aha, this is good! Immediate and warm writing with appealing characters – I really enjoyed the opening scene with the shop, lovely humour!'

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WHEN THE HATE GETS IN

By Gerry Rush

I never knew you could actually see a heart break. Just one of those things people say.

Turns out it's not . . . and you can. Beyond painful to watch, but I can't keep away.

I play the video again.

It's turning dark. The camera scans the square, picking her up at the far side. Hazy at first – then in focus. The girl, all alone, waiting under the streetlamp like he told her to.

There's excitement on her face, but she's nervous. She checks her hair – a mousy brownish mess, tortured into a failed French plait. Her hands fuss around. Guess it had seemed a good idea, but now she's not sure. Same with the skirt. She looks down, frowning, and tugs at the hem.

She was early, and that was fine. But now he's late and she's stressing – hope draining away as the minutes pass. She starts pacing. Left, right, forward, back . . . but always staying under the light.

Her phone goes and the camera zooms in.

Hey Porky Ani . . . I'm so glad you came – told them you were stupid as well as ugly. You've been pulled little piggy – and I win the bet.

#bigbadwolf

Lit by the blue-white phone light, I see it all on her face. Confusion. Disbelief. And finally, a horrified understanding.

That's where it happens.

The first crack.

There's hardly time for her to blink before the second message arrives.

She holds the phone away. Arm stretched out like she can stop it. But she can't . . . she has to look.

Lift up your snout and smile for the camera – this is too good not to share. Check yourself out on [PulledPork.com](#) #bigbadwolf

She goes rigid.

I'm trying to read her face. To match it to the breath-stealing rush of betrayal that forces the crack wide open. Her hands press hard against her chest.

And the heart breaks.

The tearing stab of pain makes her move, head snapping side to side, rapidly scanning the street. Searching for the boy with the camera. Can't see him. Can't hardly see anything now, cos her eyes are streaming. She runs from the light. Head down, one hand covering her face, heavy legs pumping hard as she disappears into the shadows.

I play the last shot again. Watching the girl as she runs.

It's easier to think of myself as the girl. I can pretend like it's her pain, not mine. It sort of works – but not enough. When I log off it doesn't go away – it never goes away. But it's changing each time I watch.

I never knew you could actually see the hate in someone's eyes. Just something people say. But when I look in the mirror . . .

Turns out it's not . . . and you can.

Chapter One

Footsteps on the landing.

I shove my laptop under the duvet and fake sleep. Just in time. The door bangs open. Silence for like two seconds, then a sharp kick on the end of my bed. If I don't move he might just go away.

But he doesn't. Of course he doesn't. He's messing around on the floor. Something hard hits the pillow right next to my face.

'Stop pretending or the next'll be right between your eyes.'

I shout from under the covers, 'Go away, all right? Just go.'

'No.'

Brothers are such jerks – at least mine is. 'You'd better. If I get up I'll stuff whatever you threw so far down your throat that—'

'Mum says to empty the upstairs bins. NOW!'

'You do it. You're standing there breathing, wasting valuable oxygen.'

‘It’s your job. I’ve done the recycling stuff.’

I mutter a string of amazingly creative swears under my breath. I’d say them out loud, but he’d repeat them to Mum, just for the fun of it. Then she’d go off on one, and an already lousy day would explode into Armageddon.

‘I’ll do it when I’m ready, okay?’

‘Mum said now. She—’

‘Get out!’ I snatch up the trainer he’s thrown at my head and fling it back, hitting the mirror on the wardrobe.

‘Lousy shot!’ He slams the door closed behind him.

People don’t believe it when they find out we’re twins. It’s cos we’re not identical – we’re the other kind. Mum tells people we’re fraternal. I prefer the proper term – dizygotic. It sounds more interesting.

We’re not remotely alike. Except for the eyes – both the same dark brown with flecks of hazel. Apart from that he got all the good bits. Hair – dark like Dad’s, straight and silky like Mum’s. Tall and slim, he’s built like a racehorse. Guess that makes me a donkey, cos I got the leftovers.

On one level, if I was like held up against a wall with a gun to my head, I’d have to say I love my brother. I’d miss him if he wasn’t here, like the way you’d miss a painful tooth if you’d had it removed. There’d be an odd sort of gap.

This means that on an ordinary, everyday level, I’m totally allowed to hate him.

Mum’s messaged me twice from downstairs. Having decided I take more notice of my phone than I do of her in person, she sends me snidey little passive-aggressive messages. The last one is typical.

If I don’t see you dressed and down here before lunch I’ll assume
you’re dead.

Burial or cremation? Any preferences?

I didn’t reply, which is why she sent Ben in. Her special weapon of mass irritation.

I fight the urge to watch the clip again. It’s not like I don’t know it by heart.

I can quote both texts word for word. Only have to close my eyes to see the images.

I didn't get it at first. I can see that on my face. Total confusion. Then it sinks in, and the horror sweeps across it. Of course I'd heard of pull a pig pranks, but I never thought . . . I . . .

Leaning back into the pillow, I press the palms of my hands hard against my forehead. Only stopping when it really hurts.

Truth is, I never thought of myself as ugly.

Ordinary, I guess, or quirky maybe – even plain at a push. Mum says I have an interesting face, and that's way better than pretty. Which it isn't, obviously.

But not ugly. Not actually that. And that's exactly what pulling a pig means.

A private humiliation would have been bad enough. But he was watching, filming the whole thing. And then he posted the video on that vile *Pulled Pork* website.

It shouldn't be allowed.

I know if I told Mum she'd find a way to get my pictures taken down, but I can't. I don't want anyone to know that I was stupid enough to be taken in by someone I'd met online. It's like the worst crapping cliché ever.

I must've thought about Mum three times, cos I've conjured her into my room.

'Do I have to keep asking you to do the upstairs bins?'

I snap right back. 'Do I have to keep asking you to knock and not just walk in? I'm sixteen not six.'

'Then start acting like it. Honestly, Ani, you've hardly been outside this room for a week. What's going on with you?' She pauses and her tone shifts. 'Is anything wrong, sweetheart?'

Like I'm gonna tell her. 'No, I'm fine.'

She sits on the end of the bed. 'You're not behaving like you are. Is this still about the move? I know it's been tough for you settling into a new school just before the end of term and all, but it couldn't be helped. My job wouldn't wait. You know that.'

'It's not that, Mum.' I was fine with the move. I hated my last school.

'Well what then? Are you missing your dad? You know he . . .'

'No. It's nothing to do with Dad. Just leave it, okay.'

She hates being interrupted and gets all huffy. 'Right, well – since you'll

only tell me what it isn't and not what it is, I'm done. I've had enough of this moping around your room.' She throws a plastic bag at me. 'Get those bins emptied.'

'Please get off my back, Mum.'

'I'll get off your back when you get off your arse and get your jobs done.' She swings out, slamming the door behind her.

Perfect! It's like all we do lately. She pokes . . . I poke back and one of us shouts first – doesn't matter who – and it always ends with a door banging. I'm amazed mine hasn't fallen off of its hinges the hammering it takes.

I roll down the bed, clutching the bin bag. It will literally take about three minutes. I could have done it to start with and avoided the hassle. That would've been way too sensible.

As I swing my feet out there's a dull thud. My copy of *Other Dawns, Tash's Choice* hits the floor. I rescue it from under the pile of covers. It's a first edition. Possibly my most treasured possession – the one where Princess Tash is the main character, like she should always be. Like she is in all my fanfic.

Tash wouldn't stand back and let some stupid guy treat her like shit, no matter who he was. She would make him pay so hard.

I imagine it. My mind storms with ideas. I feel the shape of the story and . . .

'Ani!' Mum's shriek shreds my thoughts. I make a quick note on my writing pad. Bins first, then story.

Tash's Revenge. It will be swift, vicious – and fatal.

And this?' Princess Tash's hand rested lightly on a small dark green earthenware cask. It stood apart from the others, black ribbon laced tight around it. A thick black seal marked it as poison.

'Careful, Princess.' Zekira lifted her hand as if she would move the Princess's away, but of course she did not touch her. That was not allowed. 'If the cask were to break . . . It is the rarest of potions. Drembane – the death sleep.'

The Princess lifted it down from the shelf, cradling it in the palm of her hand. 'Is it true that once taken there is no undoing its effects?'

Zekira bowed her head as if in humility, but in truth scarce daring to

look, as the princess rolled the priceless cask from hand to hand like a child with a toy. ‘Yes, Lady. The victim is as dead to all who look on them. All movements cease, and yet—’

‘And yet the heart beats unheard, and the senses remain strong and vital. This is true?’

Zekira nodded.

‘If such a person were attacked?’

‘They would feel every dagger point, every slash or blow. Their mind would scream with the pain, but their body would not so much as flinch. Not a whisper of their agony would reach a living soul.’

Zekira had been flattered when the Princess had asked to look round her workshop, had willingly shown her the healing medicines. But the dark turn of the conversation made her uneasy.

‘It is late, Princess,’ she ventured. ‘Forgive me, but I have salves to deliver to your aunt.’

‘Of course.’ Princess Tash smiled. ‘Do not let me keep you from your tasks. I will sit a while before your fire. The smell of the herbs is soothing to me.’

Zekira parcelled up her medicines, bowed deeply and left the Princess quietly staring into the flames. As she rushed along the corridor she could not shake the feeling that it was a mistake to leave her there alone.

The Princess steadied her horse and gazed down into the valley. The moon was high, and as the clouds shifted away, the town below was bathed in a soft silver glow. She should not be out here, alone in the night, but she needed space and silence to think. To plan.

Her inner eye saw another valley. Villages scattered along it, hugging the course of the river. At the far end, where the ground rose to the high hills behind, Prince Aaroth’s hall, stark and strong.

He had spoken of it to her. Had charmed her with his talk of the beauty of its setting – the lush, rich valley with dense woods leading up to the high peaks where eagles soared. She had seen it so clearly. Had seen herself riding through the trees. Imagined the excitement of the chase and the pleasure of his company as they rode side by side.

Her sharp anguished cry rang out, echoing across the valley. The horse

skittered nervously. It took Princess Tash a moment to recover herself. It was the last time. She had scattered her pain and regret into the dark. No more of that.

Now was the time for vengeance.

He had dared to pretend that he loved her. Had sent her notes, the sweetest of which had kindled her heart, already warm with affection, into a fire. And she had loved him in return.

But nothing had been true – not a word – not a gesture. He had shamed and humiliated her. For that he must pay – slowly, in agony and torment.

And only finally with his life.

‘Hey, Ani.’

‘What? God! Your timing stinks, you know that?’

For a second Ben looks sorry – then not. He shrugs and grins. ‘You writing another piece?’

‘None of yours, all right. What do you want?’

‘Can you lend me a tenner?’

I pick up my phone. ‘Sure. Hang on a minute while I sell a kidney.’

‘Funny, yeah. No, seriously though, I’m meeting my mates at the mall. I want to buy Priya a shake, treat her, you know. But I’m broke.’

‘When are you not? What mates anyway?’

‘How d’you mean?’

‘You left all your mates back in Leeds.’

He looks at me like I’m just too weird to live. ‘My new mates from school, and some girls we’ve been gaming with online.’

‘We’ve only been here a few weeks and you’ve got new mates already?’ Stupid question. Of course he does. It’s easy for him.

He sighs, shaking his head like he’s sorry for me. ‘So would you if you stopped living in *Other Dawns* and got into the real world now and then.’ He pauses. ‘I guess you can tag along if you like.’

I can just imagine his face if I said okay. I’m tempted to try just to watch him sweat, but I want to get on with my story. I reach for my wallet and pull out a fiver.

‘It’s all I’ve got left from what Dad gave me,’ I lie easily. Can’t let him

know I've got more. 'You have to pay me back, okay?'

'Thanks.' He's grinning. 'Didn't really expect a tenner. Just thought I'd try. Gonna do the same ask on Mum. You never know your luck, right?'

I have to smile. 'Have fun with your playmates. Don't do anything I wouldn't.'

He pauses by the door. 'That's your problem though isn't it. You don't actually do anything, Ani.'

'Out! Or I'll take my money back.'

He disappears, which is good, cos a flash of angry shame has me shaking and stupidly trying not to cry.

Because I did . . .

I did do something, just for once.

I did go out. I took a chance. Look where that got me. An ugly pig – set up and shot down. Deliberately, maliciously . . .

I throw a pillow against the wall. I have to stop doing this.

Turning my mind back to my laptop I finish the story.

Narrowing my thoughts to the power and pleasure of the perfectly violent revenge calms me down.

The castle was said to be impenetrable. Indeed, she herself had heard him boast that an army of thousands could not gain entry. But Lady Yuna, Aaroth's cousin, standing by her side, had laughed softly at these words.

'When we were young,' she had whispered, 'and my family visited the castle, Aaroth and my brother would sneak out at night down a maze of passages cut through the stone below the dungeons. An ancient, secret way. It was dark, dirty, and dangerous. Perfect for boys in search of adventure.'

'Where does it lead?' she had asked.

'It came out in a cave, hidden behind trees in the forest behind the rear keep. It was a great adventure, but it seems now he has forgot.'

She smiled, and Princess Tash had laughed at the thought of the two noble boys, sneaking through the depths of the castle like midden rats.

She was not laughing now. She passed her hand over her saddlebag. Inside, in a velvet pouch, the tiny vial nestled safely inside a skein of wool. Though Lady Yuna did not know it, her words had handed Tash the key to the castle.

*She could enter his stronghold in secret and poison his wine.
Prince Aaroth would lie at her feet, his frozen eyes begging for mercy.
The mercy of a swift death. Dagger in hand, she would deny him this
last unspoken request. He deserved no such easy release.
It was a good plan. And when the time was right . . .
Smiling, she turned her horse and headed back.*

I log onto the fan site, username – TashAni – read through one last time and hit post.

Princess Tash rides out to do what I wish I could.

It's a small satisfaction. But I'll take it.

Chapter Two

The house is quiet. Ben's off with his friends and Mum's in work. I know she's been stressed by the move, and the new job, and all the mess between her and Dad. But even with all that, she's found time to leave a note on the fridge directing me to a salad she's made for my lunch.

This is all part of her plan to make me lose weight. She says it's not. That my weight's not the issue. It's all about my health. I have considered this. It might be true – but it doesn't feel it.

Mum's super skinny. She runs off a kind of nervous energy, some part of her's always moving. Ben's the same. It doesn't matter what they eat, their bodies just use it up and burn it off. Totally unfair.

I unwrap the salad.

Here they all are – red tomatoes, green peppers, purple beetroot – all the colours, all the vitamins. Pretty as a picture. So I take one and send it to her.

Thanks Mum

Axx

I eat as much boredom as I can stand, wrap the rest in kitchen paper and stuff it down to the bottom of the bin, pulling wrappers and stuff back over the top so she won't see, and coating my fingers in something I don't even want to know about.

Drying my hands on the tea towel, I scour the cupboards.

Mum stopped buying sweet treats and snacks when Dad left. They were

Dad's thing – his and mine. Crisps, chocolate, and old movies on Saturday afternoons. It drove her crazy. She said he was feeding my addiction to junk food. He said she was projecting her own fat fears onto me. She'd ranted about how he'd have felt differently if his mother had died young like hers had – diabetes – heart problems . . . I don't remember Mum's mum, but I've seen photos, and she was a big woman.

Dad told her I wasn't fat and to give me a break, which just made her madder than ever. Now he's gone and she's in total control. The multipacks of crisps are just a tasty memory.

I pull a few packets and tins from the back of the cupboard.

Oh – My – Actual – God!

For a sec it's like I'm making up another fantasy. But I'm not. Shoved right in the back corner, hiding away in the dark, is a jar of jam. Scratch that. This is not any old jam. It's Nana Rouse's home-made strawberry jam. How did it survive Mum's health purge?

I have this thought that maybe she deliberately kept it . . . as a reminder . . . a memory maybe? Totally stupid. She never liked Dad's mum, and Nana never liked her right back. They didn't exactly fight, but the temperature always dropped below zero when they were in the same room.

The jar has Nana's label on it. She'd bought them online cos they had a picture of a smiling, grey-haired old woman in a pinnie, like a cartoon grandma. It was her joke. Nana was loud – all clashing colours and charity shop hats. Dad smiled and said she was eccentric. Mum pulled a face and said, 'Crazy, more like.' On the day that she died Dad cried and cried and so did I, sitting on his lap like a toddler, soaking the front of his shirt.

I check the date on the label. This was made just weeks before she died. It seems almost wrong to open it. But under the date, in her spiky, spidery writing, is one word. 'Enjoy.'

Can't say no to that.

I stick two pieces of bread in the toaster and make a coffee while I wait for them to pop. Because she's all about the natural, Mum buys the most amazing organic butter. The salty taste will be perfect mixed with Nana's thick, sweet jam.

Pushing the jar back into its hiding place, I rinse off the knife and clear

away any crumbs. Mum goes through the kitchen like a forensic scientist when she gets home, so I've learned to be like the smartest murderer ever – cleaning the scene of crime like I was never there.

In my room I rearrange my pillows and settle back on my bed, holding the plate under my chin to catch any spills.

The first bite is like a Nana hug.

Opening my laptop to read any comments, I realise I'm dreading – or maybe hoping – that there might be a comment from James.

I'm not even sure why. So he would see how much I hate him? Or how much pain I wish I could cause him? Of course there's nothing and I'm not disappointed exactly, just kind of sad glad.

What there is, is the usual stuff. Arguments about my take on Tash and how she would or wouldn't behave, and the inevitable brain-squeezing debates about accuracy.

Did you really mean saddlebags? Because all the evidence suggests

Tash rides bareback and carries her . . .

. . . blah, blah, blah . . .

I swallow the last mouthful of jam-smothered toast and wipe the sticky leftover from the corner of my mouth, licking my fingers so as not to miss the tiniest bit.

Scrolling quickly through the rest of the reviews and comments, I reply briefly to some of my regulars. I'm liking the nice comments and ignoring the rest when a new one pops up. It's quite long and I start to skim read, but there's something . . .

I stop and go back.

This is different. I check her username. RoseDawn. Don't think I've seen her before. She cuts straight to it. Of course Tash would do this. To be disrespected, humiliated, set up – who wouldn't want revenge in the worst possible way.

She touches a nerve. Like she was inside my head while I was writing.

I've never read anything that really shows what it feels like to be betrayed like this does . . . Recommended reading for anyone who's been through it.

I want to reply and spend ages trying to get just the right words but finally settle for:

True understanding is a rare thing. Thank you.

I've posted before I realise how pretentious and/or stupid it makes me sound.

Too late – too bad – forget it.

It's not as if I'm ever gonna meet her or anything.

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WHEN THE HATE GETS IN by Gerry Rush

SYNOPSIS

When you get dumped you want to cry

When you're dumped by text you want to die

When your pain has been filmed, and posted online . . .

You want revenge

And Ani's not alone. There's Georgie and Ella – two other victims of the same sick 'pull a pig' joker. In Ani's fantasy fanfic world, revenge is quick and easy and sweet. But in reality it is messy and dangerous . . . and it could get someone killed.

BIOGRAPHY

Born and raised in Yorkshire, now living in the south, Gerry's had a lot of different jobs – teacher, waitress, fitness instructor, lecturer, croupier, charity manager – to name a few. She has an MA in Creative Writing and writes YA for the teenage self who still lives in her head.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A strong concept, which any girl would identify with (ouch, the *Pulled Pork* website?! Revenge?!) and enjoy. And the writing is strong too – punchy, vivacious, a touch of voice – and some variety of structure which gives the narrative an extra dash of originality.'

'The little synopsis, with its smart, perfect opening, is the icing on this little cake. The stakes are clear, the hook is evident; danger is not far away. It immediately makes me want to read further . . .'

'Heartbreaking opening scene. Such cruelty. Clever mix of stories with fan fic elements. Nice! Good dialogue and believable relationships between the twin and mother.'

Contact: gerry.l.rush@gmail.com

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ZAIN SHARIF AND THE HEART OF SOBEK

By Tom Mann

Prologue

*Somewhere off the coast of Alexandria, Egypt
August 1950*

The little boat lurched as Abdul hauled the boy out of the sea. It looked like he had been in the water for a long time. Blue-grey skin, cracked lips, hair caked in blood.

‘What are you doing?’ hissed Karim, tugging his straggly beard. ‘We can’t get involved in this!’

The dead weight of the boy was threatening to pull Abdul overboard. ‘I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling pretty involved already!’

‘Listen. We were never here. We just leave him where we found him and forget this ever happened.’

‘Are you mad? We can’t leave him out here to be eaten by sharks. Grab his legs will you?’

‘He’s dead already, what difference does it make?’

Abdul glared at his friend. Sweat stung his eyes despite the cool night.

Karim’s face scrunched up like a rotten apple. He groaned and got down on his knees.

Together the two men lifted the boy out of the water and laid him next to the bucket of crabs in the middle of the boat.

‘Now what?’ said Karim.

Abdul wiped his face with the loose end of his turban. ‘We go to the police.’

‘Oh, great idea, Abdul . . . erm, excuse me officer, we were out crabbing

last night in a stolen boat and just stumbled across the body of some kid! How do you think that's going to go down?"

Abdul clasped his hands together and tears leaked from his eyes. "Why does this always happen? One minute I'm helping you earn a quick *piastre*, the next I'm an accessory to murder!"

"This isn't my fault," said Karim. "You're the one who found him."

"I never would have found him if you hadn't persuaded me . . . whoa! What are you doing?"

Karim had his hand in one of the boy's pockets. "Just seeing if he has any identification."

"He's a little boy," said Abdul, wiping snot from the end of his long nose. "I doubt he's carrying a business card!"

Karim tried the other pocket. "*Meh*, nothing." He sat back on his heels and the boat rocked under his weight. The boy's hand flopped to the side and – *thunk* – something solid rolled onto the bottom of the boat.

Karim pounced.

He held up the object before his eyes and his face was bathed in green light.

Abdul's mouth fell open.

In Karim's hand was a fist-sized nugget of grey rock with three green spires of emerald sticking out of the top.

Abdul moved closer and gazed into the gleaming jewel, its beauty singing to him like a siren. Karim grinned. His missing front tooth looked more villainous than usual in the green glow from the rock.

"Is that writing?" said Abdul, reaching out to touch it.

Karim snatched the stone away like a dog defending his bone.

Abdul put his hands up and moved back, a little frightened by his friend's reaction. "Okay, okay."

Karim held the rock out of Abdul's reach, twisting it this way and that in the silvery moonlight.

Sure enough, strange symbols shimmered in and out of sight on its grey surface, like tiny stained-glass windows. Abdul could see a squiggly sign that looked like water, a pair of legs without a body, and a crocodile with wide open jaws. The next symbol seemed to have been cut in half, as if a chunk of the rock had broken off.

‘You know what this means, don’t you?’ said Karim.

‘Since when can you read hieroglyphic?’

‘Not the writing, camel brain! This must be worth a fortune! We’re rich, my friend!’

Karim laughed in a voice rather too high pitched for a man his size, but he soon stopped when the boy’s eyes snapped open and he coughed up a good half gallon of sea water.

The boy stared into Karim’s face, sucking air into his lungs so desperately that his whole body jerked like a fish out of water.

Karim screamed and jumped backwards. The boat wobbled. Abdul leapt up to help his friend but made things worse. Karim flailed his arms, wild-eyed, but couldn’t stop himself falling. He tossed the emerald to Abdul, then toppled overboard with a mighty splash.

The emerald soared through the air in slow motion.

Abdul put out his hands – lost his balance – fumbled the catch.

The emerald landed with a *plop* and a *crunch*.

Abdul’s eyes darted back and forth between the bucket of crabs, the boy and the dark patch of sea where Karim had gone under. His heart was pounding. The boy meanwhile took three rattling breaths and fell unconscious again.

The next three seconds felt like three hours.

When Karim’s head burst into view, he was already drifting away from the tiny boat.

‘Help! Help!’ he cried.

Abdul threw a rope and dragged his friend back on board like a whaler landing his catch. Karim coughed and wheezed, while Abdul put two fingers against the boy’s neck.

‘His pulse is weak, but he’s still alive.’

‘What the devil is a little boy doing out here with a whacking great—’ The whites of Karim’s eyes flared. ‘The emerald! What have you done with the emerald?’

Abdul fell backwards as his friend advanced on him. He couldn’t speak, but his eyes flicked towards the bucket in the middle of the boat. Karim howled like a man possessed. He thrust his arm in among the crabs and emerged with a wriggling handful of blue legs and pincers. He threw

them over the side and plunged back in, stirring up the bucket like his life depended on it.

His hand appeared again, this time gripping the emerald. He cackled. There were crabs dangling from his fingers and blood trickling down his wrist, but he didn't seem to care.

'I told you I had a bad feeling about this!' said Abdul.

Karim laughed. 'You won't be saying that when you get your share of the booty.'

Abdul looked at the boy. 'What are we going to do with him? We can't leave him here. You're as crooked as the bent pyramid, Karim, but you're not a killer.'

Karim kicked the oars towards Abdul. 'Stop worrying and row, my friend. I know exactly what to do with the boy.'

Chapter One

Saint Cuthbert's Foundling Hospital

I woke up with a skull-thumping pain in my head. Everything hurt. My mouth was so dry I couldn't swallow. 'Water,' I tried to say, but the word evaporated in my throat. The blanket was tucked tight under the mattress, holding me down, drowning me. I yanked it back and tried to sit.

Where am I?

The sun was so bright I could barely open my eyes. Blinding white tiles everywhere. I squinted at the bedside table – reached out – knocked something. It smashed on the floor.

I needed to move. Do something. Anything.

I slid off the bed.

Crunch.

Sudden agony shooting up my leg. Red flowers blooming on the wet floor.

It made me retch.

My knees buckled and I went down hard on all fours.

My stomach was empty, but it kept on heaving. Bitter acid burned the back of my throat. Animal noises came from deep inside me – noises I didn't even know I could make. Strings of drool were swinging from my chin.

Then there were voices. Hands under my armpits, hoisting me back onto the bed. Strong hands, holding me down.

'Sois calme. S'allonger.'

I couldn't get enough air into my lungs.

'What's . . . happening?'

I tried to struggle but there was no fight left in me. I flopped back on the bed. A black ring around the brightness, closing in.

The voices were still speaking. Distant now. Muffled like I was underwater.

I floated in and out of dreams.

There were crocodiles and a burning boat. An explosion scorched my eyes. Or was it just the sun shining red-hot through my eyelids?

I caught glimpses of minarets peeping over the windowsill. The domes of a mosque shimmering under the golden sun – now turning into huge green waves on the sea.

I was trying to stay afloat in the rolling water – something cold and hard and heavy in my hand. My hair whipped my face as I spun left and then right.

Mum! Dad!

Sweaty sheets clung to me like seaweed.

The chant of the *muezzin* echoed across the rooftops, calling me to prayer. How many times did I hear it? How long had I been lying in that bed?

A man's voice on the wind – *Protect the heart!*

The heart? What heart?

More voices.

Different. Closer now.

Two women speaking in French – talking about me:

'Was he carrying anything?'

'Only the clothes on his back.'

'Let me see – ah very nice – *tout à fait le petit prince, n'est-ce pas?* Have them washed, they may be worth something.'

I was trapped between sleep and waking.

Suddenly there were hands all over me, pulling and prodding.

'Not a lot of meat on his bones—'

‘Can’t be more than twelve—’

Fingers in my mouth now. They were rough and reeked of tobacco. ‘Hmm, decent set of teeth.’

I gagged – batted the fingers away – tried to scramble out of bed, but knuckly hands held me down.

‘Be calm. You are safe.’

My eyes wouldn’t focus. I reached out and grabbed the first thing I could get my hands on. Fists full of black material. ‘*Qui êtes vous? Où suis-je?*’ I shouted.

The woman with the rough hands removed herself from my grip. She smoothed her robes and adjusted the wooden cross hanging round her neck. She had a broad hood and beetle eyes like a cobra.

The other nun looked at her across the bed. ‘He speaks French, Mother Abbess.’

‘So it would seem, Sister Héloïse.’

The one named Sister Héloïse held a cup to my lips. Her face was greyish, creased all over like an old newspaper.

I flinched and gripped the edges of the bed.

‘Drink. It is only water.’ She slid a hand under my head to help me.

I took a huge mouthful. Too much. It hurt as it went down and made me cough.

I groaned as I sat up. The pain was so bad I thought I might throw up again.

My eyes darted around the room. Long and narrow, three beds in a row, nostril-burning smell of bleach in the air. A long-haired white man gazed at me from a painting on the opposite wall. I could see his heart; it was blazing out of his chest just like mine.

‘Where am I? What is this place?’

The Abbess put a hand on my cheek. It felt like a comfort until she pushed my eyelid open with her thumb and squinted at me. ‘*Comment t’appelles-tu?*’ Her voice was raspy and dry like ashes.

I pulled away – opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

My name. What is my name?

It felt like someone was sitting on my chest. ‘I’m . . . I . . . I . . . I don’t know.’

My hands went to my head. Bandages, white-hot pain. I could feel my pulse pounding in my ears. Questions whirled around my skull like rats in a barrel. ‘What am I doing here? Where are my mum and dad? Why can’t I remember anything?’

The Abbess looked at Sister Héloïse. ‘Concussion,’ she said. ‘Hardly surprising. A blessing, perhaps. The memory of it may be worse than not knowing.’

There was a metallic taste in my mouth. ‘What are you talking about? Memory of what?’

Sister Héloïse shuffled her feet. ‘Should I telephone the police? Somebody may be looking for him.’

The Abbess shook her head. ‘Alas, I think we know what the police would say. “Another child left on our doorstep . . .”’

‘But those clothes – and he seems educated—’

‘All of our boys are the same in the eyes of God, Sister.’

‘Naturally, but in the circumstances—’

‘God has delivered the boy to us,’ said the Abbess. ‘The best we can do now is pray for him.’

‘Yes, Reverend Mother.’

I sat there looking from one nun to the other, trying to take in what they were saying. Then something inside me snapped: ‘Will you stop talking about me as if I’m not even here!’

The Abbess bristled.

Silence.

I shrank under the weight of her stare. ‘Please. Just tell me where I am . . . what happened to me?’

The Abbess reached out and took the loose end of one of my bandages in her stained fingers. ‘This is Saint Cuthbert’s Convent and Foundling Hospital. You were left on our doorstep two days ago in this –’ she let the bandage fall – ‘condition.’

Pressure was building behind my eyes. ‘What do you mean, left?’

‘Left, abandoned, delivered – call it what you will – I’m sorry to say there is no shortage of unwanted children in a city like Alexandria.’

Her words punched me in the stomach. Is that what I was? *Unwanted*.

‘No, there must be some mistake.’ I wracked my brain for answers, but

it was like fishing for shadows. ‘Gah . . . everything is mixed up. There was a boat, I think – it was on fire – I was in the water . . .’

‘A boat?’ said Sister Héloïse. She was holding my wrist, one eye on a small clock pinned to her robes, the other on the Abbess. ‘He did say something about a boat while he was sleeping. He was mostly speaking Arabic, so I didn’t understand everything, but—’

A short, sharp breath escaped from the Abbess’s thin nostrils. ‘He was delirious – I’m sure it was just the fever speaking.’

‘No, you’re not listening!’ I said. ‘I think there was some kind of accident. On the boat. Something happened to my mum and dad.’

The Abbess’s face didn’t move. ‘You were at sea?’

‘I think so.’

‘On a burning boat?’

‘Yes. No. I mean –’ I was losing grip on the image in my head – ‘I wasn’t on the boat, I was in the water.’

‘And then what happened?’

‘I can’t remember.’

‘You swam here, perhaps?’

‘No.’

‘An angel spirited you out of the sea and delivered you to our door?’

‘No!’

I drove my fists into the bed. No more words came, only a raw growl that rose up from the pit of my stomach and set my skin on fire. This time no one stopped me jumping out of bed.

I yanked the blanket and sheets off – scrunched them up and threw them on the floor.

The two nuns stood back.

I shoved the mattress off its spindly frame – knocked over the chair – kicked the big pot from under the bed, which went spinning across the tiles. Luckily it was empty.

I searched for the next thing to grab.

The man in the painting was looking down at me from his heavy gold frame. Kind eyes, open hands, as if to say, *Keep going, I won’t stop you.*

I paused. My fingers were kneading the back of my neck.

My anger had nowhere else to go. It curled up behind my ribs like a

caged animal, sucking the air out of the room. I went to the window and leaned out, breathing in the diesel fumes from the street below as if it were the freshest air I had ever tasted.

Cars honking, dogs barking, gulls screeching in the sky.

A coffee seller came down the street calling, 'Kaffee! Kaffee!' Someone stopped him right under my window. I must have been three floors up. A little cloud of steam wafted over his turbaned head as he poured a cup then moved on. People were out there drinking coffee as if it were just a normal day.

I felt like I had been buried alive.

The Abbess was the first to speak. 'If you've quite finished.'

I turned to look at her. Sister Héloïse was already gathering up the mess I had made.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I just . . . I can't make sense of anything. Will my memory come back, do you think?'

The Abbess's eyes flicked towards the painting. 'I'm afraid only God knows the answer to that question.'

I turned away. From her and the picture.

A face looked back at me from the cracked mirror above the sink in the corner of the room. Olive skin, storm-cloud eyes, dark brown hair sticking out of the bandages round my head.

I blinked. Frowned. Smiled. Testing if it was really me. I noticed a small chip in my front tooth. It felt smooth on my tongue. Older than my cuts and bruises, maybe. How did I get it? When?

There was a sudden warmth down my leg and a wave of shame crashed over me.

Sister Héloïse gave me a withering look. 'Don't just stand there! Quickly, out of those wet things – don't look so horrified, I've seen it all before.'

Tears leaked out of my eyes. I took down my wet pyjamas and held them in a bundle to cover my embarrassment.

The Abbess moved towards the door. 'I shall leave you to your work, Sister.'

'No, wait . . . please,' I said.

The Abbess paused in the doorway. 'Hmm?'

Her tone threw me. It was like she was waiting for me to offer her mint tea or something. 'Um . . . what should I do now?'

‘Make yourself useful, boy. Standing there with no trousers on while poor Sister Héloïse is on her knees cleaning up your mess.’

‘But—’

‘Inform me if he remembers anything of interest, Sister.’

‘Of course,’ said Sister Héloïse, bustling about. ‘Oh, Reverend Mother—’

The Abbess looked impatient now. ‘Yes?’

‘What are we to call him?’

‘He is your patient, Sister. I shall take counsel from you.’

‘Well . . . he has a head wound like Saint Pierre de Vérone . . .’ suggested Sister Héloïse.

The Abbess pursed her lips for a moment. ‘Hmm . . . Pierre. Very good. See that our little brown prince does not stay too long in his bed. The devil makes work for idle hands.’

Chapter Two

Laundry

The next morning, a nun called Sister Alice shook me awake. She had a face like a pomegranate and breath to wake the dead.

‘Out of bed, boy, it’s the laundry for you today.’

She marched me to a cobbled courtyard strung with washing lines. There were at least fifty white bedsheets drying in the morning sun. Along one side of the courtyard there was a row of high arches, out of which clouds of steam and the sound of gushing water poured.

‘Antoine! Antoine!’ Sister Alice glanced up at the clock tower as if she had somewhere more important to be. ‘Where is he? Antoine!’

A boy stepped into the light. Sweaty brow, tight black curls, caterpillar eyebrows.

‘Antoine, show the new boy how things work.’

‘Yes, Sister.’

Sister Alice shoved me towards the boy called Antoine.

‘Welcome to the laundry,’ he said. ‘What do they call you?’

‘Pierre.’

He nodded, but he was looking over my shoulder.

Behind me I heard the sound of a key in a lock. I saw the Abbess disappear through a small door at the foot of the clock tower. Moments later she emerged with a boy. He squinted when the sun hit his face, which was dirty and streaked with tears.

I turned back to the boy called Antoine. ‘This way,’ he said.

I trotted after him, under the stone arches, weaving in between huge wicker baskets full of white sheets. I guessed there were about twenty boys in there, each stirring great drums of water with wooden sticks, or up to their elbows in sinks as big as bathtubs. There was body odour under the fresh smell of wet cotton in the air.

‘Ever washed a sheet before?’ asked Antoine.

‘Er . . .’

‘Thought not. It’s simple. Water, soap, elbow grease.’

We came to a stop by a brick bench. It had little glowing doors at knee height and a row of metal lids on top. There were two boys standing there already. The lids in front of them were propped open and they were stirring whatever was inside with sticks. The pipes criss-crossing the ceiling above us rattled.

‘You can work here,’ said Antoine. ‘And my name’s Akif, by the way. Just don’t let the nuns hear you calling me that.’

I shook the hand he offered. It was dry and calloused. ‘I thought she said—’

‘What? You thought you were the only one who got a new name?’

‘They rename everyone in here,’ said one of the other boys at the bench.

‘We shall tame the natives by giving them good, strong *cath-o-lic* names,’ said Akif, impersonating the Abbess’s gravelly drawl.

The two boys with stirring sticks snorted with laughter.

‘This is Thomas and Simon,’ said Akif. ‘Otherwise known as—’

‘Tariq—’

‘—and Salim,’ they said, one after the other.

They both stuck out their hands for me to shake. They were rough like Akif’s.

‘So, you’re the kid they found on the doorstep?’ said Tariq. ‘What’s your name?’

‘I’m not sure. They said I’ve got concussion.’

Salim was staring at me like I was some kind of exotic animal in a zoo. 'What happened to your head?'

Tariq flicked his friend's ear. '*Ya hemar!* He just said he's got concussion, didn't he?'

Salim gave Tariq a shove.

'So, it's true?' said Akif. 'You can't remember anything at all?'

'No. I mean, bits and pieces, but nothing makes sense.'

'Wow,' said Salim, still looking at me like I had a blue face or something.

'Ignore him,' said Tariq. 'He's got the brain power of a jerboa.'

Salim punched him in the arm.

'Sorry,' said Akif. 'Must be horrible.' He had sad eyes under his heavy brow.

The lump in my throat stopped me answering.

'Right . . .' Akif thrust a heavy stick at me. 'Better get to work before they check up on you.' The stick was half my height and had three stubby legs on one end.

I didn't know what to do with it.

'Come on,' said Akif. 'Get the lid off your copper – the great big round thing in front of you – yeah, that's it.'

I grabbed the handle. 'Aagh!' The lid went crashing to the floor. The skin on my palm had turned pink already.

Akif leapt out of the way so it didn't crush his toes. 'Hey, watch it!'

'It's hot!'

'Course it's hot, you donkey. That thing's full of boiling water.'

Akif grabbed my hands and inspected them. 'They've never done a day's work before, have they? Don't see kids like you in here very often.'

Determined to prove I wasn't just some wimpy kid, I snatched my hands back and picked up the lid. It was still hot, but I gritted my teeth and placed it to the side of the hole it had been covering. 'What do you mean, kids like me?'

'Rich kids.'

'Who says I'm rich?'

'Come off it. Who do you think washed the blood out of them fancy clothes of yours?'

Akif didn't wait for an answer.

‘That’s right – me. Very nice they were, too. From some *la-de-da* shop in Paris by the looks of the labels.’

‘My clothes . . . where are they now?’

‘Ha! Long gone. They’ll have been sold as soon as they peeled them off your back.’

At that moment the boy I had seen coming out of the door under the clock tower walked into the laundry room.

Akif put a hand on his shoulder as he passed. ‘You alright, Momin?’

The boy’s glassy eyes had purple circles under them. He didn’t speak, just nodded and sloped off to his place in front of one of the big sinks.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ I asked.

‘The Cobra made him spend the night with old Cuthbert, didn’t she,’ said Tariq.

Akif must have seen the confusion on my face. ‘The Cobra – that’s what we call the Abbess – she locked him in the crypt last night.’

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ZAIN SHARIF AND THE HEART OF SOBEK by Tom Mann

SYNOPSIS

Alexandria, Egypt, 1950. Two fishermen find twelve-year-old Zain floating in the sea, unconscious and clutching a large emerald. After waking in an orphanage, Zain seeks his stolen jewel, travelling from Alexandria to Cairo, then all the way down the Nile to Aswan. Can Zain catch the people responsible for his archaeologist parents' deaths? Can he stop them before they use the gem to invoke an ancient dark power in their bid to take over Egypt?

BIOGRAPHY

Growing up Tom wanted to be Indiana Jones, but instead his degree in Egyptology landed him a job in the film business. He was a production executive for close to a decade. Now he's a school librarian, so he gets to share his passion for storytelling with children every day.

JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Prologues can be hit or miss but I really liked this one – lots of action and an intriguing plot. The writer has a powerful turn of phrase "questions rolled around my skull like rats in a barrel" – evocative! Shades of *The Mummy* . . . love the promise of the "dark power" to come in the rest of the book. Voice felt fresh and unique. Really wanted to read more.'

'This feels like classic MG – orphan, adventure, and missing jewel. What's not to like?! Assured writing, great sense of place and atmosphere. The friendship and camaraderie of the laundry boys is touching. Nice touches of humour punctuating the grim toil.'

'This is my kind of story! I like the setting, the French/Arabic background, the sense of mystery, and the fantasy adventure that clearly lies ahead.'

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HONORARY MENTIONS

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

CLOVUS by Sarah Broadley

OPERA MICE: COMPLETELY NIBBLED by Miriam Craig

GENJI THE NINJA by William Dobson

WE ARE FRACTALS by Julie Farrell

THE DARK GREEN by Fox McGeever

EDDIE HARP AND THE KNIFE OF AKAARA by Sarah Harrison

THE FOETAL POSITION by Barny Hobbs

THE MAGI'S HOUSE by D. A. D. Longstaff

WICK WOOD by Lucy Mohan

DEAD REAL? by Natalie Perry aka Poppy T. Perry

PHIL GLUM: LICENSE TO KRILL by Mandy Rabin

THE BOGGLE SPOTTER by Catherine Rosevear

A CHEEKY BIT OF MURDER by Katrina Sansone

MONSTERS OF SMASH by Kelly Smith

THE ACCIDENTAL QUEST OF MIMI POTTS by Karen Walk

ASTRA FIRESTAR AND THE RIPPLES OF TIME by Stuart White

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