MA WRITING FOR YOUNG PEOPLE
2019 BATH SPA ANTHOLOGY

Edited by Anna Clothier and Heather Davey
FOREWORD
by Professor David Almond

Professor David Almond’s novels for children include Skellig, My Name is Mina and A Song for Ella Grey. His major awards include the Carnegie Medal, two Whitbreads, the Guardian Children’s Fiction Prize, the Michael L. Printz award, and the Eleanor Farjeon Award. In 2010 he received the highest international recognition given to an author of children’s fiction: the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

Our renowned, unique, astonishingly influential and successful MAWYP is 15 years old this year! I love being part of this creative community, this living tradition of writers, teachers and readers which has such an impact on individual lives and on the outside world. How wonderful it is that Bath Spa University celebrates, inspires and teaches writers for the young. Children’s literature is at the beating heart of our culture. It is where stories have their start, and where our literary culture is constantly renewed. Children’s literature, like young people themselves, is in a state of continual growth and change. It is playful, troubled, hilarious, serious, adventurous, ambitious. Despite what the boring pessimists tell us, young people read. They read with passion, intelligence and excitement. They read with their bodies and their senses as well as with their brains. They ask the most perceptive questions and give the most vivid responses. For young people, our ancient world is brand new. For them, the ancient much-told dramas of being born, growing up, falling in love, discovering death are experienced for the very first time. What better audience could an author ask for?

As writers for young people, we are united in a genuine belief that books really can help to create a better world. Books help young people grow into active and creative citizens. They draw together the generations. They celebrate and are influenced by children’s own creativity. They help young people to discover themselves, to express
themselves, and to understand their place in the world. Without fine children’s books and fine children’s writers, there would be fewer adult readers. There would be fewer properly mature adults. Our world would be diminished. I am proud to work on the Writing for Young People MA at Bath Spa, and it’s a privilege to help introduce this fine selection of new work.
INTRODUCTION
by Dr Lucy Christopher

Dr Lucy Christopher is a Reader in Creative Writing and the Course Director of the MA in Writing for Young People. Her novels for young adults have been published in over twenty countries and have won major international awards, including the Michael L. Printz honor award, the Branford Boase, the International Reader Award, the Prix Farniente, and the Golden Inky. She has been shortlisted for the Waterstones Prize, the Costa Award, the Prime Minister’s Award, the Children’s Book Council of Australia award, and longlisted for the Carnegie Medal.

You’ll never believe it but this year our MA in Writing for Young People celebrates its fifteenth birthday! And guess what, you get me as a birthday present. I am, of course, delighted to be the new Course Director of this amazing course. Must say though, Professor Julia Green leaves behind a massive pair of shoes to fill (who knew such a petite lady had such big feet?!) but I am doing my best to stretch out my toes to fill them best I can, helped of course by our wonderful team of tutors.

So... fifteen years! What a milestone. I think it’s safe to say that we have well and truly come of age. We are definitely making our mark both at home and abroad, as all adolescents should. And this is a great opportunity to celebrate this MA course, and to give you a little history.

The MA in Writing for Young People began in October 2004 with eight students, established by our wonderful Professor Green. The course grew a little more in the second year and that’s when I first taught on this MA – so I’ve been here almost since the beginning, too, which I am extremely proud of. It was in this year we had Sally Nicholls, who won the first Agents’ Prize for Most Promising Student; a prize that continues to this day, awarded by Jodie Hodges from United Agents. This year’s prize was won by another Sally – Sally Purdie – and you can see her funny and tender writing in these pages under her pen name S. R. Pardieu.
Our MA course grew rapidly in students, staff, and also in its reach and success in the wider world (we have 38 students currently – the biggest cohort yet!). At the time of writing this, 64 of our alumni have secured publication deals. This is a staggering 27% of our total alumnus – you would be hard pressed to find a creative writing course anywhere with that publication success rate. Many of those debut books were manuscript projects while on the MA; many of them were noticed by agents and publishers reading previous anthologies and attending previous anthology parties.

It’s vital to acknowledge that the measure of our success is not only through publication. The value of an MA course is ultimately the work that is done on it; whether or not that goes on to be commercially recognised; and the writing processes discovered. Our students change while on this course. They grow as writers, and they grow as people. We encourage students to explore their childhoods and see what they find there, to evaluate what and why they write, and to think about the impact their work has on audiences younger than themselves. Our students learn to keep going and to show up. Ultimately, our students learn to be magicians, empaths and craftspeople, and they learn to create hope... because what is writing for young people if it doesn’t contain at least a sliver of that?

These pages contain hope. Here we have 24 stories that sing with it, nurture it, celebrate it. From a time-travelling box of stars, to the unexpected arrival of a cherub in a storm, to creating the perfect virtual reality boyfriend, hope erupts from these pages as if shot from the most joyful of glitter canons. Here are tales of growing up, growing things, growing wisdom and growing wings. You will travel up wild rivers, to castles, to New Orleans, and to the land of a thousand lakes. I am so excited for you to read them!

So let me introduce you to this talented class of 2019. In this time of global uncertainty and anxiety, our young people will need these stories, and those like them, more than ever.
FROM THE TUTORS

I have known many of these stories from their early days in workshops. I met them first as marvellous nuggets, snatches of voice or setting; kernels. But kernels need time and nurturing and plenty of attention if they are to develop. And their creators have been diligent. Over time they have painstakingly crafted their pieces into the wonderful stories contained in this anthology.

You will find tales set in the past, the present and in a terrible, possible future. There are scenes to make you sigh, to hold your breath and to laugh out loud. And at the heart of them all are arresting characters with whom young readers will identify: young people living and laughing, and against all odds, changing the world.

I have loved working with the marvellously creative students represented here, getting to know them as people as well as authors. I will follow their progress with anticipation – they are truly talented, hardworking ‘Imagineers’.

Janine Amos, Senior Lecturer

I’m so proud of the students and the work they have produced, on show for the lucky, lucky world in this anthology. The extracts range from funny to moving, truthful to fantastic. During their time on the course, each writer develops their voice, finding just the right way to tell their stories. And now it’s your turn to see the results of that process. Enjoy!

Dr Elen Caldecott, Associate Lecturer

Every year it’s an exciting moment to read the Bath Spa Writing for Young People Anthology for the first time and this is no exception. As the title suggests, this anthology is bursting with imagination and ideas, showcasing the creativity of the students. However, we all know that writing is about more than that. It’s about hard work and determination too, and students should be extremely proud of the
effort they’ve put in to achieve all they have. Congratulations to every single writer!

Clare Furniss, Manuscript Tutor

We are very proud of these new writers from the wonderful MA Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University. Read and be amazed at the wealth of talent, originality, creativity and professionalism represented here. Congratulations to everyone involved.

Over the fifteen years since we started this specialist MA, more than 60 alumnae have been published: I am sure many of these new writers will join them. Writing for children and young adults is an act of optimism: necessary and urgent. We have enjoyed working with each student, helping them to write the best book they can possibly write, the book that only they can write. Now it’s over to you!

Julia Green, Emeritus Professor in Writing for Young People, Bath Spa University.

It has been a pleasure to see the imaginative power and range in the students’ writing this year. From the cruelty of the apartheid regime, through quirky and delightful witchcraft and boarding school adventures with added magic and humour, this has been another delightful chance to explore new worlds and characters created by talented writers. I wish them and their stories all the best as they spread their wings.

Marie-Louise Jensen, Manuscript Tutor

It’s been a privilege working with these students, and seeing their writing bloom over the duration of the MAWYP. This collection reveals what a variety and talent we’ve nurtured. I’m proud to be able to present them to agents and editors.

Dr Joanna Nadin, Lecturer
LOVING HOMES WANTED: for our latest batch of new-borns currently snuggled up in their Bath Spa incubators. Some mewling, some puking, but all of them kicking and screaming with pure talent for writing original children’s fiction. You will find each one fed and watered by the MA’s loving hand and all of them are cuddly, publishing-house-trained, and up to date with their vaccinations (should you wish to take them to any fancy book festivals abroad). Each new-born gets on great with other writers and comes with their own completed manuscript, plus a head full of brand new ideas just bursting to get out. PLEASE NOTE: viewing is essential, no time wasters please. And at least one of them bites. To find out more, keep turning these pages...

C.J. Skuse, Senior Lecturer

This latest anthology from the students of the MA in Writing for Young People has something for everyone: stars and saints, lakes and lobsters, castles and canals, mystery and magic and lots more besides. So pour yourself a drink, pull up a chair and let the imaginations of these talented storytellers weave their storytelling magic once more...

Steve Voake, Senior Lecturer

The writing on the Bath Spa MAWYP gets better and better with every year that passes. This is a wonderful showcase of what our talented students have produced. I have no doubt that many will go on to be published. It has been a huge privilege to be involved in the tutoring process.

Anna Wilson, Manuscript Tutor
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MIDDLE GRADE
Anna grew up in the West Country, in a house with a time machine (nobody else had guessed this curious quirk of the airing cupboard). Later, she combined her love of history and stories at university, and from here pursued a career in publishing, working firstly for a book packager, then as an editor of children’s magazines.

But her love of history never left her, and when she discovered traces of a real-life ‘lost boy’ in her reading, Anna was determined to discover his story. Unable to visit the past in person – she had long since left the house with the time machine – she decided to write herself there instead.

About *The Box of Stars*

*Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded...*

If you could go back and change the past, would you?

Kit’s Uncle Derek disappeared three years ago. Now, together with his new friend Pan, Kit is determined to find him. But Kit’s search takes him further than he could ever have imagined.

Spirited back to the sixteenth century in a mysterious box of stars, he soon discovers that spies are lurking on every corner, and careless talk costs lives. When history starts to rewrite itself before their very eyes, Kit and Pan must navigate the trials and treachery of a Tudor court in turmoil to get back to the present they thought they’d left behind.

The clock is ticking, and the future is at stake...

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THE BOX OF STARS

Prologue

It Worked!

Thaddeus Ferris had experienced a great number of extraordinary happenings in his long life, and very few of them surprised him.

He was quite sure that tonight would be a quiet one, because the stars had told him as much, and there had been no signs. No thunderclaps or lightning cracks; no howling winds, or rain...

Instead, our story begins without warning, on this mild, still, and, until now, largely uneventful night in London, at a time when stars still twinkled overhead, even in cities, and the streets smelt foul.

Charterhouse Lane was entirely deserted, owing to the lateness of the hour, and all the windows lining this narrow, winding thoroughfare were inky black.

Or rather, all but one.

Thaddeus was still hard at work, and a warm orange glow seeped between the shutters of his snugery.

The room was small and cramped, set above an apothecary’s shop, and overlooking a tavern frequented only by the very brave, or the very thirsty. Part study, part workshop, it was lit by several dripping candles, and filled with all manner of things that Thaddeus used for his experiments and research. The walls were lined with shelves, most of which groaned and buckled beneath the weight of large, leather-bound books, or treasured curiosities and trinkets. There was a model of the Sun orbiting the Earth, a tremulously ticking clock, and a vast collection of hourglasses, all of different shapes and sizes, filled with
trickling sands in a rainbow of jewel-bright colours. In the centre of
the room was a low trestle table, and upon this table stood a large
wooden chest.

It was this chest that held Thaddeus’s attention. A complicated
sequence of stars was carved into the wood, and, sunken into the lid,
four brass dials glowed in the candlelight. With his crooked nose only
inches away from them, Thaddeus reached out a gnarled, bony hand,
and slowly turned each one.

‘Hello?’ came a muffled, throaty voice from deep inside the chest.

Thaddeus started, and gave the lid a tap.

Whatever was inside tapped back. ‘Hello?’ it said again. ‘Could you
let me out? I think I might have come rather a long way!’

‘Who are you?’ croaked Thaddeus, checking the latch was secure.

‘I’m Derek,’ said the voice inside the chest, ‘and I’ve come from...
Well, actually, I think it might be best if you let me out and we can talk
about it properly. Have a bit of a chat—’

Thaddeus gasped. He didn’t know what a ‘chat’ was, but he knew
he didn’t want one. It sounded most unpleasant. He looked hopelessly
about. Perhaps he ought to fetch help. There might still be drinkers in
the tavern, hiding from the watchmen out the back. Miserable, drunken
sots they would be, though. He didn’t want them in his workshop,
charging about and upsetting things.

Only the sound of more knocking, and more muffled cries from the
Derek brought Thaddeus back to his senses. He grabbed a weighty-
looking candlestick, snuffed out the light, and tucked it into the
waistband of his breeches. Then, drawing a deep, rattling breath, he
reached out with trembling hands, and opened the lid just a sliver.

Within the gloom, two eyes blinked.

Thaddeus dropped the lid with a bang.

‘Please,’ said the voice inside the chest. ‘Please let me out. I promise
I won’t hurt you.’

Thaddeus steeled himself, and slowly pushed back the lid until it
came to rest on its hinges.
For the first time in many years, Thaddeus was surprised.
A short, dumpy little man sat inside the chest, with his knees drawn up to his chin. He had flyaway, steel-grey hair, a scrubby, wiry beard, and sparkling blue eyes, which surveyed Thaddeus with polite interest.

The Derek made no attempt to climb out of the chest, so Thaddeus made no attempt to bludgeon him with his candlestick, but grabbed hold of it, just in case. ‘Who... Who are you?’ he spluttered, looming above the Derek in what he hoped was an imposing manner.

‘I’ve told you, I’m Derek!’

‘Then, what are you?’

‘I’m an historian,’ the Derek replied. ‘Now, would you be so kind as to tell me when I am?’

Thaddeus blinked. ‘When you are?’

‘Yes,’ said the Derek. ‘What year is it? Is there a prime minister? Who is your king? Or perhaps you have a queen, do you?’

‘Prime-what? What are you talking about?’ Thaddeus drew himself up to his full height and looked imperiously down the considerable length of his nose. ‘Look, sir, I rather think—’

‘Please,’ said the Derek, earnestly. ‘Please tell me when I am.’

Thaddeus bristled. ‘It is 1543,’ he said. ‘And of course, our king is Henry.’

‘Good Lord!’ cried the Derek, unfurling himself, stretching his arms out wide. ‘Fancy that! It worked!’

Chapter One

Timeshares

Kit Mallory checked the time. Again.

He was quite sure, now, that it was doing something strange.

Of course, this should not have come as any great surprise to him. The strangeness of time is the only truly reliable thing about it.
As anyone who has ever had an hour-long maths test will tell you, sixty minutes can seem like an eternity. Yet, when you are dreading something, as Kit was this morning, time has an annoying habit of speeding up.

Over the course of the past few days, Kit had felt the hours fly by like minutes, the minutes like seconds, and the seconds like something far too fast to mention.

And all because he was dreading the start of his holidays.

‘I could just stay at home, you know,’ he told his father hopefully, as they sped down yet another winding country lane, ruffling the hedgerows and sending a charm of goldfinches soaring to the sky.

‘How many times, Christopher? You cannot stay at home!’ snapped Mr Mallory. ‘You know we’re going away. Your mother’s been getting her headaches again. Needs a break. Besides, you like it at Felicity’s.’

‘Like,’ thought Kit, was not the word he would use to describe six whole weeks at his aunt’s ramshackle farm. It felt like a life sentence.

Merryacre was cold and draughty. The house stood, still and crumbling, as time passed all around it, and left it quite alone. Aunt Felicity didn’t have a telephone, or a computer, and the only tablets she ever used were the ones for her bad back. She had lived in a state of stubborn seclusion since her husband, Derek, mysteriously vanished, catapulting Merryacre into the news, and ensuring Aunt Felicity remained the subject of idle speculation and gossip for many years to come.

‘Never showed up, did he, that Derek?’ said Mr Mallory, swinging his Volvo violently around another hairpin bend. ‘Good-for-nothing cad he was, too. Swindling layabout!’

Kit didn’t say anything. His father seemed to reserve a particular kind of malice for Derek, who, he said, had run away with a vast amount of Mallory money, and was now selling timeshares abroad.

‘Called himself an historian!’ he scoffed, apparently enjoying the conversation he was having with himself.

‘He was a historian!’ Kit’s voice was an octave higher than usual. ‘He wrote lots of books!’
‘Shame nobody bought them then, isn’t it?’ spat Mr Mallory, scathingly. ‘You mark my words. He’s off selling timeshares abroad.’

Kit sighed. He couldn’t see how anyone could sell time. Or share it, for that matter. Least of all Derek, because somehow, time had claimed him.

The days and the weeks and the months had marched on, rolling into years, until the real Derek was almost completely forgotten; swallowed up by the stories people told about him, and the funny things they said.

There were all sorts of theories about what had happened to Derek, each one wilder and more unlikely than the last.

All anybody knew for certain was that it was three years, almost to the day, since Derek had wandered into the garden shed one evening after dinner and vanished into thin air.

Months after the disappearance, when the police, and the reporters, and the busybodies had finally gone away, Aunt Felicity shut the door on the world’s most famous garden shed and robustly carried on. But although she tried hard not to show it, Kit knew she had been worried the last time he came to stay. Between all the ‘There we ares’ and the ‘Off we goes’ there had been a lot of lengthy silences, and he was sure he’d heard her crying, once, behind the bathroom door.

‘Look at the state of the place!’ Mr Mallory marvelled, gazing up at the house with an expression of horror as he hauled Kit’s trunk from the car. ‘If Derek hadn’t run off with all that money... And not so much as a postcard, mind!’ He slammed the boot shut with feeling. ‘Well, anyway,’ he said, glancing at his watch. ‘I’d better be off. You don’t mind, Christopher, do you? Lots to do. Packing,’ he said, as if that explained everything. ‘Early flight. Time difference. Don’t call.’

And with that, he was gone, leaving Kit to drag his trunk across the yard and on, into the house, for what promised to be an eternity.
Aunt Felicity had left a note on the kitchen table, beside a lumpy-looking sandwich and a fruitcake the size of a hubcap.

Welcome, Kit! the note said, in her familiar spidery scrawl.

Lovely to have you back again. I’ve made you lunch, and you must help yourself to cake. Come and find me when you’re ready – the roof’s leaking again (worst luck!).

Bernard should be around here somewhere: wouldn’t come for his walk this morning – dozy dog!

Love,
Aunt F.

Kit ate a lonely lunch, undisturbed even by Bernard, who could usually be relied upon to share a stodgy sandwich and a slice of concrete cake.

He swept the leftovers – crusts, burnt bits, and Spam – into his pocket, and set out in search of the dog-shaped dustbin, who he hoped would devour the lot.

Kit knew that Bernard’s favourite things were sniffing and snacks, and since both could amply be indulged in at the stables, this is where he went first, taking the long way round to avoid Alfred Hitchcock, the cockerel, who was glaring at him, looking cross.

Neither Bernard nor Aunt Felicity were at the stables, but somebody else was.

Pottering about the yard, tending to a little bay pony who was
almost as wide as he was tall, was a skinny, haughty-looking girl with dirty blonde hair and a terrible singing voice.

‘My grandfather’s clock was too large for the shelf,
So it stood ninety years on the floor.
It was taller by half than the old man himself,
Though it weighed not a pennyweight more.
It was bought on the morn of the day that he was born,
And was always his treasure and pride.
But it stopped short – never to go again –
When the old man died.
Ninety years without slumbering,
(tick-tock, tick-tock)
His life’s seconds numbering—’

She spotted Kit standing at the gate and, mercifully, stopped singing. ‘Who are you?’ she asked, quite rudely, Kit thought.

‘I’m Kit,’ said Kit. ‘Who are you?’

‘Pan,’ said the girl with the dirty blonde hair and the terrible singing voice. She patted the fat little pony fondly. ‘And this is Gallop.’

Kit didn’t think Gallop looked at all capable of galloping anywhere, and was about to say as much, when he noticed the girl staring at him.

‘Whatever happened to your nose?’ she asked.

Kit raised a hand self-consciously to his face. ‘Had a fight,’ he said, because this was a far more interesting story than the truth, which was that he had been born with an extremely crooked nose. ‘What sort of a name is Pan, anyway?’

‘It’s short for Pandora,’ said the girl, rolling her eyes. ‘It’s awful, isn’t it? Mum’s idea of a joke, I think. I was found in a box, you see. On the Underground at Seven Sisters. I’ve no idea what happened, but Mum adopted me. My brother’s name’s worse. He’s called Benedict!’ she snorted. ‘And he wasn’t found anywhere! Well, Mum says she found him under a gooseberry bush, but we all know that’s not true.’
And so it continued. Pan was off, happily chatting away and brushing the same patch on Gallop’s side until Kit saw the beginnings of a bald patch.

In spite of their poor start, Kit was surprised to discover that he liked Pan. She told him all about her mother with the nice normal name (Jane), her father, Bob (who also had a nice normal name), and the unfortunate Benedict, whom she called Podge. Kit thought this was a bit rich, given the size of Pan’s pony, but by the time he had opened his mouth to tell her so, she was already talking about something else.

‘I’m going to find them, you know. My first family. I don’t think they meant to leave me behind, do you? I forget stuff all the time, so I know it’s easily done. I lost my gym bag last week. Mum was furious.’

‘Mmm,’ said Kit, who didn’t know very much about babies, but thought they were different to gym bags in several important ways.

‘Look, I’ll show you. I’ve made all sorts of plans.’ Pan opened the door of her tack room to reveal a giant pinboard full of possibilities. There were lots of brightly coloured rosettes and riding certificates ‘For Effort’, photographs of the Seven Sisters Railway Station, large Ordnance Survey maps, and dozens of faded newspaper clippings with blaring headlines: ‘MISSING FISHERMEN FOUND!’, ‘LOST CAT RETURNS AFTER SEVEN YEARS ON THE RUN!’ and ‘HAVE YOU SEEN THIS DONKEY?’ Kit noticed with a pang that there was one about Derek, too.

‘You see,’ said Pan, pointing to the yellowing papers. ‘I’ve been researching lost things, and these places’ – she nodded towards the maps – ‘are where I’ll look next. I’ve been searching for a while now, but there’s an awful lot of world out there, and they’ve got to be somewhere, haven’t they?’
CC’s passion for writing began at age nine with a short story about a vampire who drank milk, followed a few years later by a terrible piece of fanfiction that should probably go straight into the digital equivalent of a shredder. Since then, an English degree, the discovery of a mysterious concept known as ‘editing’, and the MA Writing for Young People have improved matters. CC lives in Cornwall and likes dragons, dinosaurs, and developing an ever-growing mental library of facts about obscure and impractical topics.

About Willemina
At the height of the Victorian science craze, Mina’s first term at boarding school is nothing like she’d hoped it would be. Who’d want to knit and learn etiquette when the boys get to study engineering? They even learn how to use vivium, a chemical that has almost magical properties. Only fellow scholarship girl Bethan agrees that it’s unfair when the teachers tell Mina she can’t take engineering lessons, so together they come up with a plan.

Disguised as a boy, Mina enters a world full of gears, perpetual motion machines, and exploding toasters. And when the engineering teacher announces a big competition, she takes her chance, risking her secret identity and testing her talents in ways she never thought possible.

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‘May I work on the watch now?’ Mina held out her slate, which was covered in chalky scribbles.

Her tutor, Mr Graves, glanced over it through glasses that looked like someone might have sat on them. ‘You seem to have found all the right answers, so yes, you can. Did you discover yet which part I took out? I forget.’

Mina nodded. She loved Mr Graves’s puzzles, which he’d been setting her ever since he became her tutor three years ago. ‘The wheel that controls the minute hand, sir. You made it easy for me.’

The elderly gentleman opened his puzzle drawer. It was full of small clocks in different shapes, intricate measuring devices, and tin wind-up toys, all of them with extra moving parts the two of them had invented and installed. They’d been taken apart and put back together so often that there were dents and scratches on every visible surface. Mr Graves pushed aside a tin soldier and took out a battered wooden cigar box.

With a mock-solemn expression, he slid open the lid to reveal a little bronze-coloured cogwheel. ‘It seems you are correct.’ He favoured her with another smile. ‘Well done, Mina.’

Mina did her best to look as if she’d expected nothing else, but part of her mind did a little dance of triumph as she picked up the cogwheel. ‘Do you think you can put it back together?’ Mr Graves asked.

‘Of course, sir.’ This time her confidence was sincere. She’d already put the intricate system back together without help twice before.

‘Good girl. Go ahead, then.’

Mina returned to her desk, which, like everything in Mr Graves’s cramped study, had seen better days, and those days had likely ended
sometime in the previous century. On the corner of the desk stood a little basket containing the dismantled pocket watch, as well as several small watchmaker’s tools. She pushed her tight sleeves as far up as they would go, then sat down and set to work.

Mr Graves took up his newspaper. For half an hour or so it was quiet in the small study, except for the occasional turning of a page and the tickings and tinklings that came with restoring the pocket watch to its former scruffy glory.

‘Done,’ Mina muttered to herself as the backing of the watch clicked into place. She looked around for a cloth with which to wipe the watch and her hands. Mr Graves stored his tools in larded rags to keep them from rusting, which made Mina’s hands greasy and slippery when she used them.

Without looking up from his newspaper, Mr Graves threw her an ancient towel full of holes. It had lost its original colour, whatever that had been, years ago. Mina caught it and began trying to pick bits of dusty lard out from under her fingernails. As she did this, she glanced over the front page of the newspaper, which carried the usual advertisements: kitchen appliances, bespoke suits, and beauty products. None of them interested her in the slightest.

Mr Graves turned over a page, and a few moments later his expression became one of surprised approval. He nodded to himself and began to write on a piece of scrap paper:

Owen, York, Sept. 24, 1850.

‘What is that about, sir?’ Mina asked.

‘Do you remember me telling you about Sir Richard Owen and the Dinosauria?’

‘Yes.’ Mina had found the idea of the oversized, lumbering reptiles amusing, though she was glad modern lizards no longer grew to the size of a small cottage.

‘It seems they’ll be displaying some fossils in York next month, and
Sir Richard is giving a talk about them. It’s a pity you’ll be at school, or I would’ve taken you to see the exhibition.’

Mina shrugged. ‘Perhaps another time.’ She’d prefer lessons in engineering over crumbly old bones any day. You couldn’t make anything interesting with bits of dead animals, the way you could with vivium.

Mr Graves seemed to guess what she was thinking. ‘They’re quite intriguing, you know,’ he said, folding up his newspaper.

Mina nodded for the sake of politeness and picked up the watch to wipe off her greasy fingerprints.

‘I know you like machines better, but Mother Nature builds more intricate ones than we could ever dream up. Wouldn’t you like to know how insects and trees and everything around us work as well as they do? There is a lot to be learnt by studying them. I’ll make some sketches of Sir Richard’s specimens and send them to you to look at when you have a free moment. How about that?’

‘Thank you, sir,’ said Mina. Mr Graves’s sketches were beautiful, but she already knew these ones would end up in the same dusty folder as all the other ones he gave her. Mina knew he wanted her to be an inventor, which she thought was nearly as silly as hoping she would become a politician. She was good at repairing things, but whoever had heard of a girl being an inventor? It was absurd. Still, she accepted his sketches and kept them safe.

‘Anyway —’ Mr Graves began, but he was interrupted by a series of rattling noises.

The old, worn cuckoo clock above his desk sprang into life. Two little doors in the front opened, and a bright yellow canary shot out from behind them.

Mina couldn’t help but smile. Mr Graves had saved up for months to buy a tiny bottle of vivium. Together, they’d followed the instructions in a battered copy of *Vivium and its Manifold Applications*, concentrating so hard on how they had wanted the bird to fly that it had given Mina a headache. She’d been allowed to help him paint a vivian formula on the bird’s wings and coat some pieces of the clockwork inside it. It was the
only time she’d ever used vivium, and, despite the headache, she’d loved every second of it.

The bird chirped a series of five musical notes. Its wings were starting to rust, but still it managed an unsteady, squeaky circuit around the room, repeating the five notes all the while. It made an ungainly landing and disappeared back inside the clock.

‘Oh, dear,’ Mr Graves said. ‘It’s later than I thought. You’d best go home, Mina, or your mother will chase me with a broom for making you miss the train.’

_The train._ Mina’s stomach felt like it had turned into clockwork, twisting and turning and making her feel queasy. Only two more hours before she’d be on the night train to London. From there, she’d take another train – this one to Templeton School. She’d been looking forward to it for months, but now that the time had come it felt almost as if she was dreaming, and she was about to wake up and find herself apprenticed to her mother’s grumpy cousin, who was a seamstress.

She pulled on her old coat, which was so small the sleeves only came to halfway down her forearms, put on her bonnet, and picked up the sailcloth bag that leaned against her desk. ‘Here are your groceries for payment, sir,’ she said. ‘I bought you some ginger snaps at the baker’s on the way here. They’re in there, too.’ She set the bag on Mr Graves’s desk.

‘Thank you kindly, Mina.’ Mr Graves beamed at her. He had a weakness for biscuits. ‘And that reminds me…’ He reached under his chair and handed her the bag she’d given him yesterday. ‘I have a farewell present for you, too. My headmaster gave it to me when I left Templeton to go to Oxford. It’s in here, but don’t open it until you’re at school. I hope you’ll love it as much as I did.’

Mina curtsied as best she could in her too-small dress and said, ‘Thank you, sir. I’ll write to you soon. I have to go now, though, or I’ll miss the train after all.’

‘Of course, of course. Give your parents my best and come to see me next time you’re home.’ Mr Graves blinked several times in quick succession, then seized Mina’s hand and, seemingly forgetting she wasn’t
a boy, shook it vigorously. ‘You’ll do us all proud, I’m sure of it. Off you go, and good luck.’

Down the stairs Mina went, out the front door, into the street filled with carts and cabs and shouting men, heading for home. The salty wind tugged at her plaits, the seagulls cried overhead, and she breathed in the familiar smell of fish from the nearby marketplace. Now and then she came across someone she knew: a neighbour, Ann the baker’s daughter, the milkman. They all waved and shouted goodbyes. Her mother had made sure all of Flamborough knew where she was going. Mina, excited though she was, was suddenly unsure if Mr Graves’s idea to send her to Templeton had been a good one. How could a grocer’s daughter from Yorkshire fit in at a school for young ladies and gentlemen?

Chapter Two

When she got home, Mina found her cousin Jane leaning against the wall by the back door, reading a letter. Jane was a tall, skinny girl, a few years older than Mina, but with the same brown curls and spindly fingers. Mina’s mother was training her up to be a maidservant. For the moment, though, she had untied her white apron, and its strings fluttered in the wind. She looked up at the sound of Mina’s toe-pinching shoes on the cobblestones.

‘Hello, Mina – I mean, Miss Phillips,’ she said.

Mina grimaced. ‘I’m your cousin! When Mother’s out of earshot, please just call me Mina. You never called me Miss Phillips before you came to work here.’

‘Your mother will have me thrown out if I break her rules, and then where would I be?’ Jane sounded both defiant and resigned at the same time. ‘On the streets is where. I need this job, Miss. Ma can barely afford to feed the younger ones as it is.’ Jane folded up her letter, tucked it into her apron pocket, then caught the strings and retied them behind her back.
Mina’s cheeks burned. ‘I’m sorry, Jane. I didn’t mean it that way.’

‘I know,’ Jane said with a sad smile. ‘You just enjoy your time at school while you still can. You’ll be caring for little ones soon enough, whether your own or someone else’s.’

The only thing that made Mina more nervous than the thought of going away to school was the thought of leaving it in a few years and taking a job as a governess, like her mother wanted her to do. She struggled to find a change in subject. ‘Who’s the letter from?’ was the best she could come up with.

Jane blinked. ‘The letter? Oh, it’s from Nettie. She’s settling in well with the Williamsons. Good thing, too. Her first position was a complete disaster.’

‘Oh. I’m glad.’ Mina stared down at the cobbles. Nettie was Jane’s older sister, who’d been their maid-in-training before Jane. She’d been rude to Mina whenever she could get away with it.

‘So am I.’

‘Anyway, I’d better let Mother know I’m home.’ Mina started edging towards the door.

‘Yes. And I suppose I’d better get back to work. Your poor mother must despair of me making a mess of the kitchen every day.’

‘No, she doesn’t. Just yesterday she told me how pleased she is with how much you’ve learnt,’ Mina lied. Her mother hadn’t said anything of the sort, but Mina reasoned that if Nettie, who’d set fire to the curtains on several occasions, could find a job, then so could Jane.

‘Did she really?’ Jane beamed.

Mina nodded and fled through the open back door, into the musty half-light of the storeroom where the shop supplies were kept.
MARNIE FORBES ELDRIDGE

Marnie is a theatre practitioner, writer, actor and director, having worked with the Royal Shakespeare Company, RADA, and many other theatres and schools throughout the UK. When she was little, she wanted to be a cowboy, a detective, an archaeologist and a time traveller; she settled for creating stories and being all those things.

Marnie was born in Germany, was Canadian until she was 11, and now lives near Avebury with her husband and two daughters. She was named Marjorie but couldn’t pronounce that and called herself Marnie. The name stuck, as did the love of adventure, stories, myth and folklore. Her world is one of the contemporary, that dances with the classical, fantastic and mysterious.

About The Code in the Castle

Work out codes, navigate hidden passageways and find the answers to puzzles in this contemporary Famous Five meets Sherlock Holmes STEM adventure.

Mikey Midwinter loves codes, The Hound of the Baskervilles and mysteries, so when for the winter holidays he visits his cousins at Crag Castle, the scene is set for an adventure to take place.

Strange lights signal across the moor at night. Secret tunnels are found within the heart of the castle. Mysterious codes are left for the children and then Uncle Aary goes missing...

It’s a race against time to crack the codes, find the missing scientist and stop the terrorists.

Can the children work it out?

The game is afoot.

mmforbeseldridge@gmail.com | @MForbesEldridge
THE CODE IN THE CASTLE

Chapter One

Crag Castle

It was the perfect night to start an adventure. The full moon was huge in the star-laden sky, it cast an eerie blue glow over the desolate moor. Trees skirted the granite outcrop that was crowned by the stark and brooding Crag Castle. An old estate car, loaded down for the winter holidays, snaked its way towards the shadowy building.

Inside the vehicle, two children were finding ways to remove the boredom of the long journey. Technology had been abandoned as mobile signals were no longer picked up and they were using pens and paper, creating puzzles and codes. Mum was humming along to Christmas tunes on the radio as they drove towards their destination.

Mikey watched the dark world slip past his window. Strange silhouettes outside infiltrated his thoughts. Some, he thought, were animals. It made his heart quicken and his mind race with the mysterious possibilities of what they could be. He held his copy of The Hound of the Baskervilles close and hoped they were the famed ponies of this moor and not something more sinister.

‘Careful Mum,’ said Mikey. ‘Don’t hit them.’

‘I won’t, don’t worry. It’s quite unnerving though, with those eyes shining in the dark.’

Mikey’s sister, Bel, glanced up from the piece of paper she was writing on. ‘Especially with no streetlamps.’ Her phone illuminated her face as she used it to see the code she was trying to work out. ‘Have you noticed there aren’t any, even in the villages we’ve passed through?’
‘That’s because it’s a Dark Skies Reserve,’ replied Mikey.
‘A what?’
Mum called back to them. ‘I think it was one of Europe’s first. No lights at night. No light pollution. We’ll get some amazing views of the stars over the moor after dark.’
‘How odd,’ muttered Bel. ‘Is that why my phone won’t work? It’s a dead zone?’
‘No, that’s to do with coverage.’ Mikey rolled his eyes. Sometimes his sister really was moronic. She was old enough to have a phone, so she should at least understand it. He would, if he had one.
As he stared at the stars, he was glad he’d packed his binoculars. ‘There should be more skies like these, we can learn to read them again.’ Bel laughed. ‘It’s the twenty-first century not the nineteenth.’
A car came hurtling towards them, its lights on full beam. Mum slowed down, shielding her eyes. ‘Jeepers!’
‘What was that?’ Bel cried out.
Mikey turned and watched the car disappear into the night. He only managed to catch the first part of its registration plate, but he did see flashing blue lights within.
‘An idiot,’ replied Mum, and she continued to drive.
‘An unmarked police car,’ said Mikey, taking his torch out and noting the information down.
‘How do you know?’ Bel asked.
‘I just do. I know things. Was it coming from Crag Castle?’
‘The direction of it,’ answered Mum. ‘I’m sure everything’s fine. Made me jump though.’
‘There’s nothing else down here is there, no other roads?’ asked Mikey.
‘A farm,’ said Mum.
‘Interesting,’ muttered Mikey, then he turned to Bel. ‘Have you figured it out yet?’
‘Yup, here you go.’ She passed him the piece of paper she’d been writing on. As she brushed her short blond hair out of her eyes, she waited for his verdict.
Mikey turned his torch on again and studied it, then said, ‘That’s right. Well done.’

‘What’s the good of a coded message if it’s easy to crack?’ asked Bel.

‘You had the key to the code, so it should be easy.’ Mikey turned away from his sister shaking his head. ‘Without the key it’s just lines and dots, unless of course you understand cyphers and their history.’ He wrote on another bit of paper and passed it to her. ‘Here, try this. Without the key.’

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‘That’s what happened in the Second World War; we had to try and work out the German codes. They used something called an Enigma Machine to encrypt all their messages. The coding system was changed every day. So, there was no key.’

Bel took the paper and said, ‘You were there were you?’

‘Very funny,’ said Mikey. ‘I meant the collective “we”.’

‘Ooh the “collective”! Why don’t you just say the Allies, like any normal ten-year-old?’ Bel leaned forward to see if she could sneak a view of the key she’d just used.

But Mikey folded the paper up and put it in his notebook. ‘No one is normal,’ he said.

There was a laugh from Mum. ‘Come on you two, don’t be mean to each other. Not long till we get there.’

Mikey watched as Bel tried to remember the key to the code she’d just used. It wasn’t that difficult. Pig-Pen was well-known. He looked at his notebook and the codes and ciphers page he’d created.
Yes, he knew this one off by heart. If Bel spent more time reading rather than texting her friends, she might know things like this. Maybe there was an app for codes? He would have to ask her and see if he could check. That would be useful.

Perhaps when he got a phone, he wouldn’t need notebooks and pens. It wasn’t long before he went to senior school and would be allowed one.

No, he liked writing things down. And what if technology failed and they couldn’t rely on it?

Mum turned the radio down and glanced back at them. ‘It’ll be nice to spend the holidays altogether again. Are you excited about seeing your cousins?’

‘I’m looking forward to seeing where they live,’ replied Mikey. ‘How come they can afford to live in a castle, and we can’t?’

‘Uncle Aary is just a tad richer than Mum, in fact any normal person,’ said Bel putting her paper and pencil down. ‘I can’t do it. I need the key.’

‘See, it isn’t as easy as you thought. If you’d remembered it, you would’ve been able to decipher what I’d written.’ Mikey took the paper out of his notebook and gave it to his sister. ‘I thought Uncle Aary was a scientist for the government. They don’t get paid much.’

There was a snort from the front seat and Mum said, ‘Depends what you work on. Anyways, he comes from money.’

‘Wish we did,’ said Bel as she finished writing down the answer and handed it to him. ‘Very funny.’

**My brother is a brilliant code master.**

Mikey ignored her and looked out at the silhouetted landscape. Trees lined either side of the road as it rose steadily. He caught a glimpse of what looked like a giant bat on the horizon. It had to be the outline of Crag Castle. His breath came out quickly and he bit his lip in expectation.

As the car came to a stop the children tumbled out and stretched their aching legs. Their breath smoked the air and they grabbed their fleeces.
It might only be half-past five, but it was cold and dark. The gravel crunched under their feet and they could smell woodsmoke and pine.

The castle looked as though it had been carved from the rocky hill. Mikey couldn’t tell where manmade met nature. It loomed over them and made him shiver in the winter night. He pulled his hoodie closer and grabbed his rucksack, stuffing his things from the journey inside, but keeping *The Hound of the Baskervilles* out, like a talisman. The moon appeared from behind a cloud and its light illuminated the courtyard. Mysterious, eerie and exciting. He gazed at the ornately carved building that had a tower in the middle and his heart beat faster.

‘We’ve come to Baskerville Hall,’ he whispered and held his paperback close.

Bel laughed. ‘It’s a castle not a hall, Sherlock. We already knew that they lived here. I hope it’s got central heating.’

Mikey was lost for words as they made their way up the steps to the immense wooden door.

‘I can’t imagine your aunt living somewhere cold and draughty.’ Mum lifted the heavy knocker in the shape of a fierce cat-like creature. It was fitting for a building situated on a moor that was fabled to have a beast.

Mikey glanced behind them expecting to see a huge black panther.

Bel didn’t look up, but continued focusing on her phone and muttered, ‘I still haven’t got a signal.’

‘Well at least you’ve got a phone.’ Mikey stared at the door as it opened with a loud creak.
Chapter Two

Inside the Castle

A petite blond lady stood framed in the large stone archway. Light spilled out and illuminated their entrance.

‘Immy, children, it’s so good to see you,’ she gushed, and the two women hugged tightly. ‘Mrs Wright, please get the rest of their things from the car and take them to their rooms.’

Mrs Wright, a cylindrical shaped woman with short black hair, and dressed in red, stepped forward. ‘Yes, Madam.’ She took the keys off Mum and reminded Mikey of a fire extinguisher, ready to burst. ‘Joe. Here, now. Come and help me,’ she barked.

A boy, about Bel’s age, scurried towards her. His head was down, and he was wearing dark clothes that clung to his thin form. He glanced up at the children and stared at Mikey’s book. Good taste. Mikey grinned at him, but Joe looked down and followed the ‘fire extinguisher’.

‘Madam, hey?’ Mum laughed as Auntie Jess ushered them into the surprisingly cosy hall. ‘This is amazing. How are you all settling in?’

‘Oh, we’re here, we’re managing. Come on, warm yourself by the fire.’ She laughed a little too hard. ‘It’s bitter out there. You never know, it may snow.’

There was a massive fireplace at the far end. The crackling of wood burning, and the smell of smoke took the chill of the night from them. Each wall had tapestries that gave the place warmth and comfort. It wasn’t what Mikey had expected. Castles should have weapons and suits of armour, battlements and moats, heraldry and portraits, but this was decidedly more... homely.

‘Lovely,’ said Mum.

‘There are only a few rooms sorted, this being one of them. I mean, it’s the first place you come into.’ Auntie Jess gestured around her.

‘It’s warm,’ stated Bel in her usual, obvious manner. Mikey continued to take it all in.
‘It’s big,’ said Auntie Jess. ‘It’s only been three months and there’s so much to do. Aary’s totally focused on his work and it’s got rooms enough for him. Which is good. He can experiment and toil to his heart’s content. But it’s difficult to keep an eye on where the children are and...’

‘A perfect playground.’ Mum took her sister’s hand. ‘And the children are of an age to look out for themselves.’

Mikey couldn’t see his cousins, Anil and Tilly, anywhere.

‘Really? I suppose you could look at it like that,’ said Auntie Jess. ‘Bel, I can’t believe you’re at senior school now. You look so grown up.’

She turned to Mikey, who was busy looking at the several radiators. Of course, the castle had central heating, it was modern, not like the ancient ones he’d studied. His sister may be older than him, but sometimes she didn’t think logically. She really needed to read more Sherlock Holmes.

Auntie Jess ruffled his mousy brown hair and said, ‘Gosh, haven’t you grown?'

Taken aback at being treated like a dog, he looked at his aunt and said, ‘Well of course I have, I’m not a baby. I’m far more suited to senior school than Bel.’

Bel laughed and said, ‘Maybe intellectually, but not emotionally.’

‘Ha, ha.’ Mikey turned to his sister and said, ‘I’ll have you know—’

‘Auntie Jess doesn’t want to hear your bickering,’ said Mum. ‘It was meant as a term of endearment.’

‘Oh, gosh yes Mikey. I didn’t mean to—’

‘Perhaps they could dump their stuff and see their rooms?’ said Mum.

‘That’s a good idea.’ Auntie Jess walked to the staircase and pressed a button on the side of the balustrade. ‘Anil will be down in a minute.’

‘What’s that?’ Mikey went closer to get a better look. There was a doorbell with a wire snaking its way up and then vanishing.

‘We’ve fitted it so we don’t have to run up and down the stairs when we need to speak to someone,’ said Auntie Jess. ‘You can’t get a phone signal here and Wi-Fi is unpredictable due to the thick stone walls, so
we’ve reverted to the old ways of getting people’s attention. This goes to
the first floor where the bedrooms are. Only Tilly has decided to move
her room to the tower, so she won’t hear it. Anil will take you up to her.’

Mikey was delighted and asked, ‘Does each room have a bell to the
kitchen area as well?’

‘It does.’

‘Why don’t you use Wi-Fi through the electricity to get in touch
with them?’ Mikey began examining the bell and the wire. He would
have to investigate this further. He thought Uncle Aary was a scientist,
so why hadn’t he solved this problem?

Auntie Jess looked taken aback by the question and said, ‘You’d have
to ask Uncle Aary about that.’

‘Is Tilly okay?’ Mum looked concerned.

‘Oh, I don’t know,’ said Auntie Jess. ‘She hates it here. The move
hasn’t been a smooth one for her, she misses her friends. So, for some
reason, she’s decided the safest place is the tower, and has moved her
bedroom there. I rarely see her.’

‘Well, when she sees her cousins she’s bound to come around,’ said
Mum. ‘It’s always hard moving.’

Mikey laughed, and they all looked at him. ‘You’re right, moving
school, changing friends every couple of years, it takes its toll.’

Mum frowned. ‘We’re talking about Tilly, not you.’

‘We’ll go and see her,’ said Bel.

‘That would be lovely. Thank you.’ Auntie Jess turned to the stairs
and called out, ‘Anil, look! They’ve arrived!’

A boy a bit older than Bel bounded down to greet them. His floppy
black hair fell over his face.

Mum stepped forward and gave him a hug. ‘Gosh, haven’t you grown?’

‘Well it would be a bit odd if he hadn’t,’ muttered Mikey. Why were
grown-ups obsessed with how much children had grown?
L. J. Moss devoured so much fantasy growing up that she became a fictional character herself, embodying bits of all the books she ever read. She’s been a pierrot, poet, play director, artist, therapist, teacher, strawberry picker, and storyclub inventor. Part fable, part fairytale, she wanders through the woods between worlds, stalking persnickety protagonists and their paradoxical plots.

About Marley Jones and the Pandora Plot

*Don’t go into those woods.*

*Don’t open that door.*

*Don’t unlock that box.*

*Ever!*

Should Marley open the locked box she gets at a car boot sale? Well, you would, wouldn’t you? Especially if the box had a sticker on it, proclaiming FREE GIFTS INSIDE. But what if the box is actually a dangerous magical artefact? What if sinister people are on its trail? And what if the things inside the box were locked in there for a reason? Would you think again? Will Marley?

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Police were called in today after a spate of Halloween robberies. Only antique and vintage shops were targeted, mainly in Camden Passage. Rosina Greener, 39, of Sleek Anteeks, said that a woman in a grey hooded cloak had visited her premises just before the burglary. A vintage wooden box was taken, and gold coins were left in its place. The coins later turned into buttons.

There were also reports of gangs wearing dark suits and face masks at the Chapel Market carnival, mingling with partygoers in fancy dress. They might have been taking advantage of the Halloween festivities to commit criminal acts, said Amos Lamp, 57, landlord of The Flying Rook.

Mr Lamp said he had to ask some of the masked men to leave his premises when they chased a cloaked woman through the main bar, shouting, ‘We’re losing hope.’

The men caused a lot of damage to his little round tables, his collection of shiny horse brasses, and very interesting beer mats.

It was thought the woman might be the same one who was seen in Camden Passage. After she left The Flying Rook through a locked door, she apparently vanished into thin air.
Chapter One

The Seventy-Two Steps

There were seventy-two steps up to the top floor flat in the Peabody Estate in Islington, where Marley lived with Gran. Marley counted the steps each time she climbed all the way up and each time she went all the way down.

She had lived there for as long as she could remember. When Marley looked out of the window to the south-west, she could see right across London. London was often dull and grey, but on a winter evening, when the sun set, orange and golden light lit up the tower blocks and the distant top of St Paul’s, and the city looked unearthly and strange.

It felt to Marley as if the little flat was floating high above the ordinary world.

Looking down from the kitchen window at the other side, she saw the blocks of flats opposite, the car park, and the pram sheds. There was a battered old Mini in the car park which never went anywhere. Some of the children jumped on its roof and smashed its windows. They looked as if they were having fun.

Being so high up above the street felt safe. When the wind rattled the windows of the brick Victorian building, Marley sometimes imagined herself in the countryside, with trees all around, full of apples, and cows standing underneath them, with their mournful, beautiful faces. She had never been to the countryside, but in her mind it was a bit like Highbury Fields, all green grass and no traffic.

Her gran, on the other hand, grew up in the countryside, somewhere in deepest Dorset. In the kitchen, there were postcards pinned to the cork noticeboard, showing fields, and cows, and birds, and the sea.

‘I’ll go back one day,’ Gran said, ‘and I’ll take you with me, Marley. You’ll love it. It’s not always easy living there, but there’s real magic at the heart of it.’
‘More magic than here? More magic than the Angel?’ Marley said, looking out at the golden light over London.

‘Yes,’ said Gran. ‘One day...’ She sighed.

In the meantime, they lived here, on Greenman Street, where there wasn’t much magic at all. Sometimes, when Gran had enough money, they went down the seventy-two steps, across the square, past the Green Man pub and the tiny park, and ate lunch at Luba’s Place; borsht and blinis, and sometimes, potato dumplings.

They had no garden, but herbs flourished in their window boxes; mint, camomile, sage, lemon balm and thyme. Marley loved to brush her fingers through them and smell their sweet scents.

On the corner opposite, there was a taxidermist’s: Mayhap & Son. They passed it whenever they went down the Essex Road to the Angel, to Chapel Market, and Marley always lingered outside, looking in the window. The stuffed animals were very lifelike. Sometimes, when the light fell on them in a particular way, their eyes glinted, and they almost seemed to move.

Marley was used to her life in Islington.

She didn’t expect anything to change.

Until, one day, it did.

Chapter Two

Halloween

It was the end of October: almost Halloween.

‘The clocks will turn back soon for the winter,’ Gran said.

Down at the Angel, Chapel Market looked sparkly in the late afternoon. As dusk fell, all the usual stalls – vegetable stalls, sari fabric stalls, cheese stalls, flower stalls – lit up with little skull lights, glowing spiders and luminous skeletons.

Pumpkins flew off the shelves.
People queued to buy fancy dress: witch, ghost, and demon costumes, and themed masks of all kinds, from Anubis, the Egyptian dog-headed god, to Zombie Apocalypse monsters. A boy in torn, ragged clothes played haunting, ghostly music on the fiddle, and passers-by threw coins into his hat.

Marley and Gran walked past The Flying Rook, heading for M. Manzes, the world-famous pie place. They wanted pie and mash and gravy for tea, and then they’d watch the Halloween carnival procession.

After, Gran bought chestnuts to roast in the oven at home, and a new jam pan. Marley bought a Halloween toffee apple. It wasn’t real toffee on the apple, just a brittle red sugary crust. Marley crunched through it to the crisp sharpness of the fruit below.

‘*Trick or treat! Trick or treat!*’ A crowd of demons and witches jostled Marley as they ran past. Their banging Halloween music drowned out the fiddle player.

Marley laughed as she was pushed sideways by a werewolf, then spun around by a small witch. The witch kept on spinning her round until she was dizzy, and wouldn’t stop, and Marley dropped her half-eaten toffee apple. She felt sick and shivery, and a bit scared, now.

She couldn’t see Gran anymore, and she was carried along by the crowd until they all turned the corner, leaving her alone, and for one awful moment she thought she was lost. She hesitated, then walked further along the street, which had no name. Footsteps crunched along behind her and she saw an immensely tall, thin, grey creature reflected in the window of an empty shop.

She felt a cold, crawling kind of fear. She couldn’t move. The creature came close, closer...

Then she heard the busker again. He pointed at her with his bow and nodded towards a turning. She ran back that way, her heart pumping hard, until she saw the painted rook on its swinging pub sign, near Baron Street. This was where she was to meet Gran, if they were ever separated, since Gran knew Amos Lamp, the landlord. As Marley waited, two men passed by, wearing dark suits and masks which covered their eyes.
‘There’s been a sighting, Bolger,’ one of them muttered to the other.
‘All forces are mobilised. Fear Liath’s here.’
Marley thought they were actors, part of the carnival.
More of the masked men and women gathered in twos and threes,
waiting for something.
The air parted like an opening curtain.
Horses leapt through the gap, hooves clattering on the concrete street. They were a bright, shining silver. Their long manes and tails streamed out behind them, leaving a trail of glitter sparkling in the dusky air. They cantered through the market, ten or twenty of them, riderless. People clapped and cheered, moving to the sides of the street to let them through.
Marley wriggled between the legs of the crowd until she was at the front. She barely noticed the hunched, miserable man in an overcoat and trilby hat who appeared from nowhere and stood silently beside her.
She stared at the horses. Each one had a pointed horn on its head that was barely visible – seemingly made from silvery flames and mist – and feathery, flickering wings.
‘Unicorn, Dada,’ said a little boy.
‘No such thing as unicorns,’ said his dad.
The unicorns were heading towards Marley. At the last moment, they veered off down Baron Street, towards White Lion Street, passing so close she could almost touch them.
The last unicorn paused in front of Marley and lowered its head. Its silver horn glimmered, and its eyes sparkled. She held out her hand, but the tall, miserable man stepped quickly in front of her. The air around him shimmered, and with a pop! he was gone, and the unicorn too. Marley spun round, looking for them, but the tall man and the unicorn were nowhere to be seen. The air parted again, and the other unicorns charged through and vanished, leaving a ringing silence behind them and a circle of silver flames. And in the silence, the fiddler began to play, and sing some curious words: ‘Come away, O human child, to the water, and the wild...’
One silver feather came spinning through the air, out of the silver circle, and Marley caught it.

Then the carnival drumming started up, and ghouls and demons went dancing through Chapel Market.

Hidden among them, a grey-cloaked, grey-haired woman twirled, and danced, and laughed, and wherever she went, people felt light-hearted and filled with courage, without knowing how, or why.

And Gran found Marley, finally, at the Flying Rook, and cried because she had thought she was lost. They walked back to Greenman Street, past the Angel tube station, through Camden Passage.

Marley saw the dark-suited people in masks again, lurking in shop doorways.

But Gran just told her to walk faster and look straight ahead.

Marley felt weary as she climbed the seventy-two steps to the top flat. She looked out at the street below, where she saw witches and goblins and ghouls making their way home from trick-or-treating.

She put the unicorn’s silver feather away in her tin of buttons and interesting things. They had just started to eat their chestnuts when there was a banging on the front door.

‘Trick... or treat?’

Gran peered through the peephole.

It was two women in dark suits and masks.

She did not open the door.

That night, Marley’s dreams were all of unicorns, and ghouls, and flying rooks, and green, wild, watery places.
Chapter Three

Counting Stars

A week later, Gran told Marley they were moving away from Islington.

‘We can’t stay here; there’s danger coming. I can feel it. We’re going to live near a village in the countryside. It’s the old house where I grew up. People there moved on; lucky for us. It’s a bit of a mess, but we can make it into our home.’

Marley was somewhat disappointed.

Gran had been wrong about London not being magic.

After all, you couldn’t get anything much more magical than a herd of winged unicorns stampeding through the middle of Chapel Market in Islington, one late afternoon at Halloween.

The old house was strange and cold and unfriendly. Living in the countryside was not like Marley expected, and whenever she couldn’t sleep, she imagined herself back in London, counting the seventy-two steps, up and down, up and down, up and down. When she woke next day, she’d think for a second she was back there. Until she heard birds calling instead of sirens blaring, and the wind whistling in the trees instead of the roar of traffic, and she remembered...

After a while, the house seemed to accept Marley, and it became comfortable and warm and lived in.

And at last, before she went to sleep each night, Marley looked up at the sky and counted stars, instead of steps. She forgot about London.

This place, Tinbury, in Dorset, was home now.
The body of a woman wrapped in a grey cloak was found in a ditch beside an overturned van in the early hours of Sunday morning, according to a jogger who does not wish to be named, but whose sweatshirt bore the words: Team MacBoodle.

There was no form of identification on the body, or in the van, apart from a silver chain around the woman’s neck with the letter H and several odd-shaped charms on it. She was not known in the area, but she had been seen at the Grimstone Car Boot Sale on Saturday.

Two men were spotted in the distance, running away from the crash site across the neighbouring field. There is no evidence to link them with the incident.

The body of the woman later disappeared from the scene before the ambulance arrived, the ambulance having been delayed by a tree falling across the road during a freak storm.
BELINDA STEPHENS

When not reading to the fairies in the rotary dryer pole hole, school-aged Belinda dreamt up adventures as she roamed the Fens on pony or bike.

For ten years, she toured with London theatre companies and reviewed for The Stage, before moving to Dorset to start a family and work as a Youth Service drama advisor and staff reporter for The Western Gazette. Twenty years ago, she became a primary and dyslexia teacher. Belinda loves working with young people and discovering what makes them tick. She also loves exploring distant lands and ancient places and going to sea in anything that floats.

Jack in Time was longlisted for the Bath Children’s Novel Award, 2019.

About Jack in Time

Granny’s died, Mum and Dad have split up, and now the new boy in school is threatening Jack’s status as Luther’s best friend. Wishing he could go back to a time before all that happened, Jack gets more than he bargained for when, on a school museum trip, a vintage bus whisks him away to Dorset – and 1944.

Befriended by Bertie, a feisty female evacuee, he discovers surprising reserves of courage and resilience as the pair confront life – and death – in an unpredictable world of bullies, bombs and broken families.

By staying to help his wartime friend secure her future, Jack risks giving up his own. Will he manage to find the last bus back to the twenty-first century before it’s too late?

bj7796@googlemail.com | @BelindaBoo7
I got to school to find a stranger sitting in my seat. Next to my best friend. Miss Lyatt’s used to me scraping into class a bit late. Usually, she just tells me to sit down, but this time she said, ‘Good morning, Jack. We have a new boy joining us today.’ She stretched out her arm like a TV host introducing some kind of A-list celebrity. ‘This is Ben. I’d like you and Luther to be his school buddies – look after him until he finds his feet.’

‘But,’ I said, so that only she could hear, ‘he’s in my seat.’

‘But,’ she said, so that everyone could hear, ‘there’s a seat right next to him, Jack. I’m sure it’s just as good. Go and sit down, please, we need to get on.’

It wasn’t just as good. It was next to some blond, sporty-looking kid I’d never met before. It was not next to Luther, my best friend since Reception. We do everything together. Well, nearly.

Ben looked a bit nervous as I walked towards them. Good. I ignored him and high-fived Lu.

He grinned. ‘Alright? Anyway, Ben, like I said, I belong to the All Stars Football Academy and we’re always looking for new members, so—’

‘Now listen carefully, Year Six. We’re leaving for the living history museum just after nine tomorrow.’ Miss Lyatt looked straight at me. ‘Don’t be late, or we’ll have to go without you. And remember to arrive in your evacuee outfits.’ Her eyes lit up. ‘This trip will be an excellent way to bring our project to life.’
Everyone began talking about what they were going to wear and who they wanted to sit next to on the coach. I didn’t need to ask Luther – it’s a given. We always sit together. I glared at Ben, but he was looking the other way.

Luther makes me laugh. He said he was going to come dressed in his cousin’s nurse outfit, a tin helmet and a gas mask. He’s the tallest, most muscly kid in the class, even without the height of his Afro. I could just imagine it. He wouldn’t really though. He’s as good as gold for the teachers.

Mum had cut off a pair of old school trousers to make me some shorts and found a blue sleeveless pullover in a charity shop. With the grey shirt and black lace-ups I’d worn at Dad’s wedding, I looked, pretty much, the real deal. I haven’t worn them since the wedding. New things are always uncomfortable.

At break, the playground was a total war zone. We zoomed round with our arms stretched wide, whining like planes in the Battle of Britain, exploding with the sound of bombs and machine gun fire. There was a lot of spying too, and creeping round corners.

I grabbed Luther. ‘Quick. Let’s hide from Ben round the back of the hall. He doesn’t know the school layout yet. He’ll never find us there.’

‘Better not. We’re s’posed to be looking after him. He’ll think we don’t want him around.’

_Exactly._

Lu’s thoughtful like that. But I wanted him to be thinking about me, not Ben.

After break, we all covered boxes with brown paper and added string to make gas mask holders. Then we wrote our names on luggage labels to wear with our outfits. People were passing secret messages under the desks until Miss Lyatt found Kyle’s on the floor. She said it was ‘highly inappropriate’ and, if she came across any more of that language, we wouldn’t be going on the trip at all. Then she said, ‘before lunch, we’ll carry on with our research into what happened to those poor soldiers stationed in Devon in 1944. What can you remember so far? Jack?’
History’s one thing I am good at. That, and making up stories.

‘It was a rehearsal for landing in France on D-Day. Exercise Tiger, they called it. They filled the bay at Slapton Sands with boats full of soldiers who had to jump into the sea and invade the beach while their friends fired over their heads from the cliffs. They even used real ammo.’

‘Well remembered. And how might the soldiers have felt, practising with live ammunition? Ben?’

‘Like a boy band rehearsing a song they don’t know in front of a live audience?’

Luther laughed. So did a lot of the girls. I didn’t. It wasn’t even funny.

‘I think it would have been brilliant,’ said Kyle. ‘Till those German E-boats turned up and torpedoed them all.’

‘On my birthday, that was,’ Priya said. ‘Twenty-seventh of April.’

Kyle glared. ‘Twenty-eighth, actually.’

‘Well, a number of things went wrong over those two days, so you’re both right,’ said Miss Lyatt. ‘Carry on with your research everyone. You can work in pairs.’

I wanted to share an iPad with Luther, but he was having a sneaky peek at the footy results.

‘Wanna share this one?’ Ben asked.

‘No thanks.’ I got a book from the display table and moved my chair next to Lu’s.

‘Look.’ I nudged him. ‘It says here the US and UK radio signals weren’t set the same, so the soldiers on the cliffs didn’t get the message not to start and shot all their friends by mistake. Whoa. At least seven hundred and fifty dead. In two days. Some rehearsal.’

Luther wasn’t listening. He was scowling at the scores. ‘They made some fatal errors and lost the game.’

On the way to lunch, I tripped and totally shredded my knee. If it had just been Luther there, to be honest, I’d have probably cried and he’d have taken me to the office to get cleaned up. But when Ben gave me a tissue and asked if I was okay, I made out it was no big deal. It really was though.
‘Seems alright, doesn’t he?’ Lu whispered while Ben was in the toilet. I shrugged and dabbed my knee with a wet paper towel.

Ben hung round us for the rest of the day, saying stuff like, ‘Oh, you’re really good at history, Jack;’ and, ‘Oh, I wish I could play football as good as you, Luther.’

’Course, I could see through all that. There’s no way he could be as nice as he made out. But I was still worried Lu might fall for it.

After school, instead of getting a lift home with Mum and my kid brother, Will, I walked back with Luther as far as the corner shop. Until a couple of months ago, Granny picked us up every day. But then she got ill and couldn’t do it anymore. She always had a bag of humbugs in the glove compartment and smelled of homemade cakes when she hugged. I cried loads when she died.

‘Fancy coming down the Rec later?’ Lu asked.

‘Nah, not really.’

Bad things always happen outdoors. I either get picked on cos I’m rubbish at football, or I fall off my bike or get stung by wasps. I prefer staying in and playing video games. That way, I get to call the shots.

‘How about I beat you on Warrior World Two? Again.’

Lu grinned. ‘You’re welcome to try.’

The General’s the best character to play. He wears jet-pack boots, bullet-proof armour and his long-distance, X-ray vision means he can see where problems are, then sort them out with his special powers. He says, ‘injustice makes me angry’ a lot, and the angrier he gets, the more powerful he becomes. Like when Lu had a go at Kyle for calling me a loser. Kyle’s never bothered me since.

‘You’re on,’ I said. ‘Give me a minute to get set up – I’ll be online in ten.’

Lu headed home. ‘See ya then.’

‘Will’s having pizza for tea,’ said Mum, when I got in. ‘Or you can have beef stew with me. It’s lovely – been in the slow cooker while I’ve been at work.’
‘Pizza please. It’s easier to eat while I’m busy obliterating Lu’s warriors. But can you take off any pineapple?’

Barney trotted in, tail wagging, and dropped a ball at my feet. We’ve had him since I was two and I love him to bits, but once you start playing, he won’t let you to stop. Mum always takes him out after tea anyway. He’d waited all day; another hour wouldn’t make much difference. I dumped my bag on the kitchen floor and wandered into the living room. Will was already stretched out, watching TV. I picked up the remote to load WW2.

‘Can I play?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Cos you’re too young and too annoying. You can watch – but only if you keep your mouth shut and keep out of my way.’ I shoved his feet off the sofa and sat down.

‘Jack,’ Mum called from the kitchen. ‘Don’t be mean to your little brother. You’d miss him if he wasn’t there.’

I grinned at Will. ‘Doubt it.’

I do miss him, when he goes to stay with Dad and Kate. They always invite me too, but I’ve stopped going. It’s hard trying pretend things are still the same. How can they be? Anyway, they’ve got Bethany now. I’m not big on babies. Will was bad enough.

Lu and I played for a while until I blasted a hole in his spaceship and sent six of his crew plummeting to their deaths.

A message flashed onto the screen.

‘OK, you win. Going down the Rec to play footy with Ben. See you tomorrow.’
Chapter Two

‘That’s it, huddle together.’ The photographer waved his arms and leapt about like an excitable chimp. ‘Miss, can we have you in the middle, handing out a couple of name labels? That’s right. And could some of you children make the ‘V for Victory’ sign?’

‘Maybe not that,’ said Miss Lyatt. ‘Just wave, Year Six.’

She never missed a chance to get the school into The Gazette. She’d arrived wearing a long raincoat, a red beret and her hair all crimped in waves. She was even using a real gas mask box to carry her packed lunch. Everyone looked amazing – just like real evacuees.

The sky turned that kind of weird yellow that comes before a storm. Miss Lyatt hurried us onto the coach. I made sure I got in the queue behind Luther, so we had to sit together, but she put him next to Ryan, as that was the next free seat, and told me and Ben to sit opposite, across the aisle. It meant I was by the window and had to keep leaning over Ben to talk to Luther. I couldn’t handle two hours of that.

‘Lu,’ I whispered. ‘Swap seats with Ben. Come and sit next to me.’

‘Better not. It’s alright like it is.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Fine. If you’d rather sit next to him.’

‘Don’t be stupid.’

‘Oh. Great. Thanks very much. Go on, then. Talk to him.’

‘Thanks.’ He laughed. ‘I will.’

I turned my back on them, folded my arms and glared out of the window. I knew Ben would cause a problem. The skin round my nails was already sore, but I chewed them anyway. We were fine as we were. We didn’t need Ben. Plus, if it wasn’t for Lu picking me for his footy team every playtime, I’d have literally nothing to do.

It was Luther’s birthday the weekend after next. His mum and dad had planned a guided tour of Swindon County Ground and a coaching session followed by pizza and the match. It sounded brilliant. Everyone wanted to go, but Swindon F.C. only allows fourteen kids to a party. Lu had given me the only invite that wasn’t taken up by his All Stars
Academy team. But what if he subbed me for Ben?

I shoved my hands in my pockets to stop me biting my nails and found the toy ticket machine I’d brought to put on the project table. Granny was only little during the war. It was her favourite thing. It was made of silver tin with a dial showing four numbers, probably to count tickets, and when you turned the handle to get one out, it rang a bell. Except there weren’t any tickets. Toys were so lame in the old days.

I stared through the rain on the windows. Mum had already left for work, but a few other parents had stayed to wave us off. As the coach pulled away, Miss Lyatt said, ‘Try to imagine how it must have felt to be a real evacuee, split up from your family and friends, not knowing when – or if – you’d ever see them again. Aren’t you all lucky you’ll be home in time for tea? Now, everyone, when we get there, I want you to remember...’

I wasn’t really listening. All I could hear was Luther banging on about his All Stars team to Ben. If only I could go back to a time before Ben joined the school, I thought, and all the other bad stuff in my life happened.

Granny’s ticket machine felt warm in my hand. *Be careful what you wish for*, she whispered in my head.
Yarrow Townsend

Yarrow spent most of her childhood in the woods, pretending to be characters from books. She especially liked the ones where children had to survive on their own. In 2009, she went to Oxford to study English and French Literature, where she discovered that the Botanic Garden was the perfect place to revise for exams. After university, she became an English teacher. Yarrow now works for the RSPB in the New Forest, helping people find secret paths through the woods, and fulfilling her lifelong dream of learning to use a chainsaw. She also writes poetry, most recently published in the SO:Write Women’s Anthology.

About The Wild River

Twelve-year-old Orla can talk to plants. Since Ma died of the River Sickness, they’ve been her only friends in the grim village of Black Creek. When Orla is kidnapped by Haulers on their way up the Wild River, she discovers she’s not the only child with uncanny powers. The Haulers are searching for a powerful mineral called Pitchstone, and they’ve stolen three children who can help them navigate the wild: Idris, who speaks to the water; Ariana, who talks to the birds; and Orla, who wants nothing more than to return home. But when she discovers the truth about Pitchstone, Orla realises the whole forest is in danger. She must overcome her fear of the river, and gain the trust of the other children, if she’s going to keep the plants safe.

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Chapter One

Pine Tar

*Pinus sylvestris*

Forest Pine

The village of Black Creek should have been abandoned long ago. It was a shivering, damp, dead-end of a place, where wooden houses huddled together along a dark river, as though afraid they would fall into the churning stream or else be swallowed up by the forest. It was not a place for children, out among the foggy woods and wild things. Few knew how to survive there, and Orla Carson was one of them.

Twelve years old, Orla had coal-black hair and a frown that never left her face. She wore a pair of boy’s breeches that she never changed, an oilskin coat and a belt with room for at least one sharp blade. For as long as she could remember, her home had been the woodshed down by the river, away from the rest of the village. She’d lived there with Ma, and now that Ma was dead, she lived there alone with no help from anybody. She looked after the wild garden, and the wild garden looked after her. There was no need for anyone else.

Orla’s garden was so overgrown with plants that it looked as though the forest was trying to steal back the boggy patch of land. That afternoon, in the goose-grey light, Orla was knee-deep in nettles, hacking away at the undergrowth with Ma’s bone-handled knife.
It was the first day of September, and the season was changing. The plants were uneasy.

*Take it from the stem!* hissed the dock.

*You need more than two leaves,* the nettles said.

*No— just a little from the tip!* insisted the milfoil.

‘I know how to make the ointment,’ Orla tutted. She snatched the leaves as they fell and stuffed them into her pockets, but deep down, she was grateful for the advice. Her horse, Captain, was tied to the side of the woodshed, looking miserable. His hoof was half-rotten and she needed to draw out the infection before it got worse. Ma had known how to do it, but the summer had been poor in Black Creek and the plants had not grown well.

Orla pushed her damp hair away from her eyes and examined the leaves in the gloom. They were smaller than usual and flecked with black marks. She would be lucky if the ointment did anything at all.

The plants noticed her concern and hurried to whisper their opinions.

*Not those — they are sick!*— *more comfrey!* insisted the plants closest to the shed.

*More milfoil!* cried the marigolds.

*Pine sap and resin and tar,* they whispered. *Pine tar!*

‘Pine tar indeed,’ replied Orla, irritated, trudging back towards the horse. ‘You think I’ve got time to boil up that muck?’ She picked up Captain’s hoof. It smelled terrible and there was something oozing from the heel.

*Pine tar!* they said in chorus.

Orla shoved the plants into her stone mortar and hammered them to a pulp. ‘Will you just be quiet and let me work?’ But she added another comfrey leaf, like they’d said. Then, she lifted Captain’s hoof again and pasted on the green ointment.

‘Next time you escape, stay away from the village,’ she told him. ‘Nothing but glass and nails and trouble up there.’
Captain chewed benignly on the stick of willow she had given him, as though he had done nothing wrong. She let down his foot and patted his neck.

‘That ointment looks fine to me. You’ll feel better in no time.’

Thinking she would warm her hands by the stove, and perhaps heat up the last of the acorn coffee, Orla made to close the door. But as she did, the plants shivered in the wind.

‘What do you want?’ she snapped. ‘There’s no pine in the village, nor tar neither.’

*Pine from the borderwoods*, said the plants.

‘My ointment’s good— good as Ma’s. I don’t need no pine tar.’

*But it’s not enough*, said the water-pepper.

*The plants are sickly this year*, said the foxgloves.

*Pine, or he’ll die of infection*, said the bindweed.

She squinted in the direction of the woods: bone-grey trees standing in a watchful line.

There was no reason to feel uneasy. She’d never seen a bear or a wolf or even an elk in the forest, despite what the villagers said. But the thought of going without Captain made her stomach knot more than she cared to admit.

The plants were insistent.

*Dusk’s falling*, whispered the grass. *Birds are roosting.*

*Can’t wait another day— can’t wait*, called the dog-rose.

*You must*, said the white lilies.

When Ma had got the Sickness, she had given her one rule: listen to the plants. Orla sighed.

‘Fine,’ snapped Orla, grabbing her hat from the hook by the fire.

‘I’m going. I don’t want to have to steal another blasted horse if he goes and dies of infection. *Fine.*’ She was fond of Captain’s dark eyes and his snuffling breath, though she would never tell anyone that. Patting him on the flank, she strapped a saw to her back and tied on a sack for the pine. Captain blinked and tugged at his rope. Orla tightened the knot.
‘You’re staying here. I’ll come back soon and boil down that tar. Get your foot back to normal.’

She left the garden, ducking between juniper and bog-myrtle. They murmured in approval, but she was still uncertain. She walked warily along the riverbank towards the woods, watching the water run out of the forest like a spill of black ink. Its surface was disconcertingly still. Just like the villagers, the river was something she could never trust. It had made Ma sick, all those years ago, and for that reason, Orla never touched it.

Beneath the trees, Orla was suddenly aware of how quiet her footsteps were. It felt strange, not being on Captain’s broad back. The plants watched her as she followed the narrow path, and they said little. They were not like the plants in the garden. They kept their secrets close.

‘You’re not going to tell me how to find this pine, are you?’

There was no reply.

‘Fine,’ said Orla, trudging on. ‘I don’t need your help.’

A blackbird swooped across her path with a squawk. It was almost dusk. Ma had always said that your eyes were sharper when night began to fall. Orla scanned the forest for the pine trees among the ash and beech and oak. Trotting down a steep bank, she felt her pulse rise. She imagined herself as a bright-eyed hunter, as she had always done when she came to forage in the woods with Ma. While Ma collected morels and tinder-fungus, Orla would run and run, waving a stick and strapping fur round her neck like a Hauler. She’d never told Ma she’d played at being free like the men who’d come up the river to hunt. The men who’d called Ma ‘mad-woman’ and ‘witch’. The men who’d—

Watch your step, hissed a vine, cold and leafless on a holly tree. Orla’s attention flicked back to the woods. Ahead, the pines stood thin and silent, all in a row. Where there was pine, there would be sap.

Ma would have told her to ask the tree before taking, so that is what she did.

‘I’m going to take a little sap, if you please,’ said Orla, looking up at
the most promising tree. ‘It’s for my horse’s foot. It’s gone gammy and he might die and I need him. Many thanks.’

When nothing moved, Orla hooked the saw over her shoulder and began to climb the lower branches that stood out like brush-bristles from the trunk. The tree let out sap in places where it had been damaged, clotted like amber blood. Bear-hugging the trunk, she peeled a little away. The pine did not object, not in a way that she could hear. So she sawed away at a fist-size clump, the blade slipping easily into the hardened sap. She continued until her sack was filled with chunks of sweet-smelling sap, then shimmied down the trunk.

As she landed on the lowest branch, there was a sharp crack.

Orla clung to the trunk, expecting the branch to give way and send her tumbling to the ground, but it did not.

The noise had not come from the tree.

Orla held her breath and scanned the forest. No deer, no hunters. Just the soft sound of rain falling on a carpet of pine needles, and in the distance, the rumble of the river running through the forest. Still, it made her skin prickle. She did not want to be out here any longer than she needed to be. Nothing felt right today.

*Time to go*, said the plants.

Orla didn’t need telling twice. She lowered herself to the ground and strode back towards the river, taking a shortcut through the willows. Without Captain, she could fit beneath their twisting trunks. Their branches hung like strands of hair, clasping at her arms as she pushed her way home.

*Not this way*, they said.

‘Well, I’m here now, aren’t I?’ snapped Orla, refusing to turn around now she’d come this far. But a moment later, Orla wished she’d taken the forest path after all.

Emerging from the willows, Orla found herself closer to the river than she’d planned. Here, the water was no longer glassy still. It rumbled and thundered and crashed against rocks and fallen trees, lapping at Orla’s feet. She clung to the willow, pulling herself away from the water.
This was not right at all—the river was wilder than it had ever been. And now, something was moving towards her: a huge, dark shape that curled in the current and tore through the overhanging trees, cracking and groaning as it went. Orla gasped. This was the sound she had heard from the pine trees.

The sound of a boat being torn to pieces by the wild river.

There was an almighty crash, as loud as a tree falling in a storm. With an enormous ripping noise, the bow caught against a jagged rock. Orla leapt back as splinters of wood flew towards her, as big as her arm. The boat, pulled between the rock and the rushing water, tore in two, the wood screaming.

Clutching her sack of pine, Orla scrambled away from the water, terrified that it would touch her. She pulled herself into the lower branch of an alder, watching the water and the wood spilling beneath her.

There was no doubt about it: it was a Hauler’s boat. No one else was mad enough to go up the river. Orla shuddered. It was empty. No haul, no supplies, no men.

There was a flash of white in the water, dipping beneath the surface and then rising again, eerie pale.

‘What was that?’ she said, her voice shaking.

_Sickness_, said the weeds.

She should never have come this way. A Hauler boat was bad news. Jumping from the tree, she pulled herself onto a higher ledge of riverbank and the path that would lead back home. But as she turned, Orla made the mistake of looking back into the river.

A ghost-white face was drifting from the wreckage, moving fast. An arm bobbed above the surface a little way beyond. There were men in the water.

Orla shuddered. No—she did not need to see this.

She raced along the steep bank, down and down, back towards the village, through snatching brambles and tangled furze. Willow flicked in her face as she ran, sprinting—stumbling through the forest as the plants hissed _death and danger, run!_ Slipping and sliding, trying not to
look at whatever—whoever—was down in the water.

‘Let me through!’ she cried, pushing against the thicket on her left, desperate to take the forest path home. But it would not let her through: the riverbank was the only way back. And the plants were crying out too—so loud that Orla had to clap her hands to her ears as she ran.

*Death!* they chanted. *Death and disease and nothing good will come of it!*

‘Ah!’ yelped Orla, as the bank fell away into marshland, where willows spread like witch-hair into stubs of bog-myrtle and broom. Where the water slowed, Orla saw a white shape drift towards the shallow bank.

Dread filled her. She had not imagined the face in the water. Even in the low light, she could see it was the body of a Hauler—pale and bearded with sunken grey eyes, all wrapped up in a dark blue coat.

The plants twitched and trembled, feeling her distress.

*There’s someone here,* they warned her.

Orla looked beyond the body. There, in the middle of the river, was a boy. Idris: a Hauler’s son, and someone to leave well alone. His hands draped into the water as pieces of the boat drifted past him. He looked on in horror.

Orla turned away, nauseous. Whatever he was doing in there, that boy was none of her business. Captain needed her, and the garden needed her. She didn’t have time to deal with Haulers in the river.

‘Get out of the way!’ she cried, pushing into the bushes, wishing to get as far away from the dark river as she could. This time they let her through, muttering and whispering and tossing their stalks in the wind.
Karen grew up roaming the wild Aberdeenshire countryside, where adventure could be found by its sparkling rivers and crumbling castles. She studied graphic design at Falmouth University, and now lives near Bath. As well as middle-grade adventures, Karen writes funny fiction for younger readers. *Aurora’s Flight* was Highly Commended in the Writers & Artists Writing for Children and YA Competition 2019.

**About *Aurora’s Flight***

When Rory discovers a chance to be reunited with her absent mother, the only thing in her way is one hundred miles of wild waterways – and Dad. Then painful memories of when – and why – Mum left soon surface. So Rory hatches a plan: skip her school trip, steal Dad’s narrowboat, and find her mother. It’s the only way to fix things; to show Mum she’s really changed.

But when she finds a stowaway on board, things veer wildly off course. Bruised and evasive, the stowaway – Dylan – has brought trouble. His bag is stuffed with cash, a creepy man is following them, and a flashy cruiser driven by angry thugs is in pursuit. But navigating the busy, summer waterways alone is impossible: Rory needs Dylan’s help as much as he needs hers. As they flee through a maze of canals, Rory must hide from the authorities – and confront her own terrible secret – to reach her mother, before it’s too late.

*Aurora’s Flight* is a contemporary middle-grade adventure with an emotional heart, which explores how, sometimes, sailing away can help you find your way back home.

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Chapter One

The Picnic

Sunlight splintered through the storm clouds as our narrowboat drifted out of the gloom, making raindrops on the hull glitter like diamonds. Drips from the cool, damp tunnel pooled with the morning’s rainwater along the sleek, steel roof. Wild grass heavy with buttercups and clover leaned away from the towpath, brushing the water as we cruised past.

I climbed on the roof and swirled wet circles over the smooth green surface with my fingertips. There were no scratches on the new paintwork yet. Not like our other rentals, always returned to our boat yard with extra dents and chips.

‘Rory,’ called Dad over the roar of the engine. ‘Mind the paint!’

As I spotted something up ahead, I clutched a rope and slid down to the bow. I squinted as sunlight sparkled on the dark, glassy water, and gave Dad the signal to slow down. The boat shuddered under my feet. I tied a lasso and swirled it slowly over my head. I crouched low, keeping my target in my sights.

I watched. Waited.

Nearly time. After three.

One. Two. Three.

I flung the rope. It missed, landing in the water with a slap. I fished out the lasso and held it high, ready to try again. Freezing water dribbled up my sleeve. The boat drifted closer to the side of the canal.

Last chance—

Yes!
I hit my target, snagging the low mooring post by the towpath. From at least three metres away this time; almost certainly a new record.

‘Did you see that?’ I pumped the air with my fist, followed by my latest victory dance. ‘Dad!’

He gave me his usual *I’m not really listening* gaze, so I scowled back with my best *I just did something brilliant and you missed it* face.

I perched on the bow, then sprang onto the grassy bank. I unhooked the rope as Dad hopped off the deck, clutching another rope. Together, we gently drew *Charlie-Boo* in. That’s what I decided to call this boat. Dad wanted to call it something stupid like *Soggy Bottom* or *Passing Wind*, but I knew Mum would love that I’d named it after Charlie. That I wanted to keep my baby brother’s memory alive after I... well, after what happened.

A rental from another yard chugged into the full lock up ahead, bashing into the bricks.

I tutted. ‘Amateurs.’

‘At least it’s not one of ours,’ said Dad. He rubbed a smear of mud off the fresh paintwork while we waited. ‘Though it won’t be long before this one gets scuffed up too.’

The other crew set to work on the lock. A woman heaved the top gate closed while a man raised the paddles on the bottom one. The clack of cogs echoed through the valley as he turned the windlass in circles. Water whooshed out of the lock, into the canal. Their boat swiftly disappeared behind the towering wooden gates.

I gripped my rope as the swell of water made *Charlie-Boo* sway. The gold letters curved over three perfect roses painted on the side: yellow, pink and blue. I’d sent Mum a photo of the boat before we set sail a few hours ago. She hadn’t replied yet, but she would. It was really early in New York; she’d probably still be asleep.

The gate groaned as the rent-a-crew dragged it open. Their boat inched slowly from the shadows, into the lower level of the canal.

Dad rubbed his stubbly head. ‘Hurry up, guys,’ he muttered. ‘I’m ready for lunch.’
‘Must be hard work pushing a tiller back and forth all morning.’ I turned to see Rain halfway out of the cabin. She smiled, resting her arms on top of the sliding hatch. ‘Not to mention drinking tea and scoffing biscuits. Right, Rory?’

I shrugged and looked back at the lock. ‘S’pose.’

‘Well,’ she said, ‘who wants another cup of tea?’

‘We’re fine, love,’ said Dad. ‘You look tired. Put your feet up. We’ll stop for our picnic soon.’

‘Stop fussing, I’m fine.’ Rain stepped up onto the deck. She placed her hands on her lower back and stretched. Wooden bangles clanked as they slid to her wrists.

‘Just looking out for my girl,’ said Dad. He reached out and placed a hand on her swollen belly. Rain laid her hand on top of his.

‘Or boy,’ she said. Then they smiled at each other in that dopey way they’ve been doing for the last six months.

I turned away. Rain wasn’t supposed to be here. Dad said we’d spend the day together before my school trip next week, just the two of us. Then this morning he insisted she came too.

The other boat finally passed, leaving the gate open for us. I tossed the rope on board and pushed out the bow with my foot.

‘Mind the paint!’ Dad glared at me.

‘I’ll steer her in,’ said Rain. ‘You help Rory. She’s been hard at it all morning.’

‘I can do it myself.’

I stomped up to the gate. Rain revved the engine and drove into the empty lock. She glanced up and smiled. A breeze swept her copper curls off her tanned shoulders. I slammed the bottom gate shut. She looked fine to me. I didn’t know why Dad made such a fuss of her.

*Have a rest, you look tired.*

*Sit down, I can get that for you.*

*Put your feet up, Rory can peel the potatoes.*

Water gurgled and swirled as Dad filled the lock, and *Charlie-Boo* raised to the next level of the canal. The engine purred as Rain edged
out and steered the boat to the side.

‘Hopping on?’ Maybe she looked a tiny bit tired.

‘Meet you at the next bridge,’ I said, and strode up the towpath.

Rain waited for Dad to close the gate. Then I heard them laughing. No doubt Dad was doing his ‘hilarious’ I’ve nearly fallen in the water routine again as he jumped on board.

I kicked at the gravel and checked my phone again. Still no reply from Mum. There was no signal now either. I sprinted up to the bridge and held it high.

Nothing.

Up ahead, the canal carved through folds of green fields edged with tangled trees. It was a million miles from the New York landscape Mum woke up to each day. When she first moved, she sent me a photo of a sunrise from her apartment; orange light glowed around the dark squiggle of skyline and spilled over the huge grey river, making the choppy waves look like cooled lava. I couldn’t believe it had been a whole year since her promotion to Senior Lawyer. I missed her so much.

Back at the lock, Charlie-Boo was still parked where Rain stopped for Dad. He was probably in the galley, making her another horrible herbal tea. But the bow had drifted away from the bank. No-one was at the helm, and it wasn’t moored to anything.

Grit crunched under my trainers as I jogged back to the boat. ‘Dad?’

Dad came up onto the deck, not smiling or laughing any more. He flung a mooring rope at me.

‘Wait there,’ he ordered, and ducked back inside the cabin.

I gently pulled the boat to the side. I heard Rain cry out. Through the porthole, I saw her curled into a ball on the bed. Her face had crumpled, and her hair was spread over the white sheets like twisted, rusty cables.
Chapter Two

Dylan

‘It’s just a precaution,’ said Dad. ‘I’m sure the baby’s fine.’ He hammered a mooring pin deep in the soft grass with a mallet.

I crouched to tie the ropes. ‘But how will you find a hospital?’ I said. We were surrounded by fields and trees and not one single house, let alone a signpost to the nearest A&E. ‘We’re in the middle of nowhere.’

‘According to the map book, there’s a village that way.’ Dad nodded at a wooded hill on the other side of the water. ‘I’m heading up there. See if I can find a signal to call a taxi.’ He tossed the mallet on the deck and marched up the path.

‘Wait, I’ll come—’

‘Stay and keep an eye on Rain,’ he called back. ‘You know what she’s like – she’ll be clearing out the weed hatch given half a chance.’

I walked the length of the boat and dropped the fenders down the side. I paused at the porthole. Rain was still on the bed, uncurled now with her feet balanced on a pile of pillows. She cradled her bump with one hand and held a small book of baby names in the other.

I flicked the last fender off the roof. She didn’t need babysitting.

Dad waved his phone in the air as he crossed the bridge, then disappeared into the shadows of the trees.

I pulled myself up on the roof and held my phone high. Mum would be awake now. She set her alarm for 6 a.m. every day, even on Saturdays.

But there was still nothing.

‘You won’t get a signal here.’

I looked at the towpath. There was no-one there.

‘Head up that hill a bit.’

Behind a fence on the other side of the water, stood a skinny boy in a filthy blue football kit. A battered bag hung limply from one shoulder. He jabbed his thumb in the direction Dad went. Then the boy started waving wildly, shouting, ‘Ahoy, there!’
I stared at him. It was typical of some weirdo to turn up as soon as Dad ran off.

‘Your mum,’ said the boy, pointing at the porthole. ‘She’s waving at me.’

My tummy clenched. ‘She’s not my mum.’

The boy shrugged. He plucked a clump of cream wool off the barbed wire, and flicked it to the grass. ‘So,’ he said, ‘where are you heading?’

I pulled a face that I hoped said, Go away and leave me alone. Unfortunately, it clearly said, Keep jabbering on.

‘Okay, where have you been?’

I turned away and coiled the central mooring rope. I placed it in the life ring.

But the boy still didn’t leave. ‘Have you come from Upper Foxbridge?’ he said.

I spun round. How did he know that? Then I peered over the edge of the roof, at the phone number of our boat yard painted on the side. Free advertising, Dad called it. Announcing our private details to strangers, more like. I folded my arms.

‘It’s nice there,’ said the boy. ‘The waterside pub does good grub.’

‘What are you,’ I said, ‘a tourist information service?’

He nodded at the sheep grazing behind him. ‘Well, they’re not going to tell you where to get a tasty shepherd’s pie around here, are they?’

The boy grinned at me. He also seemed to think he was a comedian.

‘I’m Dylan,’ he said. ‘What’s your name?’

I ignored him; as if I’d tell a total stranger my name—

‘Rory?’ Rain emerged from the cabin in a tinkle of bangles. Perfect timing, as usual. ‘Is your dad back yet?’ Maybe she did look a little pale.

I jumped down to the grass. ‘No.’

‘Hell-o!’ Dylan waved at Rain.

She smiled weakly at him and stepped out on the deck. She clung to the red and white striped tiller to lower herself to the bench. ‘Cool artwork,’ said Dylan, nodding at the three roses.

‘Thank you,’ said Rain. ‘I painted it myself. It’s traditional canal art.’

Here we go. Once Rain started talking about her art, it was difficult
to shut her up. If Dad came back and found her waffling to a strange boy about colour and texture, it’d be me getting into trouble for letting her out of bed.

‘Dad says you should be resting,’ I said.

‘I needed some air.’ Rain tilted her face to the sun and closed her eyes. She rubbed slow circles over her bump. ‘Make a start on the picnic, love. You know how grouchy you get when you don’t eat.’

Heat crept up my neck as she wobbled to her feet and went back inside. Dylan grinned. ‘Your mum’s funny.’

‘I told you, she’s not my mum.’

And she wasn’t funny, not on purpose anyway. Dad laughed at the way she inspected every food label and made us eat organic stuff. And how she spent hours pummelling floury dough to bake bread, when you could buy it from a shop, sliced and ready to eat.

Mum was funny. On Good Days, she’d tap-dance in the aisles of the supermarket, and joked that my chicken pox spots would turn into feathers. I tried not to think about her Bad Days, when she’d stare into space or stay in bed crying.

Or how, sometimes, I made those days even worse.

Dylan straightened his bag. ‘I’d better get going,’ he said. ‘Maybe see you around, Rory?’

I hoped not. Dylan waved, then disappeared through the trees.

Dad jogged over the bridge and back to the boat. ‘Taxi’s picking us up in twenty minutes,’ he said. He untied the ropes and plucked out the mooring pins. ‘Let’s turn this around. Then you can drive back to the yard while we’re at the hospital.’

Charlie-Boo stretched along the bank. The dark canal curved away from me, back towards the long, gloomy tunnel.

I stared at Dad. ‘On my own?’

‘You’ll be fine. I’ve taught you everything you need to know.’

Dad turned the boat and took it back through the lock. How could he dump me in the middle of nowhere, all alone? He parked by the towpath and bundled the rough rope in my arms.
‘Call me if you need anything,’ he said.
I waved my phone at him. ‘But I’ve got no signal!’
‘There’s plenty of people on the canal today. If you need any help, just ask.’
‘But—’
‘Aurora!’ Dad’s voice echoed round the fields. A coldness spread under my skin as he fixed his eyes on mine.

Rain came up onto the deck. Dad rushed to take her hand. He helped her off the boat the way he used to help Great-Gran with steps, when he was worried she’d fall and break more bones.

‘Honestly, this is a fuss over nothing,’ said Rain.
‘We’re not taking any chances.’ Dad’s voice had softened. ‘Come on, love. It’s not far.’ They walked up the towpath, Dad guiding Rain past rows of plump foxgloves like they were razor-sharp spikes.

Like she was the first person ever in the history of the world to be having a baby. He didn’t fuss like this over Mum when she was pregnant with Charlie. I bet he didn’t care this much when she was pregnant with me. Now he was happy to abandon me, miles from home.

‘Go straight back to the yard,’ Dad called over his shoulder, not looking back.

Then they crossed the bridge, and left me.

Alone.
TEEN
Lucy grew up in North Wales in an ancient house built by her Welsh warlord ancestors. With six-foot-thick walls, turrets and a dungeon, it was built for battle. Old chests and deep drawers spilled over with memories of previous lives, and these fragments of her family’s past partly inspired *Fledgling*.

Lucy came to writing through a circuitous route involving time spent as a product manager, buyer, dinner lady, web designer, colour consultant, and teaching assistant. She has two almost-grown-up children and a shaggy dog called Brontë.

**About *Fledgling***

*1900. Edenburg, Bavaria.*

A cherub is blown into Cassie Engel’s bedroom during a thunderstorm, triggering a series of terrifying events. Cassie has to quickly work out if its arrival was an accident, or part of something more sinister. With a self-obsessed opera singer for a mother, a strange taxidermist father, and a best friend who isn’t quite what he seems, Cassie is forced to unearth the secrets of her family’s past to prevent a future she does not want. As dark forces gather, she must summon the courage to fight for everything she has ever known and loved.

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Our house perches on top of a tall rock. My great-great-grandfather, Walter Engel, built it years ago, hauling the foundation stones up by rope and pulley. It was a simple place at the beginning – just a hotchpotch of rooms looking down on the Bavarian Forest and the small town of Edenburg. With a growing collection of stuffed owls, Walter built another storey dedicated to their display, with a small annex to the side for his book collection. In his middle years, he built two more floors for his frequent house guests. When Mother inherited the house, she added a music room at the top. Today, our house stretches precariously to the sky, a monument to the dreams of five generations of the Engel family.

Living on a rock presented various challenges over the years, particularly the problem of how to reach the house without crampons and climbing boots. My grandfather’s solution was to use explosives to blast out a road that would encircle the rock like a helter-skelter. And to this day that is how we come and go from our eyrie, either on foot or by carriage.

So that is where we live. Mother, Papa, Grandma and me. My room is on one of the middle floors, near Grandma and Papa. Mother sleeps on the floor above.

At night I can see Munich, miles away, where Mother performs at the opera house. When not on stage, she spends her days in the music room rehearsing for her next performance. Papa used to sing too, but these days is most often asleep somewhere about the house, or busy in his workshop.
Grandma has lived with us since the cancer took hold last year. It’s spreading through her body now, gnawing at her bones. She used to look after me when Mother was performing and I was too young to leave alone. We’d play games like hide and seek or *I spy* amongst the owls. When I was six, she taught me the Bavarian dances of her childhood: the Zweifacher and the Schuhplattler.

I sit with her now, holding her hand, squeezing cool water onto her parched lips with a small sponge. She’s a remnant of her former self. A heap of hollow bones, sunken cheeks and white hair.

Remembering the nurses are coming later to turn her, I check the dials on the brass morphine pump. This barbaric-looking contraption was designed by Grandpa years ago to relieve my Uncle Killian’s pain after he returned from the war with a shattered leg. The bellows hiss and heave noisily and I wonder how she sleeps through the racket. I adjust the settings, allowing a little more of the powerful medicine to flow into her veins.

I gently kiss her hand and head back to my room.

A storm is brewing. Living high like this, we see the weather coming before anyone else.

*Storm’s coming*, I tap into my little Morse code machine, warning Raphael, my one and only friend in Edenburg. People tend to stay away from us these days, what with the house, and the owls – and Mother.

*Thanks*, he taps back.

I glance down at his house at the edge of town and see him lean out of his room to pull his window closed.

Mother is in her music room, as always. I know she’ll keep her window open, despite the storm. People whisper when they see her, standing at her window, as if performing to the heavens. She’s singing ‘Agnus Dei’ – *Lamb of God*. The wind catches her voice and it weaves around our rock, and up into the eye of the approaching storm.

The world becomes dark. Rain pelts at my window. Mother sings. Grandma’s pump sighs.
I hear a tap at my window and press my face against the rain-soaked glass but see nothing. I throw myself back onto my bed and return to my book. I hear the tapping again. I try to ignore it, but it comes again. Curiosity finally overwhelms me, and I pad back to the window, planning to open it just an inch. The wind catches it, throwing it open, and the storm fills my room. Something whistles past my ear and lands with a gentle thud on the bed. I slam my window closed, my hands shaking. Turning back to my bed I see what looks like a bird of prey lying in a sodden, trembling heap on my eiderdown.

I pick it up carefully, wrap it in a shawl and hold it on my lap like a baby. Having grown up with the collection of stuffed owls, I should be able to identify it.

Eventually the creature’s trembling subsides, and I un wrap my little package to see what’s inside. I’m certain it’s a Ural Owl.

I examine it, gently lifting its wings, turning it over. My heart stops. It can’t be. I tap a message to Raphael again.

*Please come. I need you.*

*Now?*

*Yes, I reply. Now.*

The creature seems to be in a deep sleep. I barely dare touch it, terrified it might wake. I have never seen anything like it, but I’m certain I know what it is. Four tiny wings protrude from its shoulder blades. Its body is covered in scruffy feathers. The skin on its hands and feet has the feel of parchment. I touch the sparse, soft hair on its head. It is dark, like mine, but finer. Still wet from the storm, it begins to shiver. I wrap the shawl around it again. Its pale face with tightly shut eyes is that of a sleeping infant.

Raphael comes before the storm has passed. He’s drenched.

‘I have something to show you,’ I say.

He bends down to kiss my cheek. ‘Hello, Cassie, how are you? How lovely to see you!’

‘Oh, sorry. Hello, Raphael. But something strange has happened and I don’t know what to do.’
He looks down at me, and then at the bundle in my arms.
‘I think you need to sit down,’ I say, touching the bed next to me.
I cannot think of anyone else in the world I can trust with this. Gentle Raphael is the obvious and only choice. He sits next to me and I place the creature on his knee. He unwraps the shawl a little.
He looks at me. ‘Is this what I think it is?’
I nod. He wraps it up again, his eyes wide. ‘Where on earth did you find her?’
‘She was blown into my room in the storm. I heard a tapping at the window. I opened it and she landed on my bed, over there.’ I point to the patch on the bed, which is still wet. ‘I thought they were just something from the Bible,’ I add. ‘I didn’t think they actually existed. And I thought they were supposed to be boys.’
‘Those stories are from a different time,’ Raphael says quietly.
‘Do you think she is some kind of angel?’
‘I think she might be a cherub, actually,’ he says. ‘They’re quite different to angels.’
I remember the exhibition of religious paintings Grandma took me to see in the Glaspalast nearly two years ago. The main hall was filled with oil paintings and statues of cherubs – but they were pink, well-fed infants with little wings that couldn’t possibly have lifted them into the air. They were nothing like this strange creature.
‘What do you think I should do with her?’ I say.
‘I don’t know,’ he says, handing her back to me.
‘We could look in the library. See if there’s anything there on cherubs,’ I say. I visualise the shelves in the old library upstairs. ‘There’s a section on feathered creatures, and definitely some religious books.’
He nods. ‘But we need to be careful. It’s possible someone, or something, will be out looking for her.’
My heart misses a beat. ‘What sort of something?’
‘I’m not sure. It depends...’ he trails off as he walks to the window and looks up at the sky.
The storm is subsiding, but dark clouds still swirl around the house,
accentuating the gloom in my room.

‘Do you think we should feed her?’ I say, shivering.
‘I don’t think so,’ he says. ‘I think she needs something else to stay alive.’
‘Such as?’
‘I suspect her needs will be quite different to those of a human baby. And I don’t think you should tell your parents about her for now.’
I nod. ‘Where could she have come from?’
Raphael looks at me, as if considering something. The intensity of his gaze makes my cheeks burn.
‘I guess she lost the others in the storm. Like a bird separated from its flock. It happens,’ he says.
I look at him. ‘The other what?’ I say, the hairs on the back of my neck pricking. ‘You think there are more out there like her?’ I glance out of the window nervously.
‘Probably not many like her. Most likely Seraphim. They’re the larger, human-like angels you see in the Bible. They normally do a better job of protecting their cherubs.’ He turns away from the window to face me. ‘Was your…?’ He stops himself.
‘Was my what?’
‘Oh, nothing.’
‘What is it, Raphael?’
‘Your mother was singing earlier, wasn’t she?’ he says, after a pause. ‘Yes, of course she was. She’s always singing. What are you saying?’
‘Well, I know it sounds strange. But there is a theory that angels communicate by song. Like whales. I’m wondering if she was drawn to your mother’s voice. Maybe she thought her singing was the host calling to her.’
‘By host, you mean other angels?’ I say, even though I know the answer. Raphael nods.
‘And you think they’ll come looking for their baby?’
He nods again.
My spine tingles.
‘And she’s not a baby, Cassie. She’s probably thousands of years old.’
I glance down at the creature in my arms, at her strange paper-like skin and delicate feathers. I cannot believe she is so old.

**Chapter Two**

We climb the narrow staircase to the owlery, the room that leads through to the library. I hug the cherub close. Her heart seems to beat in time with mine. The owlery hasn’t changed since my great-great-grandfather established his collection of stuffed owls here nearly a hundred years ago. Wide-eyed creatures stare at us from ebony-framed display cases as we pass. My favourite, Otto, a Pygmy Owl, sits caged for eternity with his friend Fritz, the Tawny Owl. Eric, the giant Eagle Owl, stands majestically in the middle of the room in a vast dome-shaped glass case, his wings outstretched, his eyes wild. Tiny hand-written labels hang from the owls’ claws, identifying each of the thirty-eight creatures by their Latin names.

The owls are my responsibility, and I have established a daily routine of dusting feathers, replacing rusting pins, and polishing cases until they gleam. Grandma named me as official curator when it became clear to everyone that Mother would not keep the owls safe. This responsibility has been mine since my twelfth birthday.

The ancient heating system clatters and crashes as we pass by on creaking floorboards. I kick the cast iron pipe that runs along the side of the room and the noise subsides. I’m pleased to be wearing my sturdy boots.

We pass through the door at the far end and step into the library. It is even darker here than in the owlery as the room was designed with just one small window to protect the books from the effects of the sunlight. Raphael reaches across the battered leather desk in the centre of the room and flicks the noisy switch on the desk lamp. I breathe in the familiar smell of ancient tobacco mingled with old books and leather, a sensory legacy from a great-great-grandfather I never knew.
The walls are lined from floor to ceiling with books of all shapes and sizes, with subjects ranging from philosophy to anatomy to dancing cats. Of course, there is a whole section on birds, identified by a handmade *All Things Feathered* sign. I hope to find something useful here, but then I wonder if texts on cherubs would be hidden somewhere else. Might they be within the section on *All Things Supernatural*, or even in *World Religions*?

‘Where should we start looking?’ says Raphael, glancing about the room.

‘I guess somewhere around here,’ I say, running my fingers along the spine of a tall leather-bound book entitled *Owl Taxidermy for Novices* within the ‘feathered’ section. Walter organised his library in such a way that makes it almost impossible to find what you are looking for, but I have a feeling he might have placed books on angels close to the reference books on owls.

I hear Mother calling, and my heart sinks. She doesn’t call me in the usual way a mother might. Instead she sings my name in the character of her latest role. This month she has been rehearsing to play Malwina in the opera *Der Vampyr*.

‘Cassie! Cassie! Cassie! Cassie!’ she sings, in a rising arpeggio, increasing in volume with each note.

‘Cassie! Cassie! Cassie! Cassie!’

I put my head down, hoping she might forget about me. But she doesn’t stop, and her voice rises steadily until I can no longer bear it.

‘Would you like me to come with you, for moral support?’ says Raphael.

I want more than anything for Raphael to come with me, but I know I need to face her on my own. I couldn’t bear it if she turned on him. And she cannot see the cherub.

‘I think you should stay here,’ I say firmly. I hold the tiny creature close to my heart. I don’t want to let her go; she is beginning to feel a part of me. ‘And you need to look after the cherub while I’m gone,’ I say, handing her to him. ‘I’m worried about what Bram will do to her if he sees her.’ Bram is my cat. Gentle as a baby with me, but violent and
brutal with anything feathered. ‘He brought down a sparrowhawk on the rock just yesterday.’

Raphael smiles. ‘If you’re sure, but call if you need me.’

I leave Raphael in the library and head towards the spiral staircase that leads up to Mother’s music room.
Anna lived in five different countries, including Finland, France and Nigeria, and went to seven different schools, so books were her constant companions as she was growing up. She wrote her first series of stories, about two squirrels called Bracken and Fern, when she was seven and living in the Scottish Highlands. And she hasn’t stopped writing since.

Anna now lives in a small village in the Surrey Hills with her husband, two teenage children and a very disobedient but loveable Lakeland terrier called Lettie. She uses her role as a teaching assistant specialising in literacy to share her love of reading and writing.

*The Lake* received an honourable mention in the United Agents Prize for the most promising writing.

**About *The Lake***

Rebellious Elsa lives in the Land of a Thousand Lakes. Her mother wants her to sit inside and sew, but Elsa wants to roam free with her beloved elkhound, Mossi, while she carves animals from the trees and searches for the mysterious wolf who appears to her in times of need.

Five years ago, Elsa and her older sister Helmi witnessed their father drown in a boating accident, which left Helmi mute. When Elsa’s mother insists that Helmi marries the strange young man who comes to their first Midsummer’s Eve party since the tragedy, Elsa fears something else terrible is going to happen... But no-one will listen to her...

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THE LAKE

Prologue

Friday, May 27, 1921

It began as a perfect summer’s day. The calm surface of the lake mirrored the blue sky. The tops of the pines swayed in a gentle breeze and coots called out across the water.

Two young girls crouched in the shallows and raced tiny boats with birch bark sails. A man rowed slowly towards them. He was on his way back from the rocky island in the middle of the lake. The girls glanced up every now and then. When he reached them, it would be time to go home, and their game would end. The oars dipped in and out of the water and they knew it wouldn’t be long.

But the boat barely seemed to move. After a while, the girls stood up to watch. They were used to the tricks that light can play on water, how distant it can make things seem, so they waited. But still he got no closer. The older girl shaded her eyes against the glare of the sun. She saw then that the bow of the boat had started to tilt. The angle was wrong. Water was flooding in over the stern.

She screamed a warning. Papa! Papa!

But it was too late. The boat was already being sucked down into the deathly cold depths of the lake. It disappeared beneath the glassy surface in the time it took a lapwing to cross the sky.

For a moment, there was silence: birdsong ceased and the rustling pines were still. The two girls stared at the space where the man and the boat had been.
The same girl who cried the warning fell to her knees and screamed again. A long, high, terrible scream that spiralled up and broke the sky in two, like an axe splitting a log.

The younger girl turned and ran, while the pieces of a suddenly shattered world whirled all around her. She half-fell, half-scrambled up the hill, away from the lake, as far as she could get.

A woman, pale with terror, ran down towards her.

*What is it?* she cried. *What has happened?*

But her answer had already come from the screams of the girl who knelt by the water - the dreadful, desperate screams that rang out and echoed endlessly across the lake.

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**Summer 1925**

*Chapter One*

It has been a long time since we celebrated the coming of the midnight sun. A long time since we went in search of flowers to cover our windowsills and young birch trees to place at our doorway.

But today we have come deep into the wood to find our midsummer trees, and they stand ahead of us now: two saplings, side by side, barely taller than me. With their slender white trunks and fresh green leaves, they are perfect.

‘Those ones,’ I say, pointing so my brother Pehr can see.

He looks up at me. ‘Can’t we get bigger ones?’

‘No, we can’t,’ I say. ‘Don’t be a pest. They’re only for decoration, for tonight - you know that.’

Pehr’s shoulders droop slightly.

‘Anyway,’ I say, ‘we’ve got to be able to get them home.’

Sunlight filters down through the leaves of the taller, older aspens. We push through the ferns and Pehr drops to his knees by the smaller sapling. We have brought Mossi, Papa’s old Elkhound; he crashes
through the undergrowth towards us and almost knocks Pehr over.

‘Get him off me, Elsa!’ he cries.

‘Silly boy.’ I try and push Mossi to one side, but I cannot shift him – he wants to stay and see what we are doing.

I hold the tree steady, and Pehr tightens his grip on the saw handle. Mossi watches intently but I have to look away. The young green wood is hard to cut and it’s a few minutes before the little tree is severed.

‘I’m not hurting it, you know,’ Pehr says. ‘Trees can’t feel.’

‘How can you be so sure?’ I say.

‘Because they’re not people.’ He laughs and crosses to the other sapling. Its leaves shimmer in a sudden breeze. Perhaps it’s afraid, perhaps it saw what we did to its companion, but I tell myself they’d never have grown tall here, with the adult aspens towering over them and stealing their light.

Mossi follows us as we drag the trees through the wood. Their trunks are smooth and cool to the touch, but their branches catch and they’re hard to pull across the mossy forest floor. We go the long way, avoiding the lake, and come out eventually onto the footpath half-way up the hill.

I rest my sapling on the ground and lift Pehr’s up onto his shoulder. ‘It’ll be easier to carry them like this now,’ I say.

Mossi runs in circles round us and barks. Maybe he has forgotten that we used to do this every midsummer; this will be our first party in four years.

I reach out my hand and Mossi comes to stand by me, panting hard, the black tips of his ears soft between my fingertips.

With the trees balanced on our shoulders, we begin to make our way up the hill. Pehr goes ahead and Mossi weaves between us on the narrow pathway, exasperating us, bashing into our legs.

‘Ow!’ Pehr cries out. ‘Make him stop – I’m going to drop my tree!’

‘Mossi!’ I say. He comes to my side, and we walk together, my free hand resting on the thick ruff of fur at his neck.

At the top of the hill, we stop and look back down at the way we have just come: the winding, knobbly path, the forest on either side,
and further down again, to the lake that lies beyond. I think of the happy days I once spent there, but a shiver runs through me all the same.

We stand in silence, shading our eyes against the glittering expanse of silver blue.

‘Come.’ I nudge Pehr. ‘We have to get back.’

Pehr carries on looking at the lake. He is only eight, and he does not remember the things the rest of us do. He would spend all his time down there, if he could. He squints up at me. ‘Can we go fishing tomorrow, Elsa? Please?’ His brown eyes are just like Papa’s were.

‘Perhaps,’ I say.

I turn for home and after a few moments, Pehr follows.

My mother leans out of the kitchen window just as we get the saplings up onto the doorstep.

‘Matti was to help Pehr with the trees, not you, Elsa,’ she says, sighing. ‘You are meant to be arranging flowers with your sister.’ She wipes her brow with the back of her hand and leaves a floury streak. ‘Go quickly now,’ she tells me, ‘you’ll find Helmi on the side veranda.’

My mother is flustered. Today is important to her but it’s making her even more infuriating than usual.

‘I don’t know anything about arranging flowers!’ I say.

‘Do not try my patience today, Elsa,’ she says. ‘You are thirteen and it is high time you started learning how to do some of these things.’

I clench my jaw and go - there’s no point in arguing with her, not today.

‘And stop scowling!’ she calls after me.

I find Helmi surrounded by blooms. Long-stemmed lupins, creamy yellow and dark pink, cover the veranda table, and heaps of frothy lilac lie all around her feet. We got up in such a rush this morning that we didn’t plait each other’s hair, and Helmi’s falls in golden folds around her shoulders as she reaches down for some lilac.

‘Hey.’ I drop down in the chair next to her. Helmi smiles but carries on, silently sorting through the flowers with her slender white fingers. I look
down at my own hands, brown from the sun already. Dirt under my nails.

‘So many flowers,’ I say.

Helmi smiles again and points to the lines of glass jars and vases on the floor.

‘We’ve got to fill all those?’

She nods.

This is going to take all afternoon.

Uncle Viktor has sent his servant, Matti, to help with the preparations, and he comes now with an armful of bird cherry blossom. ‘There’s more here, Miss,’ he says, laying it on the veranda steps.

I groan, but Helmi takes the boughs and picks a sprig to hold under my nose. It smells of summer: I close my eyes and I could almost be beneath the fragrant trees.

I pick up a jar and take a handful of lupins but they won’t all fit in.

Helmi watches me for a moment then takes the flowers. She places them into the jar, one by one, showing me how to do it, and then hands the jar back to me.

I tut and push in a single stem, but my crossness makes me clumsy; it crumples and bends.

Finally, Helmi speaks. It still surprises me when I hear her say something.

‘A bit more gently,’ she says. Her voice is low and hesitant, as if she is still getting used to using it. She lays her hand softly on my arm. ‘Come – we can do it together.’

We sit side by side in the shade of the veranda and pick our way through the endless flowers.

I am still cross though - I cannot hold it in. ‘Mother is driving me mad!’ I say. ‘She’s always trying to make me do things I’m not interested in. Why won’t she let me be?’

Helmi shakes her head but doesn’t look up.

‘Why does she always have to spoil things? Is she doing it deliberately?’

A bee hums amongst the flowers, landing on each one in turn, and my questions hang unanswered in the air between us. I wait, but Helmi
is silent. ‘I don’t know how much more of her bossiness I can take!’ I blurt out finally. Another stem snaps in my hands.

Helmi turns to me at last. ‘Don’t fret, Elsa,’ she says quietly. ‘Mama is just anxious about the party.’ She pauses. ‘She wants everyone to come, like they did in the old days.’

I shrug. Helmi may be right, but it doesn’t explain my mother telling me what to do every other day.

By the end of the afternoon all the vases are filled. With Helmi’s help, my efforts are passable, even to our mother when she comes to check our progress.

‘Wonderful,’ she says, clapping her hands together. ‘Off you go now, wash and dress. The guests will be here soon.’ She follows us back into the house and calls up the stairs after us. ‘Your dresses are laid out – put them on after you have washed. And scrub those nails, Elsa.’ I roll my eyes and swing our bedroom door so that it closes with a bang.

Helmi pours water into the china ewer and we wash our hands and faces. I am to wear the white muslin my mother has picked out for me. Helmi does up the buttons at the back and braids my straight brown hair into its usual two plaits, and then she puts on her pale blue muslin, and I plait her silky hair.

We pause at the window on our way down; our maid, Lotta, finally released from the kitchen, walks through the garden. Matti appears at her side and they laugh together as they go from tree to tree, hanging paper lanterns from the low branches, ready for our guests.

Our midsummer parties always used to be down by the lake. All our neighbours would come and Papa would light a bonfire to scare away the evil spirits that are supposed to flit through the forest on this special night, when the sun forgets to set.

_The nightless night_, Papa always called it.

But tonight, our party will have to be at the house. It won’t be the same, but after what happened, how can we celebrate anything down by the lake ever again?
Tobias Howlett

Tobias was born in London in 1996. Before studying on the Writing for Young People MA, he graduated with a first from Bath Spa’s Creative Writing BA. His interests include writing anthology bios, being friends with clouds, and inventing quirky interests. When he isn’t trying too hard to be funny, Tobias enjoys researching mythology and wandering around taking photos.

Speaking of photos, his soul is trapped in the above portrait. He would like it very much if you freed him from purgatory.

About *Land of Guilt and Honey*

Meet Ronann. His brother’s dead, his left arm’s gone, and he’s trapped in the afterlife. In his humble opinion, things could be better.

The good news is that there’s a way out. The bad news is that a murderous war goddess wants to tag along. The even-worse news is that something terrible is happening to the afterlife, and only Ronann can stop it. If he fails, the souls of the dead will be condemned to nonexistence. No pressure.

Luckily, he has a wide range of magical powers at his disposal. Just joking. All he can do is pray.

Wish him luck. He’ll need it.

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LAND OF GUILT AND HONEY

Don’t Let Go

When my left arm was severed, I must admit, I wasn’t too thrilled. To be honest, I’m not wild about it now. But there is one small advantage: the empty space to my left aches whenever it’s about to rain. Not the most useful advantage, but it’s something.

The empty space is aching now.

‘Don’t…’

When the rain arrives, it consists of tiny droplets that float down slowly. You can pluck them out of the air. I do so and put a droplet on my tongue. Sweeter than honey!

The droplets settle on the grass: dew sent from above. The perpetual midday sun fills the rainclouds with gold. Swallows arc through the sky, their birdsong like a child’s laughter. Fragrant woodsmoke smelling of roast pork and herbs drifts over from afar. They don’t call this place the ‘plain of delight’ for nothing. It’s a beautiful scene.

Spoiled only by the three corpses at my feet.

‘…Let…’

The three of them – maidens – are lined up neatly. Physically, they look around my age, so I reckon they’ve seen sixteen years, give or take. Their plain clothes – green woollen dresses and black cloaks – indicate they’re peasants from the physical world. Nothing out of the ordinary.
But there are a few details that stand out, and they’re more than a little strange.

For one, they’re identical. I’ve heard tell of brothers or sisters who are born looking the same, but this is something else. These three corpses are exactly alike, as if copies were made of someone at the moment of their death. Also, they don’t look dead at all. In fact, they look like they fancied a nap on the grass. The exact same contented smile graces each of their faces. You wouldn’t know they’d perished.

That is, until you noticed that each maiden has a single silver apple tree branch through her heart. That’s a bit of a giveaway.

‘...Go!’

Raindrops have settled on the branches. On the corpses, too. But it’s the branches I’m focusing on. They’re as dead as the three maidens, bereft of any life. I’ve only ever seen a silver apple tree branch once before, long ago, on a day I try not to remember. That one was in blossom.

The corpses fade from my vision. I see only the branches, pointed skyward like silver antlers. I keep trying to wrench my eyes away, to focus on something else, but I’m transfixed. The branches shimmer, demanding my attention. They nearly succeed, too, until an instinct, deep-rooted and primal, screams at me to look to my right. I tear my gaze from the branches.

That’s when I see him again.

At least, I see a figure on a hill, in the distance. But I know it’s him. It always is.

‘Don’t let go!’

He starts walking towards me. I can’t move. Not again. Not again—

‘Don’t let go!’

He’s walking fast. He’s getting closer. Please, no, I need to get away—

‘Don’t let go!’

I run. Why can’t I run faster...? It’s like I’m running through water—

‘Don’t let go!’
I look back and see his pleading face—
‘Don’t let go!’
He’s nearly got me... No, please, not now... Not now... Please, help—
‘DON’T LET GO!’
Help... Help... Help... Please don’t make me relive it... Please, I don’t
want to... Not again, please... No... HELP—
‘DON’T LET GO!’
He grabs my shoulder.
My stomach clenches as that familiar sickening weightless feeling
descends, and I tumble into a memory.

A Memory – Part One

The Good(ish) Old Days

Druid Vedacu turned in a circle, looking every one of us in the eye. Most
of us in the Learning Roundhouse squirmed under his gaze, shifted on
the dry earthen floor, or glanced longingly at the doorway. I didn’t do
any of that, though. I returned his gaze. He sneered and looked away.

‘I shall now nominate one of you to delineate the three methods of
entering the afterlife,’ he said, his mouth no more than a thin slit in his
face. I suppressed a yawn. Say what you like about Vedacu, but he never
let simple things – like a complete absence of charisma and a hatred of
children – stop him from taking on students.

Corbbas’s hand shot up immediately. He was normally pale as snow,
but when there was a question to be answered, his face bloomed a fiery
red. I smirked. Good old Corbbas. The iron shield, protecting us from
Vedacu’s questions.

Unfortunately, today the iron shield failed. Vedacu gestured for
Corbbas to lower his hand. There was a collective intake of breath.
Then our teacher spoke the dreaded words: ‘Perhaps I’ll ask a different
student for a change.’
Icorics leaned over. ‘I thought there was only *one* method of entering the afterlife, so let’s pray Druid Vedacu doesn’t ask me!’

I laughed. Big mistake. Vedacu immediately stalked over to me. ‘I see Ronann has volunteered,’ he said. ‘Tell me, boy, how does one enter the afterlife?’

Oh, gods... except for the obvious answer – dying – my mind had gone blank. I looked around the roundhouse, desperate for clues. There was a spear mounted on the wall – that was no help – and otherwise the dwelling’s interior was bare. Vedacu certainly wasn’t going to give me any hints. That just left my fellow students; I searched their faces until I settled on Corbbas, and, without even meaning to, he gave me the information I needed.

I smirked. ‘One way is dying, of course. Another way is to be invited or kidnapped by a spirit.’ I glanced at the spear on the wall again – a replica of a legendary warrior’s weapon – and remembered something. ‘Both of those happened to the great demigod Cú Chulainn, I believe.’

‘The third method?’

I glanced at Corbbas again. ‘One can enter through still bodies of water if they possess a silver apple tree branch. A blossoming one, to be exact.’

Vedacu narrowed his eyes. He must’ve known I rarely bothered studying, but there was nothing wrong with my answer. ‘Correct,’ he admitted, before retreating to the centre of the Learning Roundhouse so that he was encircled by us students once again.

‘I thought you were doomed!’ hissed Icorics, eyes wide. ‘How did you know all that? Surely not from studying.’

‘I read his mind!’

‘What? But... Oh, very funny, Ronann.’

I took no pleasure in tricking him, but I felt it was my brotherly duty to teach Icorics to be a little *less* gullible and a little *more* cynical. ‘How did you do it?’ he asked.

‘Corbbas was so desperate to answer the question, he mouthed the
answers without meaning to,’ I whispered. ‘A covert glance told me all I needed to know.’ And, to my credit, I remembered that two of the examples applied to the long-dead warrior Cú Chulainn; I embellished Corbbas’s answer a little so that he wouldn’t get too suspicious. A touch of genius, in my humble opinion. I grinned at him across the circle, and he narrowed his eyes, but didn’t say anything.

I spent the rest of the lesson daydreaming, thinking about the afterlife, and what it must be like. To walk among spirits and gods... It was a world away – literally – from my sheltered existence in the Druid Commune.

How soon that would change.

A Memory – Part Two

Sun, Swimming, And Terror

As the lesson ended, we were informed by Vedacu that he’d be testing our knowledge of the gods, the Tribe of Danu, that evening. Everyone groaned. There are a lot of gods. You’d need a mind as big as the sky to remember them all. *Come to think of it, I mused, who is the god of the sky? Hopefully that won’t be one of the questions.*

We all left the Learning Roundhouse, glad to escape from its suffocating earthen walls out into the pleasant afternoon sun. Many students would spend their time preparing for that evening’s assessment by performing memory exercises. But others – like me – had a different plan. It was finally warm enough to go swimming in Lake Velitas, and that sounded a lot more fun.

‘That cough clearing up?’ I asked Icorics.

My brother coughed into a rag, before stuffing it in his pocket. Question answered. ‘I think I’ll return to the Lodging Roundhouse for a riveting round of memory exercises,’ he joked weakly.

I frowned. ‘You’re sure it isn’t serious?’
‘Oh yes, I’m sure. Don’t let me keep you, Ronann. I’ll see you this evening.’

Icorics hurried away and disappeared behind a giant wicker effigy of a warrior-god I’d forgotten the name of.

I sighed. My brother had had that cough since last Samhain. At this rate, Icorics would still be spluttering away by next Samhain. And he was retiring to the Lodging Roundhouse more often these days.

I snapped out of it. If he said it wasn’t serious, then it wasn’t serious. He seemed cheerful enough most of the time, so it couldn’t have been that bad. I put all my worries from my mind. Lake Velitas was beckoning.

It was a glorious day at Lake Velitas. The sweet smell of water mint was in the air, and the lake was smooth as glass. I wanted to make the most of it; we couldn’t go swimming tomorrow, during Bealtaine.

Bealtaine was our festival to mark the beginning of summer. It was a mixture of festivities – music, bonfires, and feasting – and tedious rituals that Vedacu forced us to perform, such as visits to holy wells and recitations of long incantations. One of these rituals involved an evening visit to Lake Velitas, but we’d spend our time on the banks, performing various ceremonies, not plunging in. And even if Vedacu underwent a complete personality change and suggested we all have a swim, no one would dare dip their toes in. Not on Bealtaine, when the boundaries between our world and the Otherworld become blurred. Not when a body of water can transform into a portal. Not when a spirit might reach through and snatch you away.

But Bealtaine wasn’t until tomorrow. Today, Lake Velitas was just that: a lake.

I hurled myself into the water, splashing several other students. They jokingly swore revenge and swam after me. I made my escape, laughing hysterically, drunk on joy. My future years of druid training seemed to stretch ahead infinitely. In that moment, I felt immortal, as if I would stay young and happy forever.
I had no idea how right I was.
About the staying young part, at least.

I lingered in the water long after the other students had left. I was so relaxed that I lost track of time, and it led to a frantic sprint back. I made it to the Learning Roundhouse just before the lesson started. Moments after I sat down, Vedacu, shadowed by the blazing roundhouse firepit, began speaking:

‘This evening, I shall describe several members of the Tribe of Danu to each of you. Upon hearing these descriptions, you will be expected to...’

I let our teacher drone on. I understood the gist. We’d have to rattle off several names each. As long as I remembered three or four, I’d be fine. I glanced over to my left to see what Icorics thought of this.

He wasn’t there. In my hasty arrival, I hadn’t noticed that Icorics was missing.

Oh, gods.

I had that feeling where you know, you know something is deeply, terribly wrong. Vedacu was a hard taskmaster; if a student could drag themselves out of bed, he’d expect them to attend. So, if Icorics was absent, his cough must’ve been far worse than he let on—

‘Ronann.’

I started.

‘He possesses a bottomless cauldron of food and medicine. He wields a staff that can revive the dead. He is the Morrigan’s consort. What is his name?’

Vedacu had ambushed me while I was distracted. It was an easy question – even with my limited knowledge – but my thoughts were elsewhere, and I must have looked like a fool. My silver tongue failed me. ‘Um, he’s...’ I muttered. ‘The, er...’

‘The Dagda,’ said Vedacu. ‘Really, boy, if you cannot remember that, you ought to be studying every waking moment if you want to become a druid.’
I lowered my head in assent. But I wasn’t giving a second thought to the Dagda, or the Otherworld, or becoming a druid.

I was hoping, praying to the Tribe of Danu – every last one of them – that I was wrong about Icorics.
Lis is a secondary school librarian from Bristol who’s always been hooked on children’s novels. She began writing her own in 2010; *Blackmail for Beginners* is her third full length manuscript. Lis studied English Literature at the University of Warwick and collects Golden Age crime novels (including Christie, Allingham, Crispin, Sayers and Marsh). These, along with works by Ross Welford, Fleur Hitchcock and Siobhan Dowd have inspired her to write this contemporary detective story. Lis is the proud inventor of the Bakewell sandwich.

**About *Blackmail for Beginners***

Jonathan, the new kid at Hanbridge High, is fed up. His family has relocated and ruined his life, he misses his friends, and now he’s found Mr Baynton’s murdered body in the PE shed. When the police arrest the wrong suspect, Jonathan sees a chance to get into trouble, annoy his parents, and convince them to return home. He teams up with strong-willed Lydia and shy geek Daniel to uncover the real killer, but the ‘Dorks and Losers Club’ blunders into some murky secrets, and the three detectives find themselves in serious danger.

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I knew he was dead as soon as Daniel opened the storage trunk in the equipment shed. We were only there looking for a football to play with while we waited for the PE teacher.

And there he was.

Mr Baynton was stuffed into the big plastic box, awkwardly folded up, knees to chest. His face was a greyish-purple and there were finger marks, like ink stains, around his neck. His eyelids were half open. I took in the state of him, then I grabbed the lid off Daniel and shut the trunk quick. I turned away, but I could still see the body when I shut my eyes. Sometimes I wish I didn’t notice everything all the time.

Daniel gagged and staggered out of the shed to be sick in the hedge.

Lydia Strong immediately came running. ‘What’s going on? What’s in the shed?’

The other students scented trouble. They started crowding round.

I stood across the door to preserve the crime scene until the cops turned up. I’d read enough murder mysteries and seen enough crime dramas to know how important it was. I was sweating and feeling like being sick myself, but it helped to concentrate on keeping the others out of the shed.

‘Come on, new boy, tell us what’s going on,’ growled Marcus Jenkins.

Marcus Jenkins was trouble. I knew that after only two weeks at Hanbridge High. I groaned inside, but I stayed where I was and tried to look like I knew what I was doing.
‘Who made you king of the school, anyway?’ Lydia Strong had got stuck behind a bunch of kids at one side and started jumping up to try and see through the window. It didn’t work. ‘Come on. Spill the tea. Tell us what you found.’

She squirmed through the pack and leaned hopefully against the open door right next to me. Marcus loomed, Lydia peered, everyone else jostled and shoved.

I felt really awkward, but I didn’t cave in. I gave the lot of them my best scowl and pushed Lydia back when she tried to slip past me through the door.

‘Someone go and tell the office – get them to ring the police,’ I shouted over the noise.

No one went.

Then Daniel stopped puking and stood on the edge of the crowd, looking at me all white and scared. He wasn’t my idea of a deputy, but he’d have to do.

‘Daniel – call the police,’ I called over the shoving horde. He nodded obediently and tottered off towards the office.

It took ages for anyone to come.

I was barely holding out against the crush when Mr Scouter came puffing across the field and roared at the mob.

‘Get away from there! Yes, you lot, what on earth do you think you’re playing at?’

As they backed off, he strode up to me and grasped me by the shoulder.

‘Good grief, boy, are you all right?’ His face was round and red and worried. ‘Go and sit down at once. You’d better stay here until the police arrive; they might want to question you.’ He turned around. ‘The rest of you, get to the hall and wait for Mr Biggs. He’ll give you some work to do until next period.’

The rest of the class groaned and moped off, Lydia and Marcus shooting dirty looks as they passed. I could tell Mr Scouter wanted to look at the body without me there, so I went over near the hedge and sat down, avoiding the place where Daniel had been sick. For the millionth
time I wished I was back in Grensham with my old mates, Jayden, Kane and the rest, having a normal sort of morning.

We’d never found a body. No one had ever found a body. We just hung out and played basketball and practised epic rock riffs on our guitars. Our band, the Boomerangs, was really starting to get noticed.

They’d be looking for a new lead guitarist now.

I carried on sitting there in the sunshine, smelling the mown grass, knowing Mr Baynton was dead behind me. I saw his muddy grey face again in my mind’s eye. I tried to think about the shape of the leaves in the hedge instead.

After a few minutes, Daniel came back from the school office, and Mr Scouter made him sit down, too. I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye. His eyelids were pink and he was shaking hard. I kept my face steady.

I didn’t really know Daniel. Mind you, I didn’t know anyone much. Daniel was in a couple of my classes; a bit of a know-it-all. Late for tutor sometimes, in the mornings, and I’d seen him get told off for looking at his phone in the corridors. If we hadn’t been in the equipment shed at the same time, I might never have said one word to him.

But it turned out he was my best chance of getting Mum and Dad to pay attention.

The police arrived quickly, along with an ambulance and a white van with ‘Forensic Services’ on the side. A tall, plain clothes policeman cornered Mr Scouter at once.

‘You’re the head teacher? D.S. Norman, Avon and Somerset Police. If you don’t mind answering a few questions?’ He flipped open his black notepad. ‘What time was the school locked up yesterday?’

‘Well, there was a Governor’s meeting until 8.30 p.m. last evening. There were a couple of stragglers – the vicar wanted a chat about Harvest – but I made sure everyone was off the premises by around 8.55 p.m.’ Mr Scouter’s hair was all rumpled.

‘So, would Mr Baynton have been here until then, sir?’

‘No, not at all. I would have expected him to be on his way home
no later than about 6.00 p.m. We don’t expect our teachers to work excessive hours here at Hanbridge High, Detective.’
‘No, indeed, sir. Could he have gained access to the school after it was locked up?’
‘Not with a teacher’s pass. Myself and the senior staff all have authorisation, plus a couple of reputable local community members who run evening classes here, but the majority of the staff – no. They’d set the alarms off if they tried. And there’s our security firm, who patrol the perimeter regularly through the night.’
‘Is there any CCTV—’
‘Let’s check you over, boys.’ One of the medics blocked my view of this interesting conversation. He took my blood pressure and temperature. I was fine, but he made Daniel put his head between his knees for a bit and wrapped a crinkly silver blanket around his shoulders.
Mr Scouter and the police officer moved away towards the shed.
After a while, an old Volvo drove across the field. A bloke got out and started to put on a white paper onesie. Then he lifted a heavy leather holdall out of the car.
‘Body in the shed, is it?’ he asked cheerfully. His hair was curly and brown, and he looked like he’d just been for a walk in the country.
‘Yeah – the police are in there already,’ I said.
‘Dr Jeffery Hinton, County Pathologist.’ He shook my hand; his was warm and very strong. ‘I deduce by your presence that you are involved here?’
‘Me and Daniel – we found him.’
‘Ah, and Daniel. Pleased to meet you,’ Dr Hinton reached out and shook the silent Daniel by the hand too.
‘Well, I’d better examine your corpse. See what I make of outward appearances.’ The doctor strode off into the shed, hailing his police colleagues cheerfully.
Daniel and I sat quietly. I don’t know what he was thinking about. Marcus Jenkins was on my mind.
Dr Hinton came out again after a few minutes and lit up a cigarette.
'Filthy habit,' he remarked as he saw me. ‘You found the deceased? Nasty business. You don’t look too shocked, though. Objectionable, was he?’

‘What d’you mean?’

‘I mean was he an unpleasant bit of work? Can’t tell once they’re dead, really. All look much the same.’

I tried to remember what Mr Baynton was like. I’d only had one of his PE lessons so far.

‘Well – he was okay. Thought he was awesome, liked to show off a bit. All shiny black joggers and a silver whistle around his neck.’

My insides twisted. Don’t think about his neck.

‘Ah. Well. That’s damning with faint praise, isn’t it? Did you notice his hand?’ The pathologist held out his own in a tight fist.

‘No.’ I shook my head. I hadn’t wanted more than that first glimpse.

‘Classic cadaveric spasm – clutching a bit of paper I think. Not seen such a nice one in ages. I look forward to breaking his fingers later to get it out.’

Dr Hinton’s laughter brought tears to my eyes and my stomach began to heave. Daniel got up and walked down the field. He didn’t come back until Dr Hinton had gone.

Chapter Two

The police and the scene-of-crime people were poking around inside the shed for ages while we sat there, missing food technology. I was desperate to get my phone out and message Kane and Jayden, tell them what was going down, but it was fully against rules and Mr Scouter was keeping an eye on us.

Two police officers came over to talk to us, eventually.

‘Hello lads,’ said the first, the same guy who’d questioned Mr Scouter already. He crouched down with his black leather notepad open and a pen in his huge hairy hand.

The older-looking police officer stood in the grass with her feet
planted sturdily and hands clasped behind her. ‘I’m Detective Inspector Meek, and this is my sergeant, D.S. Norman. Mr Scouter tells me that you protected the crime scene for us, Jonathan. I’d like to thank you very much for that. Just wanted to ask if you spotted anything in the shed or outside it before you found the body? Did you pick up any litter, or paper or anything?’

I just shook my head, still trying not to think about what was in the shed.

‘No,’ Daniel said. ‘We weren’t really noticing anything, and then we noticed too much.’

‘Okay. Is the shed normally open, do you know?’

Daniel looked over at me and I shrugged. I had only been there two weeks; how would I know?

‘It’s normally locked until the teacher gets here,’ he said.

The police didn’t have much else to say. They told us to take it easy and gave us each a card with the Crimestoppers number on it, in case we remembered anything.

After they’d gone, Daniel touched my arm.

‘They’ll be shutting the school today, I expect. But Mum won’t be able to come to pick me up,’ he said. ‘She’s not that well. Do you think your mum would give me a lift home?’ He looked at me with big puppy eyes.

‘I doubt if mine will be able to come and get me either,’ I said. ‘She’s at the office all day, and it’s her first week.’ Mum had managed to get a part time job as a travel agent in Kingham, not far from Hanbridge. It was her first job since Max came along.

Dad would be at the funeral directors. I couldn’t see him asking for time off from a brand-new job just because his son’d seen a corpse, either. Dad’s an undertaker, so he’s well used to seeing bodies. They collect corpses from the hospital morgues all the time. They use this fake trolley that looks like a fresh-made bed, and the body is hidden in a secret compartment under the mattress, so it doesn’t freak all the hospital patients out. And the van is labelled ‘Private Ambulance’
instead of ‘Death Wagon’ for similar reasons.

‘I suppose we could walk home together,’ said Daniel. ‘Where’s your house?’

I mumbled our address.

‘Okay, well I’m in the same direction. I live on Thornthwaite, number 65.’

We trudged over to the office together.

Mrs Fustemann, the school secretary, had already sent out a text to all the parents telling them school was closing because of an ‘incident on the grounds’. When we walked in, she was on the telephone, long shiny nails tapping impatiently on the desk.

‘No, Mr Archer, Jonathan is not able to stay at school today. The whole school is closed to students while the police conduct forensic tests. Your son will need to find somewhere else to go if you’re unable to leave work. Yes, I know he needs to be supervised.’ She glanced up at us with narrowed eyes. ‘Would you be willing to let him go to another pupil’s house for the day? He has just come in with a classmate, Daniel Horsefell.’

She put her hand over the phone. ‘Daniel, would it be okay if Jonathan came home with you today?’

Daniel looked at me, hesitating. This was a bit weird.

‘My mum... she’s not too well at the moment...’ he muttered.

‘No problem. I’m fine, I can go home by myself,’ I said loudly, feeling my face flame. How embarrassing could Dad be, anyway?

Mrs Fustemann barely smothered a growl. We might as well have said nothing.

‘Mr Archer? I’ve arranged for Jonathan to go to his friend Daniel’s house for the rest of the day. Yes, that’s all right. Goodbye Mr Archer. Yes, I’ll get him to text you with an address. Goodbye.’

It took a while to convince Mr Scouter to let us go on our own. We nearly had to accept a lift with Mrs Fustemann, but then he phoned Daniel’s mum and she told him to let us walk.

The Head was bouncing on his toes as we left the office. ‘Now, when
you get back in tomorrow morning, I want to see you before you do anything else. Don’t worry, I’ll tell your tutors that you won’t be there till 9.15am. I think it’s worth talking through what happened today so that we can nip any unresolved trauma in the bud.’
During the early years of his life, Miles lived by the sea with his family at a boarding kennels and animal sanctuary establishment, surrounded by numerous animals, especially dogs and cats but also other (sometimes exotic) creatures. Since then he’s had a curiously varied career including teaching in higher education, labouring on gardens and small-holdings and farms, software engineering, and working in industry.

About *Dogs. Home.*

This is Mongrel’s story. Street-wise and survival-focussed, she’s an outsider.

By choice.

But also because she isn’t a breed dog.

All the dogs at the Rescue Kennels are keen to escape now that there’s a new owner – a vicious human (‘Big-boot’) who is selling the dogs for illegal trades. When a new dog, Sam, a naïve young Staffie, arrives, the boss dog, Jack, sees the opportunity to use her muscles. And the ever opportunistic Mongrel gate-crashes the daring break-out and follows on the tails of Sam and Jack and Jack’s two minders, witless George and arrogant Geraldine.

But, then, how to survive in open countryside? Alone? Or with the others as a pack? As the only non-breed dog, which of the others can Mongrel trust? Or should she trust only herself? And how to reach a place of safety before Big-boot catches up with them?

It’s a journey that challenges the elemental canine instincts of Mongrel at every twist and turn, from her snout to the tip of her tail.

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DOGS. HOME.

Chapter One

Jack and the New Girl

Big dogs may have the louder bark, but us small dogs have the smarter brains.

So Jack always says.
And I’m with him on that. At least.
And not just because he’s the boss around here.
And not just because I’m a small dog myself, neither.
It’s about survival. Looking after your own tail.
It’s about making best use of the canine skills you got given.
‘Specially if you’re the wrong sort of dog. You know, born the wrong side of the basket.
Like me.

Of course, as boss, soon as there’s a newcomer to the kennels, Jack’s straight in. Sniffing round. His snout right in their face.
‘Your first time in a rescue kennel,’ Jack says to the new girl. It’s not a question. He’s telling her.
‘Yes,’ says the new girl. She’s a Staffie – a Staffordshire Bull Terrier. And she’s shuffling. Looking uneasy under Jack’s scrutiny. Tail tucked between her legs.
I’m just minding my business. But listening in.
We’ve had supper, so now we’re in the yard, before being banged up for the night. Routine is, exercise field in the morning, yard last thing at night. We’re meant to be squatting and crapping. There’s a human
going round sweeping it all up. And to make sure we don’t fight. It’s the one that’s been running this place for a while now, the one with the big boot. We tend to behave when he’s around.

Jack’s taking his slow tour round the new girl.

Sniffing.

Examining her, close.

The new girl’s got her head and ears down. But wagging her tail between her legs, nonethewise. Looks too eager to please, to my mind. If Jack was a human, she’d be rolling over offering her tummy for a tickle.

Jack finishes his looking-over and’s back to staring straight in her face. That is, if you can call Jack’s stare ‘straight’. Direct, yes. In your face, yes. But not lined up exact as you’d expect. You see, he’s been in a few scrapes in his time. One ear’s got a couple of sizeable nicks out of it. And there’s a impressive scar left side of his muzzle, where some mutt must have got its incisors hooked into him. Which’s what makes his eye that side droop. If the other dog did that to Jack, you can only wonder what Jack must’ve done to it.

But a slightly skew-eyed stare plus some scars helps if you’re looking to intimidate another canine. And Jack’s still staring. The new girl looks away, looks almost anywhere hoping for a friendly face. It’s understandable. Most every dog in these kennels is uncomfortable under Jack’s gaze. But he don’t worry me. I’ve lived on the streets. And you perhaps hadn’t guessed I’m a bitch, neither, you know a girl-dog. But I can snap-and-snarl – when I need to.

‘Is it your first time in a rescue kennel too, then?’ the new girl says to Jack.

‘Me!’ hufs Jack, somewhere between a growl and a laugh. ‘No. Not me.’ And he takes a quick look over his shoulder at the Lab and Afghan Hound. They’re his two enforcers, standing right behind him, as always. ‘No, I’ve been around,’ Jack says. ‘And in this place a long time. Too long.’

‘Well, I shan’t be here long,’ says the new girl. ‘I’m sure I’ll be chosen quickly by a nice new owner.’
‘Ha!’ barks the Lab. ‘That’s what we all say. Don’t we Jack?’

The Lab’s a Labrador, short-haired, light gold colour. Name of George. Name suits him. He’s got a deep, well-bred bark. The sort that brings the other dogs to attention when Jack’s got a general announcement to make. He’s loyal, but he’s sure not the shiniest dog-bowl in the cupboard. And the Afghan’s Geraldine. She’s just there to make Jack feel like he’s royalty or something, is my opinion. Not for any brains. Can’t be. Because she don’t seem to have much more behind the eyes than George. Which is to say, very little. Though I could be more’n a bit biased in that, of course. On account I don’t like her. But then she don’t like me, neither. On account of what I am. So we’re pretty mutual in that regard. Hair, though, yea, she’s got that. Hair in plenty. Hanging down from everywhere. And ha! the way she prances about, with that snooty snout of hers stuck up the sky.

‘Well, now,’ says Jack to the new girl, ‘allow me to clue you in about how things stand around here. Because you need to understand, it ain’t likely you’ll be chosen quick by a nice new owner.’

And I notice his look and tone’ve turned more accommodatory. Not looking to intimidate her no more. She sits, obedient. Holds her head patient. Like she’s ‘bout to get some instruction from a human. Jack flips another quick look at his two cronies. Look that says, *I told you I was right. This is our candidate.*

It’s then I’m knowing Jack’s got some plan in mind for this Staffie. But it sure can’t be as one of his minders because he’s already got George and that walking carpet Geraldine doing that job. And, anyway, plain fact is, it’s the Bull Terriers, like this new girl, that never stay in this place more’n a day or two. Them are the dogs what’re always disappearing out the gates real quick.

While the rest of us don’t.

The rest of us’ve been here months and months. Just waiting.

Well. Leastwise. That’s how it was.

Until just recent.
When we got taste of a new way things’re looking to go for the rest of us.

And sure not a good new way, neither.

And sure not a way I’m ever keen on hanging around here for – not just biding ’til it’s my turn.

Point of fact is, none of us dogs is much keen on just waiting. Not any longer.

If they was ever to forget and leave the gates open, we’d all be out of this place. In a flash. Me, I’m more’n happy to take my chances anywhere you like – rather than staying here.

So, anyways, whichever’s the way you’re looking at it, Jack’s going to have to move fast if he’s got some use in mind for our new girl.

So I take a look-see what it is about her that Jack sees.

She’s quite a handsome-looking example of her breed. Has a very open look and bright eyes. But no, it certain isn’t that. It’s got to be her broad, powerful strong chest and back. This girl's got a lot of muscle, even for such a young Staffie. Because I’m guessing she’s probable not yet bare on two years old. That is, if you’re counting human. In dog years, that’s probable about fifteen, going on sixteen. But ha! if you’re looking for a dog with canine knowingness, then you sure wouldn’t be giving this girl a second looking. No, you definite wouldn’t. ’Cause, this girl’s only about as knowing as a wet blind pup still sucking from her mother’s teat.

But if Jack’s on the look for a dog with brute strength and a baby-pup innocence to be easy led, then, well, yea, this is probable just his perfect dog.

I trot a step closer and prick up my ears. I’m real keen on hearing what Jack’s got in mind.
Chapter Two

Big-boot

Because Jack’s talking to the new girl now like he’s the best friend she’s ever going to have. ‘I’m Jack,’ he says. ‘Not very original for a Jack Russell, I know. But that’s what I’m called. What’s your name?’

‘Sam,’ the new girl says. And moving away from George. Who’d been thinking on getting closer up with his acquaintings. A bit too close up for this young Staffie’s likes.

‘Nice to meet you, Sam,’ says Jack. ‘I’ll cut straight to the bone. About why it ain’t likely you’ll be chosen quick by a new owner. I hate to say, but we don’t ever see no punters around here looking for a new pet. Not any more, we don’t. Used to, long time back. But not since when Big-boot took over. George and Geraldine here’ll tell you the same.’

‘Big-boot?’ says Sam. ‘Who’s Big-boot?’

Jack cocks his snout the direction of the human doing the sweeping.

‘And this place is way out in the middle of nowhere,’ Jack says. ‘So it ain’t an easy convenience for humans to get to. Not when there’s so many other places around that are easier to get, with dogs just like us, all barking loud for a new home. You know, bought as a pup by some nice family, and then dumped when they find out how big and hungry and demanding a pup can grow into. A lot of humans just don’t appreciate what it takes to look after a dog properly.’

Ha! But don’t Jack sure have a very convincing persuading way with words – when he needs to. When he’s got a scheming in mind.

‘Cause he’s in full flow now.

‘And it’s summertime now, ain’t it, see,’ he says. ‘Hot weather. Humans on holidays. So, they generally ain’t so much looking for a dog this time of year, as a rule. Christmas is best. Give a dog to their kids. As a present. Then most of them given back, sooner or later, to places like this. Or kicked out onto the streets. Which is where most of us got picked up from in the first place. So, I may as well tell you plain, it’ll probably be
months before you’re even looked at. If at all. You get my drift?"

Except, I’m thinking, how ‘bout the Bull Terriers, Jack? Why ain’t you telling her ‘bout what happens to Bull Terriers like this Staffie? ‘Bout how they don’t hardly even get to be barked hello to, before they’re got shot of by Big-boot. And not re-seen again.

But, hey, I’m keeping a hold on my trap, keeping it tight shut. Because Jack’s working his version of things careful, to a purpose. And I want to find out what it is.

Sam, though, she’s looking pretty smacked in the muzzle at Jack’s news. ‘Well, I’m not so sure,’ she says. ‘I’m good with children, you see.’

‘Don’t make no difference,’ Jack says. ‘George here, he’s good with the kiddies, too. And he’d make a great ornament for humans that live in the country. ‘Specially those from the town that want to look like gentry. But he’s been here ages.’

‘That’s right!’ George barks. Then, more quietly, ‘What’s an ornament, Jack?’

‘Never mind,’ says Jack. ‘It’s a good thing.’

‘Oh right. A good thing,’ George says.’Thanks, Jack!’

‘Of course,’ says Jack, ‘big problem for George is he’s meant to be a gun-dog, but he don’t like bangs. Hides under a table if he even hears a balloon burst.’

‘No!’ George barks. ‘No, no, no. I don’t like bangs. I don’t like bangs.’

‘Cool it, George,’ says Jack. ‘Ain’t no bangs going on just now.’

‘No bangs? No bangs? Okay, thanks Jack,’ George barks, more quiet.

But, uh-oh, look out, ’cause George’s barking’s raised the notice of Big-boot. He’s stopped his sweeping and’s looking over our way.

And Jack’s looking all tensed, ears pricked forward.

But there’s nothing going on, no trouble for Big-boot to wade into and sort out. Like don’t he just always love to do. With his boot. But still, nonethewise, he stares at Sam from across the yard. Rolls one of them little white things humans have a liking for sticking in their mouths. Rolls it careful with his fingers. Not that humans eat them things, just let them burn in their mouths. Slow, like. The stink from their smoke
gets in the way of other interesting smells you’re looking to separate out. Any dog with a good nose can smell them things a mile off. No kidding, literal, a mile off. In the yard, its stink mixes with the scent from every dog’s pee and the ripe odour of our turds.

And still Big-boot’s just staring. Looking mean. Putting that white thing in and out his mouth, the whole time.

Stares and looks...

Then... eventual – back to his sweeping.

And Jack’s straight direct back to his scheming.

‘You see,’ Jack says to Sam, ‘we all come with things that can put humans off. Like how George don’t like bangs. Like how Staffordshire Bull Terriers got a reputation for being aggressive.’

‘Aggressive?’ Sam says. Looks shocked. ‘Oh, no. No, no, no. But that’s not me.’ She’s upset at what Jack’s said. ‘I’m as soft as they come,’ she says. ‘Softer than a kiddie’s soft toy. Look.’ And she sits up on her hind legs, begs with a real soppy look on her face. ‘It’s the owners who are to blame,’ she says. ‘Any dog can go to the bad if their owner treats them badly.’

‘I know that, you know that, we all know that,’ Jack argues. ‘But once a story is out there, that’s it, whether it’s fair or not. That’s the way humans see things. And humans are the ones that call the shots. You see what I’m saying? Because look at the size of you. You’re a real muscly dog. And that’s what a human will see.’

‘I know,’ says Sam. ‘And that’s why I had to come here. I pulled my owner over. Broke her arm. She’s one of those humans with white hair and a stick. I saw a cat and that was it – I was off. You know how it is, you just have to chase that cat, don’t you!’

Yes, I’m thinking, that’s one of the things ‘bout Staffies. See a cat and they’re off, deaf and blind to anything else – owner’s shouts, other humans, big metal boxes flying along a road faster’n a dog can run. You know, that can so easy smash up a dog. It’s the cat and nothing but the cat. But ha! what our new girl’d do if she ever caught up with one, I don’t know. Can’t see a single hair of aggression on her, despite all
those muscles she’s got. Probable invite the cat over, you know, ask it, *care to share supper with me?*

‘You can see my point, then,’ says Jack. ‘A new owner will most likely be having big doubts. What with you having that sort of history. You’re very likely being here a *long* time. A *real* long time.’

And at *that* announcement, Sam drops her head so mournful low, she looks like a dog what’s just had its supper snatched away from under its snout.

‘But it doesn’t have to be like that,’ Jack says. ‘I could get us out tomorrow. And I don’t mean leaving by the front gate. A *different* way out.’

And my ears are pricked up so high now, they’re almost taking off.
Anne was born in America but has lived and worked almost everywhere in the world.

Things she’s done: kayaked with dolphins, run in the mountains of Colorado, swum in the ice-cold waters off Prince Edward Island, conducted the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, biked up the Gaisberg in Austria, read hundreds of spy stories and action/adventures, circumnavigated the globe by sailboat... (Well, actually, she hasn’t done the last one, but she’d like to.)

Anne has two sons. She writes about real life for real boys. She lives in London but dreams about the coast of Maine, and she likes to pretend she can look out her window and see gulls smashing shellfish on the rocks.

About Lobster Wars

Lobster Wars is a fast-riding adventure story about twelve-year-old Jonathan Lyon, who lives on a quiet island off the coast of Maine. He finds the body of local teen and baseball superstar, Carl Stillwater, on the beach near his house. Carl is face down in the sand, and the back of his head is shot off. Terrified of the men who killed Carl, Jonathan decides not to tell anyone about the murder. As events around him rapidly unfold, Jonathan discovers things about Carl, about drugs, and about corrupt lobstermen and cops – things that make him realise he doesn’t really know his home at all. He has to summon the courage to save himself, his family, and his island.

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It’s October on the island, and skies are calm – the leaves, yellow and fiery orange. The last apples thump down heavily onto the ground. Flocks of birds circle in spirals over the clam flats at the edge of the sea. And Eliot and me, we find a kid on the beach with the back of his head shot off.

Nothing is the way it seems.


“I can’t,” I say.

“Touch him with your foot.”

I stare out through the blackberry bushes down to the shore. The mound of his body is just visible in the bright moonlight. The waves roll up and wash back as the sea creeps closer to him.

There’s a rustle next to me as Eliot shifts position. ‘We shouldn’t have come back, Jon,’ he says.

‘We had to.’ I take out my phone. ‘You want to call someone? That’s what we should’ve done.’

‘Wait!’ He grabs my arm. ‘You can’t. You heard what they said.’

We both think about that.

I don’t want to go down there. I don’t want to know.

‘We have to check,’ I say. ‘If he’s alive, we call it in. If he’s dead, we don’t do anything. Okay?’
El doesn’t say anything.
‘Okay?!’ I say.
‘They can’t find out.’
‘We’ll call from the phone by the Dairy Queen. No one will know it’s us.’ I wait for him to say something. ‘If we don’t, how’s anyone going to know he’s out there? He could be here till spring.’
‘No, he won’t. He’ll get washed out by the tide. That’s what they wanted.’
A cloud passes over the moon and everything goes dark.
‘He hasn’t moved in ages. How long since—’ I ask.
‘How should I know?’ El says. ‘My phone ran out of juice after I took the pictures.’
‘Okay. We’ll go over together. We’ll just check it out and then go.’
El groans.
The leaves of the beech trees shiver in the wind. I creep out of the bushes real slow and squint back over my shoulder at the black mouth of the driveway. I know they’re gone, but still.
A sharp crunch sounds behind me.
I freeze. ‘What was that?’
‘I stepped on something,’ El says. ‘Just a can.’
Beer. They were drinking out here. And other stuff.
‘Watch out,’ I say.
‘How? I can’t see anything. My glasses are all fogged up. Turn on your phone.’
‘No. Someone might see. Hold onto my jacket. And look at your feet.’
A hazy moon glistens behind the clouds. We inch forward slowly onto the beach. Our feet crunch on clam shells and slip on wet pebbles.
The breeze lifts and catches me in the face – that rotted seaweed smell you get at low tide after they bring the catch in. That decay. It’s like it’s already coming from his body.
He’s twisted up all funny, face down in the sand.
Eliot bends over, clutching his stomach.
I can’t touch him.
‘Carl?’ I say. There’s a rustle as the wind picks up again. I nudge his body with my foot, but he doesn’t move.

Carl Stillwater. I can see him in my mind’s eye, reaching up into the sun, the ball snapping into his mitt, whipping it back home like the wind. How can he be lying there not moving? It can’t happen that fast. I don’t believe it.

Suddenly the moon breaks out from the clouds and everything’s clear. I can see the holes in the wet sand where the clams are buried. I can see the marks where they dragged him down to the shore. I can see the dark crater in the back of his head. ‘Jesus!’ El puts his hands on his knees. ‘He’s dead,’ I say.

El looks up at me. ‘Don’t we need to check if he’s breathing? You got a mirror?’

‘What? Are you kidding? Why would I have a mirror?’ El shrugs. ‘You hold it in front of his mouth—’

‘The back of his head’s missing. Trust me. He’s not breathing.’

We both look at that wet, rutted crater. Did he feel that? Did he even know what happened? Was there a moment of terrifying pain before he fell?

‘Can we go now?’ El says.

I force myself to look away. ‘I guess so.’

‘And we’re not going to tell anyone?’

‘I guess not,’ I say.

‘Swear,’ he breathes heavily. I look at him. ‘Okay, I swear.’

He looks away. ‘Poor Pete,’ he says.

I think about Pete Stillwater – his tired eyes and girly walk. His Mom’s nutso. That’s what they say.

And now, no big brother.

We stumble back down the pitted driveway in the shadows, the trees shaking their scraggy branches at us like a warning.

Yes, that’s what it’s like, they seem to say. That’s what it’s like to die.
It was all Eliot’s idea.

He wanted to get some pictures of his older sister partying – for blackmail purposes. I went because he didn’t want to be alone out there when it got dark. I figured I could leave my little sister for half an hour. Six-year-olds sleep like the dead once they go down.

We knew where the kids were going. It was one of those houses down by the water – a summer house, empty most of the year and way off the road down a long dirt driveway. You could make all the noise you wanted – even light a fire. No one would know.

Well, we couldn’t go down the driveway – they’d see us. But El knew how to get there through the woods. He’d studied the situation.

So, just after sunset, we hide our bikes in the bushes by the side of the road. It’s dusk, but not dark yet. We can see a bit.

We make our way through the pines and the shadowy, half-dead apple trees that crouch under them like wart-covered spectres. Branches creak and leaves crunch under our feet. We creep around, trying not to make any noise.

I hear the kids’ voices, and then I see them sitting round a fire – they’re all juniors and seniors. The wood snaps and smells like burnt marshmallows, but sharper, more acidic. Carl Stillwater gives his beer can to his girlfriend, Stacey.

‘Oof! I gotta take a leak,’ Carl says. He heads into the woods on the other side of the cove.

We duck down behind some bushes. I can’t see Eliot’s sister at first. She’s over in the shadows with some guy. They’re making out – all twisted up in a tangle of legs and arms, slobbering over each other’s faces.

El taps at his phone. ‘Crap. They’re all coming out too dark.’

That’s when we hear a car coming down the driveway.

Over by the fire, Stacey says, ‘Shut up! I think I hear something.’

Eric, this skinny senior, jumps up and throws something on the flames. It sends up a plume of smoke. ‘I thought you said the place was empty.’

Some big guy I don’t recognise says, ‘It is. They left at the end of August.’
‘Carl, where are you? Someone’s coming!’ Stacey calls. ‘Eric, grab the cans. Quick!’

A black van pulls out onto the cove. Its headlights shine right across the beach and into the bushes where we’re hiding.

I don’t like it. No one on the island drives a van like that.

‘We better go,’ I whisper.

El holds his phone up. ‘Wait a minute. I gotta get this.’ His sister’s standing up, fumbling with the buttons on her shirt.

Two guys in sunglasses get out of the van.

‘I’m going,’ I say. ‘They might see us. We could get in trouble.’

‘Okay, okay. Wait up!’ El scrambles after me. ‘Who do you think they are?’

‘Who knows. Maybe some renters,’ I say.

‘In October?’

‘They sure looked pissed off.’

El stumbles around in the shadows, scrolling through the pictures on his phone. ‘Actually, some of these turned out okay. Gayle’s gonna have a heart attack. You think I should show her right away? I could tell her I’ll post them. Or, I could threaten to show them to Mom—’

A piercing shriek cuts him off.

El grabs me. ‘What was that?’

‘Come on!’ I say.

We run toward our bikes, stumbling on roots and slipping on rotting leaves. The wood seems dark and vast. A thin branch snaps into my face.

‘Hurry!’ says Eliot, weaving around me.

I duck beneath the trees and race after him. I can hear the kids shouting as they run out of the driveway.

‘Wait!’ I whisper. We crouch down and listen. Their feet pound the road, their voices echo loud in the night.

‘Did you see that gun?’

‘We have to call the police.’

‘Are you kidding me? You heard what they said.’

‘What about Carl? Someone has to warn him.’
‘Go back there? Are you crazy?’
‘For Chrissake, they were going to kill us.’
‘Carl would have heard them. He was right there. He must’ve hid.’
‘He’ll go through the woods to the Burnham place. That’s where he parked.’

They were past us now, heading to the turn in the road.
‘I want to go back,’ says Stacey’s voice.
‘Don’t be crazy. He’ll be fine.’

Their voices fade as they run around the corner and away.
‘Come on. Let’s get out of here,’ I say, pushing my bike toward the road. The blackberry bushes snag on my clothes and I yank them free.
‘Did you hear what they said?’ El asks.

*Crack!*

A gunshot explodes in the dark.
We don’t dare move. We don’t dare breathe. We reach for each other and hang on. There’s a wild cry of birds, the scramble of a small animal running through the bushes. Then, utter silence.

Whatever those guys said, Carl must have missed it. He went into the woods to pee. And when he came out...

We grab our bikes and ride away like crazy, listening out for the black van. At the top of the hill, I turn around to look, but the road disappears into nothingness behind me. We spin down the other side, away from those men, away from the gun, away from the wart-covered apple trees, racing for home.

As I speed away, I wonder if they really shot Carl, and if so, how long it took him to die. Whether he’s lying there even now, his life leaching away into the sand – looking up into the faces of the strangers who shot him.

Carl Stillwater, whose long, dark hair shines in the sun as he squats over the plate to bat. Who walks from the school parking lot to the seventh-grade gate, where we all go in, with his hand on his younger brother, Pete’s, shoulder. Who, real quick, taps the brim of Pete’s
baseball cap, before he runs into the high school.

Dad says he’s the best ball player the island has seen in thirty years.

Dad.

What if it was him, over in Afghanistan? Shot. Lying there alone, surrounded by guys who want him to die.

My bike skids to a halt.

‘We have to call someone,’ I say.

‘What?’ El pulls up beside me. ‘No way. You heard what they said.’

‘Then we have to go back.’

‘Are you insane? They’ll kill us.’

‘We can’t leave him there with those guys.’

‘Jon, if they shot him, he’s dead. He won’t know the difference.’

‘We don’t know that. He could be out there on his own, bleeding to death.’

El stares at me.

I look away. ‘Dad says you never leave a fallen comrade.’

‘Don’t start with the army stuff. This is not the time. Those guys could be anywhere.’

‘I don’t think so. Would you hang around if you just shot someone? I think they’d run.’

‘But what if they didn’t?’

I turn my bike around. ‘I’m going back,’ I say.

I ride away from him, keeping as far into the shadows by the side of the road as I can, in case the black van drives by.

‘Okay, okay,’ he calls after me. ‘I’m coming with you.’

When we get to the driveway, El pedals up behind me. ‘You ever seen a dead body before?’

‘No. You?’

He takes his glasses off and wipes them on his shirt. ‘Stu Lawson. He was working Haskell’s boat two summers ago. Got his foot caught in the line – dragged him right under with the lobster traps.’ He looks down. ‘I saw him when they brought him into dock. All blue. His skin, I mean. Weird-looking.’
I stash my bike in the bushes. It’s real dark now. ‘We can’t go back through the woods,’ I say. ‘We’re gonna sneak down the driveway.’

The idea of running into those guys with the gun, though. That, and blue Stu Lawson. I hold my breath and listen for the van. All I hear is the crazy thud of my heart.

‘We’ll stay in the shadows,’ I say.

That’s what we do, and when we get to the cove, the van is gone, just like I thought.

And there’s a dark mound down by the water.
Sarah has loved writing stories since primary school and was inspired by reading Roald Dahl stories in her local library.

After studying for a history degree, she went off to explore the world – finding exciting stories to tell whilst living in Spain and Japan, America and Australia.

Sarah taught primary school children for fifteen years and all the time she was writing and thinking up stories to tell and act out with them. She lives and writes in Great Malvern with her son, puppy and two cats and loves taking inspiring walks on the beautiful Malvern hills. Sea of Liars is her first historical novel in verse.

*Sea of Liars* was longlisted for the Bath Children’s Novel Award, 2019.

**About Sea of Liars**

His crime – arson.
His punishment – banishment to Botany Bay aboard a terrifying convict ship.
Along with him are five more children. None of them can be trusted. At least one is an evil backstabber.
When disaster strikes, Nathaniel’s journey becomes a desperate race against time and unknown enemies to get to land.
Can Nathaniel defeat his own demons and help the children survive? Or will he drown in a despicable sea of liars?

sarah.stevens18@bathspa.ac.uk | @sstherapies
SEA OF LIARS

Aboard the Eagle Convict ship

Week One

Brought into the room
to read n write.
Brought into the room
to stop em fight.
Brought into the room
to read n write.
Them poor sad wasted boys.

Ship’s Journal
Tuesday, 4th August, 1835

All’s well
Seas are calm
England is behind us
All lost souls aboard are fearful
Few have sailed before
I have them all in mind
And we shall travel safely
To their new home

Reverend Roberts
Nathaniel Lawson

Tis the truth
for me
that I shall no more climb
in oak nor birch nor willow trees.

No more
swing in their branches.

No more
hide in their leaves.

No more
shall I see England.

No more
tread upon her shores.

From this day forth
for hour upon hour
only vast oceans
of seaweed and salt
shall I see.

No more
to me master’s harsh house
shall I go.

No more
of me master’s hard hand
shall I feel.

For here
upon this monstrous ship
I shall live
or
I shall die.
But I knows
full certain
that
I shan’t be back
to England’s shores
no more.

All the way down to Botany Bay
If I weren’t so
full of hate
I too should be
shakin
and
cryin
just like
the
other
five
boys
here
in
this
ship’s belly.
Retchèd with seasick,
I too should be
tryin
to
keep
down
what
little
food
I
has
left
just like them.

But I’s full of hate,
what’s a
deep
dark
fire
down
here
in
the
pit
of
me stomach.

It burns for me master.

It blazes for me father.

For him and his
treacherous crime.

So I ain’t doin
none
of
their
snivellen
and
moanin

nor
shall I

for
the
whole
way
down
to
Botany
Bay.

First Meetings

Waves rise
and this
tall ship tilts.

We fall hard
off our rum-cask seats.

Be amusin, look
if her timber floor
weren’t so
wet and cold.

Each boy
in this
dull, damp hull
is desperate-like
wantin to speak.

As each boy
opens their mouth
I can’t say I’s impressed.

“Well, I shan’t be writing,’
starts a tall boy
what looks like a rook.
His dark eyes
flash
in his dirty skin.

“You don’t get a say in it,’
says the green-eyed boy
arms folded in tight.
e’s softer, look
than the dirty rook
but his frown
near touches his nose.

Next boy
winks at me
sayin
‘I’m not stoppin here.’

e’s dark skinned
nails bit to the quick
a twinkle in his eyes.

‘I ain’t stoppin neither then,’
says a snot-nosed urchin
close by his side.
This one’s small
and soft-like
stood there
quakin in his boots.

There’s this fifth boy
with a lordly look
and fair curls
e says nothin.
But e do try to stare me down
No good shall come of that, look.

Can e hear me thoughts, I thinks?
Perhaps e’s up for a fight.

I says naught.
I’s naught to say.

Just yawn
like I’s bored of the lot.

Where do they think theys are goin, look
if they says they ain’t stayin here?

Well
perhaps
they’s a mind to
swim with the sharks

tis for the best
I fear.

**The Big Man**

No sharks for us
this cell door’s sealed tight
window bars
grin like a sneer.
Til a clankin key  
catches loud in the lock  
and a huge man  
hauls his-self in.  

e’s smilin wide-like  
but I still leans back  
one more powerful  
man has I known.  

I ain’t seen him boardin  
I’d not forget him  
I don’t breathe  
til e opens his mouth.  

No friends here  
‘So to it, young friends,’  
e booms out loud  
not a word of his name from them lips.  

‘There’s no friends here, Sir,’  
green-eyes dares.  
e’s a gutsy one, I thinks.  

‘No, we ain’t friends.’  
Tis the urchin whisperin.  

Why’s each one presumin to speak?  

The Big Man  
e do look to each  
‘Will anyone dare speak more?’  

‘Tis true, Sir,  
I ain’t got no friends.’
Green eyes don’t give up.

‘No, neither has I, Sir,’
the Rookboy says.

Tis a truth I’s want to agree on.

This Big Man fixes
each boy with a stare
that cleaves me down to me core.

e is a Big Man
we all sees this well
in stature and in thoughts.

Even his muscles
tell truth of his past
many a battle e must have known.

e smiles a long while
at us friendless six.

We silently waits it out.
Charlie grew up on the North East coast of Scotland and went to Hull University. He lives in Dorset with his wife, family and dogs.

There is nothing he likes more than the sound of waves on the shore, and he often finds the sea seeps into his writing as the tide takes his tales to the strangest of places.

He writes picture books under the name Charlie Farley (Orchard).

Charlie is represented by Jodie Hodges at United Agents.

About *The Seven Deadly Saints*

In a troubled land, the Book of Tales tells of ghouls, ghosts and monsters to purge on All-Halo’s Day...

*Once upon a time, when the land lost its way,*
*Came a dreadful end to All-Halo’s Day.*
*A Breath of Wind that burned it to Hell,*
*And left this wondrous Tale to tell.*

Seven children, or monsters, or both – inextricably linked by the scores on their wrists – are drawn together.

*Each but a child when cruelly cast aside,*
*Made monsters by those who were monsters inside,*
*Who together became the Breath of Wind,*
*And blew away the power from those who had sinned.*

Can the children change the world and rewrite its Tale?

charlesrosswilkinson@gmail.com | @CharlieFarley04
THE SEVEN DEADLY SAINTS

Click

A blind ghoul waits in the Caves of See,
No eyes, but sharpened teeth has he,
And when night comes he combs the shore,
To drag lost souls to his bone-strewn floor.

Old Mother Kripyr’s Book of Tales

Click-click-click.

Klycke could feel the sun on his face, and knew it was there, but his clicks didn’t stretch as far as the sky. He added the shining disc to the picture in his mind. He gave the sun a chubby, beaming face, and flaming golden locks for fun, and then took them away again.

Klycke’s world was far more rich and full of wonder than anybody could possibly realise.

Click-click.

Klycke made the noise with his tongue on the roof of his mouth, changing its power with the shape of his lips and the force of his breath. The images his head created were like great glass domes, in which Klycke was the centrepiece, as the world around him grew and changed with the bounce of his sounds.

Today in his mind’s eye, beneath his smiling sun, he could see the beach behind him, shingle rising to the tide line, the cliffs and caves beyond. Ahead of him was the sea. Waves lapped at his bare feet and his
twisted narwhal canes. Out in the distance, across the waves, his friends were coming, calling back to him. He touched the tips of his canes to the water to hear them better.

_Click-click._

Only the first twenty feet of Klycke’s tapestry of the mind, where his clicks could reach and ricochet, were vivid. Beyond that he enjoyed embroidering the detail. He listened to the hush of rushes in the dunes beside his cave, and painted the sky the palest blue, the colour his left eye used to be. He shaded the sea with rippling jade, just like his right eye before they took it. He made the sea’s surface calm and flat, based on the gentle swoosh and lap of the waves.

_Click._

Then there were the images conjured by all his other sharpened senses, enriching his picture beyond the echo of his clicks. There was the clink-scrape of shells dancing in the wash. The aimless cry of gulls on the cliffs. A crab scuttling in the sand, slipping under a rock in the pools by his feet. Klycke’s skin told him the temperature and speed of the wind. Today was warm, for autumn, with just a sigh of an easterly, bringing up the smells from Rushaven. Klycke’s nose wrinkled with the tang of brine, the musk of gull guano beside his cave, the sickly-sweet carcass of a beached beluga he’d begun to strip yesterday, a league or so down the coast.

_Click-click-click._

Klycke’s was a rich world indeed, though he’d have his eyes back in a blink. How he wished to really see all the things he pictured in his head. How he wished for certainty, over the shadow and light and fluidity of his own sensory tapestry.

Over time, Klycke began to question the truth of the panoramas he created. Could he really remember the colours of the sky, or sea, or gulls anymore? Or were these as imagined as the beaming face he’d given the sun? What about him? What did he look like now? How much had he grown? He could easily picture his two twisted whale tusk canes, as he’d shaped and carved them both himself. Each with a whale-skin
loop around his wrists and hidden sharpened inside edge. But Klycke couldn’t see himself anymore, in his ragged robes and hood, the same tattered bandage wrapped around his face that Mother Kriepyr had tied four spring tides past, when he was but a fingerling of a boy. Did they still even cover his burned-out sockets?

Click-click-click... Click-click-click.

Klycke rested on a barnacle-spotted rock while he waited for his friends, flicking a few unwitting winkles from a crevasse with a single swipe of a cane. Resting his sticks against his knees, he scooped up the star-shaped creatures and used the edge of a shell to loosen their grey flesh, before greedily swilling them down his throat. They tasted as though the sea had made them only moments before. Next, Klycke tugged a handful of dusty pink carrageen moss from the edge of the pool. He crammed the weed into his mouth and chewed slowly to soften the slippery fronds and release the peppery taste.

Klycke had learned to love the larder of the sea. Crab and lobster, mussels and oysters, seaweed and samphire. Every once in a while something more substantial washed up on his bountiful shores, like the beluga he’d begun to strip bare. Klycke found he had little competition from beachcombers, scared as they were of the eyeless ghoul of the Caves of See. Old Mother Kriepyr had worked her rumours hard to keep his beach safe.

Click-click-click.

‘Good day, land friend.’

‘Good day, Goolsh.’

The minke whale had been the one who’d taught Klycke a few simple words of whale and dolphin.

‘Come and play, come and play,’ Skee and Kee the bottlenose dolphins called, and he heard the breach and splash of them leaping together.

He rushed a click out towards them, but too late, he’d missed them in joyful flight. Klycke loved it when one of his clicks caught a sea creature mid-breach; an empty shape where they leapt, bouncing back to add to the ever-changing tapestry in his head.
‘It’s too cold for me.’ Klycke knew it would make them laugh, and he was right. ‘Hee-haw’ screams of the whale and dolphins filled the air like a swarm of jellyfish in Klycke’s mind.

‘You should come to the north where the sea is ice, and you just open your mouth for food,’ sang Goolsh. ‘The water here is too warm and empty.’

‘Who are your friends?’ Skee or Kee shouted.

Klycke still found it hard to tell which of the two dolphins were talking. Goolsh was easier, clearer, more of a song. He tried to work out who had spoken, then realised, with a start, what the bottlenose had asked and spun around swiftly, grabbing his canes and jumping to his feet.

*Click-click-click.*

Whoever the dolphins had spotted with their keen eyes was beyond the reach of his sounds. ‘Where? How many land folk?’

‘On the cliffs,’ said Goolsh.

‘Three,’ said the one he thought was Skee, leaping for a better view and splashing down.

‘And a hairy beastie thing,’ said the other.

‘Run, run for your cave,’ called Goolsh.

Klycke ran up the shore, swinging his canes and clicking as he went, ears straining, hoping not to hear the scrunch of feet on shingle at the bottom of the cliff path.

He made it to the cave, to the stench of guano, the rotting seal skull he left in the entrance, covered in shore crabs and flies. Then inside, in the dripping dark of the cave, the sound of empty shells and old bones crunching underfoot.

*Click-click-click.*

Klycke was safe. He wrapped himself in old sealskins, crossed his legs, resting his canes as he listened hard. He was more comfortable being a hermit than the crabs that shared the caves.

The footsteps were cautious. Three children and a dog. A very large dog. They wouldn’t dare enter Klycke’s cave if they’d heard any Tales
told of the eyeless ghoul. And if they did come in, then they were stupid, and their deaths would be on their own heads.

There once was a child with two odd eyes,
A sign of the Devil that the Fayre despise.
So we saved his soul and we took his sight,
But he’ll find you in the dark if you don’t take flight.

Lord Paternoster’s Book of Tales
YOUNG ADULT
Allie Bushman graduated from Columbia College Chicago, with a BA in Fiction Writing. She currently lives in Detroit. And, no, it’s not nearly as bad as you’ve probably heard. *Doing Just Fine* was inspired by the many summer lake towns that dot the state of Michigan, and her struggles with depression and anxiety.

**About *Doing Just Fine***

Sisters Billie and Gus are sent away from their native Chicago for a summer to live with their aunt, uncle, and cousin, in the small Michigan lake town of Sangamon. Billie is angry to be stuck in what she considers *bum-fuck nowhere*; Gus is optimistic. Billie plans to sulk and get a job, while Gus plans to keep up her water polo training, read books, and keep to herself. She’s used to keeping to herself. But few summers go as planned, and this one is no exception. Billie meets the charismatic, but damaged Spencer Lyons at a party and spends her time swept up in him. Along the way, she learns about her father, who died shortly after she was born, and his teenage years in Sangamon. Gus, who has always struggled to make friends, falls in with a ragtag group of local teenagers, and their investigation into strange happenings in the town. A believer in conspiracy theories, she finds herself caught in one.

allie.bushman@gmail.com
Doing Just Fine

Chapter One

Billie

I felt my phone buzz, again, from somewhere under my butt and the nest of pillows I’d created on my bed. I knew it was Artie. I scooted further down into my self-made cocoon and pressed play on the next episode of the vampire show I’d been binging for the past week. Two of my classes had been cancelled, which just gave me more time to do nothing.

And I relished it.

My roommate had left town a week early for Easter, so I had the room to myself. No questions, disapproving looks, or stinky shit smells in the bathroom. Beth-Ann really did have the smelliest bowel movements I’d ever gotten a whiff of.

My phone buzzed again. I shifted my body, and felt around until I’d extracted it. Three missed messages, all from Artie.

I’d really like to see you before you head back to Chicago.

It’s so nice out, let’s go get bubble tea and go walk around campus!

Is everything okay, Billie?

I picked my head up just enough to glance at the gaps in the curtains. They’d been pulled shut since Beth-Ann left town. I preferred a dark room. That way the glare didn’t get in the way of my show. From the little slit of light I could see, it did look nice. I hadn’t been out since my class on Tuesday.
It was Friday now.
I’d ordered delivery for half my meals, and eaten Ramen I’d had for
the others.
I caught a glimpse of my reflection in my laptop screen as the show
faded to black during a scene change. My skin looked blotchy. My hair
was greasy and tangled. I’d have to shower. Brush through the knots in
my hair. Blow it dry. Slap on some makeup. Put on real clothes. I was
exhausted just thinking about it.
I’d have to smile, and laugh at Artie’s jokes. Tell jokes of my own.
Be the charming Billie he liked. Not the Billie who’d only gotten up to
pee and answer the door for pizza and Chinese. The one who had stared
at the wall for an hour and a half this morning, for no particular reason.
Getting up to retrieve my laptop from under my bed just had seemed
like too much effort. I’d needed that time to build up to it.
My room was a mess. Dirty dishes everywhere. Piles of clothes
waiting to be washed. Books and notebooks I had dumped between
classes. I glanced at the glowing red numbers of Beth-Ann’s alarm clock.
It was only 11:30. My train home to Chicago wasn’t for several hours.
I grabbed the box of Cheez-its off my bedside table, and slid further
down into the blankets.

Gus

I watched the clock on the wall tick down the seconds. It was one of
those white and black ones, which only seemed to exist in schools. Just
five more minutes. My books were all packed in my backpack, except
for my math textbook and notebook, which sat on the desk in front
of me. When the bell rang, I would stack them, swing my bag over my
back, tuck the books under my arm, and walk as quickly as I could to
the exit. Everyone else would take longer to pack their things, socialize.
If I was quick enough, I could beat the crowd of them walking to the L,
or the bus, or just straight home like me.
‘Have a good long weekend,’ Mrs. Jones, my Algebra 1 teacher called out. She sank down into her desk, looking defeated.

But we still had three minutes left.

Around me, kids swung around in their chairs to talk to the person besides, or behind them. I picked up my pencil and tapped it lightly on a random problem on the page. If I focused on it hard enough, everyone would think I was just getting a head start on the homework.

‘My family doesn’t even celebrate Easter. I’m just going to spend the weekend getting smashed while my parents are in Mexico.’ The two guys seated behind me high fived, as if they were oh-so cool and clever for drinking.

I waited for the bell to ring, and stared blankly at the numbers I was copying down. If I looked up now, I might accidentally make eye contact with someone and they might try to talk to me.

I mean, they probably wouldn’t, because people rarely ever spoke to me, unless it was to ask to borrow a pencil, or what homework was due tomorrow.

I always had extra pencils. That way they would keep asking. Ticonderoga #2, always nicely sharpened.

Brrrngggg.

Finally.

I stood up quickly, swung my backpack over my shoulder, and swept up my books, speed walking to the door, ahead of everyone, just like I’d planned.

And just like I did every day.

The closest exit was to the right, past only a few dozen lockers: not prime real estate. It made for a quick exit.

The noise grew heavy around me, students, shouting, laughing. Lockers banging. I kept my eyes on the floor, careful to maneuver around the sets of feet in athletic shoes, and scuffed Doc Martins.

I pushed against the door, bursting out of the confined noise of the school, and into the city noise of Chicago.
It was a dreary day, grey and overcast. I pulled up the hood of my sweatshirt, and kept walking.

My phone buzzed in the pocket of my coat. I reached in, knowing the text had to be from Cameron, Mom or Billie. They were the only people who ever contacted me outside of water polo season.

Don’t forget, Billie comes home tonight. We’re going to Lou Malnati’s for dinner.

It was Mom.

I know. Can Cameron come?

Mom usually just included my best friend, Cameron Daugherty, in any family things we did. The last time I’d remembered her saying no to including Cam was when she and Dad told me they were getting divorced.

Just family tonight.

Billie

Union Station was an absolute cluster-fuck. People commuting home to their Colonials, and McMansions in Naperville, Downers Grove, or whatever other god-forsaken suburb they populated.

I didn’t get why anyone would choose to live in the suburbs when they worked in the city. Hell, Peter had done the reverse commute for years, because he refused to live outside Chicago city limits. That was one of the few things I still respected him for.

I grabbed an Uber, throwing my duffel bag of dirty laundry and my backpack into the trunk, before sliding into the over-air freshened Toyota. I could taste the fake coconut with each breath I took. I rolled down my window and watched the buildings zoom past. Their reflective surfaces took on the grey of the sky.

‘Where you coming from?’ The driver asked me.

I hated when Uber drivers tried to make conversation. I just wanted to sit in silence, pay for my ride, and be done with it.
‘Iowa.’
He nodded, but didn’t add to it.
My phone was buzzing from Artie. Six missed messages. I shoved it deeper into the interior pocket of my backpack, where my clothes muffled its vibrations.
An early season tour boat puttered down the Chicago River as we veered off of Wacker and onto Lake Shore Drive.
Lake Michigan was rough, and the pathway along the lake deserted. The waves crashed against the barrier, soaking the path. It was grey and ominous.
The Uber dropped me off at the curb in front of our condo. I grabbed my bags and ambled up the sidewalk. The security guy was one I didn’t recognize. I nodded at him, and he buzzed me through anyway.
Some security.
We lived on the fifth floor, overlooking a small park.
‘Hey,’ I called, as I pushed open the door. Gus would maybe be home from school.
‘Billie, hey.’ It was Mom, not at work. Instead, she was dressed in jeans and an oversized sweater, perched on the white couch she’d bought after Peter had taken our original one in the divorce.
‘I thought you’d be at work.’
‘No, I took a half day. Figured the three of us could spend some time together. Gus should be home soon.’
Mom never left work early. Something had to be up.
‘Okay.’ I picked up my bags and headed to my room. It looked the same as it had the day I left for Iowa. Small desk, double bed pushed against one wall, my dresser on the other. The window that looked out on the statue of the cowardly lion.
Even though the room was the same, I felt like a very different person than the one who lived here. I was just a visitor in this room now.
‘We’re going to Lou Malnati’s as soon as your sister gets here,’ Mom called from the living room, shouting to be heard through my closed door.
Right. I’d forgotten how she and Gus always shouted through the
condo to communicate, through doors and walls. It grated on my nerves, all that shouting.

I opened my door, and walked halfway down the hallway. She was still in the living room. ‘Okay, I’m just going to change really quick.’

She waved me off. ‘Be quick about it. We’ve got to beat off all the tourists.’

‘I said I’d be quick, didn’t I?’ I snapped.

‘Hey guys.’ Gus came in the door then, dropping her backpack on the tree rack next to the door.

‘Hey you!’ I crossed the room to give her a quick, tight hug. She seemed taller than she had last time I saw her.

‘Billie, if you’re going to change, do it now. We’ve got to go.’

‘No, forget it, I won’t change.’

‘You can change, just be quick about it.’

I waved her off in the way she’d waved me off earlier. ‘Nope, forget it. I’ll just go like this.’ Gus looked between us, confused. I wrapped my arm around her shoulder, pulling her with me to the front door. ‘C’mon, it’s fine. We’ve got pizza waiting for us.’

It was one of those Chicago things I’d missed desperately since moving to Iowa – deep-dish pizza. The way the cheese pulled, how it was so thick you couldn’t even contemplate eating it without a fork and knife. And the buttery crust.

There was nothing like it.

There was an Uber waiting for us on the curb outside. The evening was crisp, with a whiff of warmth. Summer was coming.

I kept my arm around her as we walked. I could smell her Gus-ness. It smelled like home.

We were seated at a table towards the back, near the kitchen, which made me feel warmer than I had all day, even on the train.

‘For you guys,’ the waitress said, as she distributed the menus around the table. It still felt weird to me, after two years, to not have all four sides of the table filled when we had a family dinner. A table for three.
‘Just so you guys know, it’ll be at least a half hour for any pizza you order to cook.’
‘We know,’ the three of us chorused, collectively.
Mom laughed.
The waitress took our orders, and then left.
‘How was the train in, Billie?’ Mom asked.
‘Fine. Uneventful.’
Mom nodded, spreading her paper napkin over her lap.
‘And Gus, how was school?’
‘Fine, uneventful.’
I shifted my eyes to Gus. She smirked at me.
‘Such conversationalists I’ve raised.’
‘Well, give us better topics.’
There was a pause, and I watched my mother during it. She took a breath, and seemed to collect herself, in the smallest of ways. I saw it, though.
‘Alright, how’s this? I’ve been assigned to a huge project at work – building out the staff across the country for a well-known food brand company.’
This didn’t feel like huge news. Mom was always being assigned to different projects. She’d travelled a fair amount when she and Peter were still together, but hadn’t done as much since. Probably for Gus’s sake.
‘Nice.’
‘It is nice, thank you, Billie. I’m going to have to be out of town for it. Pretty much the entire summer.’
Shit. So this was where it was going.
‘Good thing I’m a legal adult now, so Gus and I can just hang in the condo.’
Mom snorted at this. ‘Yeah, fat chance I’d allow that.’
‘We’d be fine,’ Gus said, softly. ‘I can cook.’
‘Lemon meringue cookies don’t make a well-rounded meal, sweetie,’ Mom said.
‘What do you have planned for us, then?’ I asked, just as the waitress
dropped our drinks off. We all remained quiet until she’d left.
‘I’ve arranged for you to go stay with your aunt and uncle in Sangamon for the summer. You can be on the lake, hang out with Hannah. And you know Aunt Katie is a much better cook than I’ve ever been. It’ll be a great summer.’
‘We have a lake here. And I don’t really even know Hannah,’ I spit out at her.
‘You always get along when you’re together.’
‘That doesn’t mean I want to spend my whole fucking summer with her.’
‘Language, Billie.’
‘No, no. You have no right to fucking tell me to watch my language when you’re shipping us off.’
‘I’m not shipping you off.’ Mom’s voice remained calm, even as mine continued to rise.
‘The hell you’re not!’

Gus

‘We could just stay at Dad’s – that way we’ll still be in the city,’ I said, not sure why nobody had offered it up sooner. It was the obvious solution.
‘I’m not staying at Peter’s. I’ll go to bum-fuck Michigan.’ Billie’s voice had a note of finality to it.
‘You can stay with your father, if you’d like to, Gus.’
‘I’m going to Sangamon,’ Billie said, even though no one had asked her just then.
I did not want to spend a summer without Billie. I’d already had an endless school year, a quiet condo because she was gone. Billie wasn’t a large person, but she had the capability to fill up a room when she felt like it.
I imagined a summer with my father. His bare, cold apartment. Him
working hard on his app. Me reading books, watching my YouTube videos; living by myself, in the apartment, and the world inside my head.

All while Billie was off in Sangamon filling rooms. Playing games with Andy and watching the sunset over the lake. I’d rather occupy a room my sister filled than sit in one all alone. ‘I’ll go to Sangamon,’ I said quietly. The waitress came then, a thick, steaming pizza in her hand. ‘Excellent,’ my mother said, a grin on her face.
HEATHER DAVEY

Heather grew up all over the UK. She has a degree in Theology, has worked as a teacher and is now a qualified school librarian. Stories have always been a part of Heather’s life, but when she’s forced to return to the real world she can be found trail running, singing ancient and beautiful music or cooking up a vegan feast – not usually all at once. Heather lives in Wimborne with her musician husband and two story-hungry children.

*The Colour of Love* was Highly Commended in the Writers and Artists Writing for Children and YA Competition 2019.

About *The Colour of Love*

They call me coloured and because of that, they say I can’t love a white boy. But I do.
They say all races must be kept apart, that what we’re doing is wrong. But nothing has ever felt this right and so,
I must tell our story.
For my today and your tomorrow.

When Kat, a mixed-race girl from District Six, falls for a white boy, there’s trouble.

   Apartheid law makes their relationship dangerous and illegal. But the deeper Kat gets involved, the harder it is to walk away. Should she risk everything for love, or are some things never meant to be?

   Inspired by the experiences of Heather’s family during apartheid, *The Colour of Love* is a novel about hatred, love, loss and hope.

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The Colour of Love

Chapter One

The first time I saw him, I was supposed to be in school.

I guess he was too.

Instead I was at the beach with Lolli. We were on a whites-only beach, just because it’s the most beautiful beach in the world. Dalebrook. All silvery sand, giant rocks, and a sky that stretches out forever. There’s also this huge tidal pool for whites to swim in. I longed to try it out. But that day, there was a beach constable on patrol, pacing up and down, looking for trouble.

‘Not worth it,’ said Lolli. ‘Let them keep their stupid pool.’

I loosened my tie and pulled at the collar of my blouse. ‘It’s not fair though.’ I watched a white woman dive in, her back arched like a dolphin. She skimmed under the surface and came up smiling, droplets of water glittering on her face. ‘Makes me so mad,’ I said.

Lolli shrugged. We’d been through this before. At Dalebrook, we had to be invisible. And we knew exactly where we could go and not be seen. Sitting on the sun-baked rocks, protected by a jagged boulder that stuck out in the shape of a shark’s fin, we planned our lives and created dreams while the mountains looked down on us and sighed.

Lolli handed me a large slice of watermelon she’d been given by Joe, the fruit hawker on Hanover Street. I sucked on the red flesh as we talked, letting the sweet, sticky juice dribble down my wrists.

It was as near-perfect an afternoon as I could imagine, back then.

And it was from our rock that I saw the boys arrive.

A group of them. Loud, tanned, and not afraid of life. Kicking at the dazzling sand, laughing and whistling. One of them lagged behind.
He kept looking around, as if he was searching for someone, or something. His movements were light and delicate, and he walked barefoot, trailing a navy jersey in the sand.

I shrank into the shadow of the rock. But he paused and looked right in my direction.

Our eyes met, and I held my breath as his gaze lingered. Then, he turned and ran to catch up with his friends.

I let out my breath as I watched him make his way across the beach. ‘Kat, are you listening?’ Lolli nudged me.

I forced myself to look away from the boy and brought my hand to my forehead, shielding my eyes from the sun. ‘Sorry, say that again.’

Lolli sighed, but her eyes dancer. ‘What are you going to do? After we’ve finished school?’

I thought about it. ‘Save money and get out. Do some job. Do any job, until I have enough to leave. Leave the country, if I can.’

Lolli laughed, but I couldn’t see why. Because when I thought of the working women I knew, like Mommy with her low-paid cleaning job up at the Hammonds’, I couldn’t see myself. At school, I’d spent hours twirling the globe on its wooden stand, watching it spin through my fingers, daring myself to stop it and choose. But I never did.

Lolli wriggled her toes and stretched out her long, sturdy legs. ‘Come on, properly now. What will you do?’ she persisted. ‘I’m going to be a secretary, or work for a good family. Or maybe if I study seriously hard, I can be a doctor. Whatever, I’m staying put, no matter what.’

I didn’t say anything. It was different for Lolli, with her nice rooms above the shebeen[^1]. If they stayed there, that is. True, she saw and heard all sorts, and the place was riddled with foul language and the stench of drink, but her father was a real gentleman and people respected him.

He wasn’t like my dad. He wasn’t like my dad at all. My dad would never support studying or any nonsense about becoming a doctor.

Lolli pushed her black hair out of her face. She’d had it straightened recently and, in the sunlight, the Vaseline combed through made it shimmer like running water. Where she found the money for fancy hair-
The boys swam out to the swell, their heads bobbing in harmony with the gentle rise and fall of the ocean. Occasionally, the warm sea breeze caught their voices and brought them drifting across to our rock. The afternoon thickened and stretched, and I wondered what it must be like to have the whole world waiting for you. What if you could do anything? What if you didn’t have to follow rules and pretend it didn’t hurt all the time? What would that feel like?

‘We need to go,’ said Lolli, her voice piercing through the film of my thoughts. She eyed our satchels and blazers on the sand where we’d slung them earlier. Tugging at her school skirt, she brought it down to her knees, and pulled her hair back with a frayed ribbon.

I hated it when the dreams ended. The boys, too, must have been aware of time and were swimming back to shore. Racing, heads down, arms slicing through the water. They were strong, steady swimmers and moved like they belonged to the sea. They reached the beach and staggered out...
of the water, combing back their hair and laughing, faces alive and certain. The boy I’d been watching lifted his face and drank in the sun.

‘Which one are you eyeing up?’ said Lolli.

‘What?’

‘Those boys. You’ve only half-listened to what I’ve been saying all this time. There’s a boy you like down there, isn’t there?’

‘No. That is, I…’ My face flushed. I pulled my own skirt over my knees and sat straight, arching and stretching the hard rock out of my back. My skin was slick with sweat and my blouse damp and sticky. I let the breeze ripple through it.

Lolli looked at the boys, head to one side. ‘Not a chance.’ She stood slowly. ‘Not in a million years.’

I knew that. Of course, I knew that. It’s the way things were. But still, I was unable to tear my eyes away from that boy with his honeyed hair and broad shoulders. I just kept on imagining, my dreams galloping away, trying to take me with them.

The boy shook the sea from his hair, then ruffled it so that it stuck out in peaks. Like the others, he pulled his jersey on over his wet torso and scrambled into his school pants. Skipping class, like us, I thought, smiling. The beach constable could really have his work cut out, if he wanted.

Lolli chucked my shoes over and I slipped them on. They were hot, full of sand, and too tight. But the alternative was running to the station barefoot and risking blisters from the scalding tarmac.

We jumped down from the rock, gathered up our satchels and blazers, and headed for the beach exit. Making it away, unseen, was the final challenge. But we’d always managed.

Except that day, we didn’t.

At the time, I called it bad luck.

In retrospect, I call it fate.

We were just about to step up on to the sidewalk when we heard a shout from the beach below. ‘What are you doing? Hey, you two. Wait!’

I whipped round. It was one of the boys. But not him. He stood back from the others, watching, his face unreadable.
‘You two! Can’t you read the signs?’ The boy who spoke was so skinny you could see his ribs. He had hair like dry grass and pointed features like a rodent. He jabbed a thumb in the direction of a notice board. ‘You’re not supposed to be here. See. White Area. Slegs Blankes².’

I shrugged, though inside my heart was pounding. ‘Well, we are here,’ I said, the tremble in my voice barely perceptible.

‘And we were just going. We don’t want any trouble,’ said Lolli. She pressed a palm into my elbow. ‘Come on, Kat,’ she whispered. ‘These morons aren’t worth it.’

Rodent Boy took a step towards us. ‘What did you say, vuilgoed³?’

I tensed. ‘Nothing.’ I stuck my chin out and pulled away from Lolli. I stared Rodent Boy right in the face, willing him to cave in first and look away.

He didn’t. ‘Do you want me to fetch the beach constable?’ he said, his voice all spiky and harsh. ‘Is that what you want? Because I will. He’s just down there.’

‘Go on then.’

‘Right then, I will.’

But he didn’t move.

The air crackled between us and a trickle of sweat ran the length of my back. The other boys drew in and I could feel their eyes crawling over our skin with disgust. My chest heaved: in and out, in and out, as I counted slowly to ten in my head. *Breathe, Kat, breathe*, I told myself. It’s something I’d taught myself to do when Dad got in a rage.

Rodent Boy narrowed his eyes, his gaze still not breaking from mine. He took another step towards me.

‘Leave it, Perry.’ The boy with the honeyed hair spoke at last, making *me* look away first. Our eyes met, just for an instant, and I saw something written in his face. It might have been pity. The kind of pity you’d have for a cornered animal. But, even back then, I hoped it was something more.

I tell myself now that it was.

Because, I need to believe.

I need to believe that I’ve done the right thing.

² whites only ³ dirty person, filth
Alice grew up in Dorset near the Jurassic Coast, so she’s always been surrounded by, and interested in, history. She co-wrote her first novel, an epic fantasy saga with its own made-up language, with her best friend when she was eleven. Sadly, this masterpiece was never completed. Maybe someday it will be. When she’s not writing, Alice is doing her best to make a dent in her to-be-read list, which has more books than there are days in the year.

About The Second Quaternary Extinction Event

Hazel and Rosie are barely friends, but, since storms destroyed the planet, they have to decide quickly who are their friends and who are their enemies. Doomsday-prepper, Boone, offers them shelter in his impenetrable bunker, so he ought to be a friend. By the time they discover he’s not, Hazel and Rosie are already bound by the agreement they’ve made with him. Can they survive his lust for power?

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The doors of the museum hang off their hinges, forced open by a gale or a tidal wave or people desperate to escape both. Rain has collected on the uneven steps outside, creating little puddles that cascade down, as Rosie strides towards the open doors. Mattie pauses to splash in them. Rosie can’t understand how Mattie isn’t tired of water by now: tired of the forever-damp, forever-cold, forever-grey.

Rosie hefts her backpack more securely onto her shoulders and holds out an arm to usher Mattie inside. ‘Come on.’

The entrance hall is flooded, too. Leaves and visitor brochures float on the surface. They’ve been there so long that the ink has leached from the pages and the information is illegible. The museum no longer looks like a meeting place or somewhere safe to shelter. Rosie knows it’s a long shot, but she remembers the tradition her family used to follow when they went on holiday. If she or Mattie got lost, split up from their dad, they should find the museum. That’s their rendezvous. That’s where Dad would always come to find them.

They came to this particular museum years ago. Rosie still remembers the stuffed bear in the wildlife exhibit, reared up on hind legs, snarling at every visitor that passed. Even when Dad had put Rosie on his shoulders, the bear still towered over her.
‘This is our rendezvous spot,’ Dad had declared. ‘Come here if you get lost, Ro, and brown bear will keep an eye on you till I find you.’

Mattie’s too small to remember, but Rosie does. Dad must too. If he’s still in the city, he’ll be there.

Rosie takes hold of Mattie’s wrist so she won’t wander off – though Mattie tries almost immediately, pulling Rosie off-course to gawk at a huge sculpture of a Pliosaurus hanging over the mezzanine. It swings gently, precariously, above them. The cables suspending it creak.

‘This way, come on.’

They pass through the café. It’s a wasteland of overturned chairs floating in water inches-deep, empty food display cabinets, and shattered crockery. There’s nothing useful here anymore, though Mattie tugs again at Rosie’s wrist.

‘I want to stop and look!’

‘This is the café, Mattie. The interesting stuff is upstairs. Promise.’

They slosh through the water. It’s a little deeper here, but the stairs are mostly dry. They follow the staircase as it twists around, and Mattie gasps: they’re face-to-face with the Pliosaurus.

‘What is it?’

‘It’s a dinosaur.’ Rosie lets go of Mattie’s hand to skim-read the information plaque. Mattie leans over the balustrade to get a better look. ‘They were giant reptiles that lived here before humans did. They’re all extinct now. That means there are none left,’ she adds, in answer to Mattie’s questioning glance.

‘What happened?’

Rosie squints at the plaque. There’s no information about extinction on there. ‘It might have been... a meteor. It crashed into the earth... and the climate changed. The dinosaurs couldn’t survive.’

Mattie nods. She understands this all too well. ‘Were there lots of dinosaurs?’

‘Loads. Let’s go look.’ Rosie holds out her hand, and Mattie takes it.

They wander through the hall, peering at each fossil. Some of the cabinets are smashed in; the fossils inside missing. As Mattie inspects
each of the remaining fossils, Rosie listens hard for sounds of life. Water drips steadily nearby, and glass crunches under her feet as they walk slowly on. She doesn’t think Dad is here. But he might be.

Mattie’s hand twitches towards a fist-sized ammonite, but Rosie stops her.

‘Rosie, I want it.’

‘It doesn’t belong to you, Mattie.’

‘Other people have taken things,’ Mattie says, petulantly.

‘I know. We shouldn’t steal, though.’ But steal from who? Sooner or later this ammonite will be swept away by another flood, along with everything else. All that’ll be left will be Rosie’s patchy knowledge of the dinosaurs. She’s not even sure that the Pliosaurus is a dinosaur. With its rubbery grey skin and the rows of teeth, it looks more like a shark with flippers. ‘Okay, fine. Take it. But anything you want, you have to carry, and if you get tired, then we leave it.’

Mattie grabs the ammonite, cradling the whorled fossil against her cheek. ‘I’ll look after it,’ she promises.

‘I know you will.’ Rosie smiles at Mattie. She could say many things about her younger sister, but Mattie is never careless.

They drift onwards to the minerals exhibit. Beyond this hall is the world wildlife exhibit, where the brown bear waits. Rosie’s not superstitious, but she knows that if they rush to find Dad, he won’t be there. If they take their time and try not to think too hard about it, he will.

The minerals exhibit has always been dark, but now that electricity is a thing of the past, it’s almost impossible to see. Once her eyes adjust to the gloom, Rosie can see that the exhibition has been ransacked. She had been hoping there’d be something left – precious gems would make excellent bartering currency – but previous visitors to the museum have had the same idea. The entire tray of diamonds has been ripped from the display, and even the pyrite is missing.

Rosie and Mattie are using their imagination to picture what elbaite might look like when, somewhere in the building, a door slams.
Mattie looks up at Rosie immediately, eyes wide. Wild, desperate hope leaps in Rosie’s chest. Dad?

She drops Mattie’s hand. ‘Stay here,’ she instructs, putting her bag down beside one of the empty display cases.

The strange thing about museums is how, even when they’re filled with people, every sound is hushed. Everyone keeps their voices low, respectful of those around them, absorbing art and culture and history. Now that the place is empty, the opposite is true: everything echoes, louder than Rosie even thought possible – including the footsteps of whoever’s just come in.

Rosie creeps back out onto the mezzanine, back to the Pliosaurus, but the entrance hall below is empty. She holds her breath. A door creaks. The newcomer must have taken the back staircase, which leads straight up to the world wildlife exhibit. Rosie wheels around and strides back through the exhibition. Mattie’s still waiting there, still wide-eyed, clutching the ammonite with both hands. Rosie ignores her and carries on to the next room.

Wildlife exhibits were Dad’s favourite, but Rosie always hated them. Stuffed animals inside airless glass cases, perched on branches or among fake plastic grass as though anyone would believe they were still living. Even now, after the museum’s been plundered, most of the animals are still here. Still trapped.

There is someone in the exhibit. It’s not Dad. Rosie exhales slowly, shakily. Of course he’s not here. She didn’t really think he would be.

Instead, there’s a girl looking at the parrots. Her hair is buzzed short, her arms folded defensively. She’s the first teenager Rosie has seen in a long time. As Rosie creeps closer, she sees that the girl is frowning. The girl steps nearer to the glass, unfolding her arms to press her palm against it. Rosie wonders if she, too, is thinking about freeing these birds. She gazes for a long moment at a blue and orange parakeet with its wings spread for flight.

Finally she steps back, putting her hands into her jacket pocket as she turns – and stops dead when she sees Rosie watching her.
Her mouth drops open; she blushes. ‘Were you watching me?’ Rosie feels herself turning red, too. ‘I—only for a minute.’

The girl’s surprise and vulnerability of just a moment ago has vanished, replaced by a scowl. ‘Why?’

‘Because... I... didn’t know there was anyone else here. And I heard someone come in... and it was you.’ Rosie shrugs. ‘I thought you were someone else.’

‘Yeah? Well, I’m not.’ The girl kicks moodily at the wooden base of a display case filled with small rodents.

The silence stretches. This girl, with her scowl, doesn’t seem likely to break it any time soon. Perhaps Rosie should cut her losses and leave her and the stuffed animals and the museum, but it’s been a while since she’s spoken to anyone other than Mattie.

‘Came to see the birds, then?’

The girl glances up, eyebrows lowering even more, as though she’s trying to work out why on earth Rosie would care. ‘I like birds,’ she says after a moment.

‘So do I.’ Rosie walks closer until she’s standing beside her. They both turn to look again at the case. ‘But this room is... it’s depressing, don’t you think?’

‘Depressing?’

‘Yeah. All these stuffed animals. It feels like death in here.’ Rosie glances sideways at the girl, who shrugs with her whole body, totally apathetic.

‘Maybe. Feels like death everywhere these days, though.’

‘You think?’

‘Yeah.’ She pauses, then adds, ‘Wanna know what’s really depressing?’

‘What?’

‘The fact that all the species in here are probably extinct now.’ Her tone is matter of fact, but it hits Rosie hard. A lot of these creatures are from the tropics, and the weather’s always been worse near the equator. Rosie steps away from the cabinet full of possibly-extinct parrots. She catches the eye of a bird with a metallic green crest and a neck the colour
of flames. Its wings are dark, glinting with iridescent green and blue and purple, but the tail is a pale, refreshing brown. It’s beautiful. It might be one of the only ones left. And it’s dead.

’Lophophorus impejanus.’ The girl says, over Rosie’s shoulder. ‘Himalayan monal. It’s a type of pheasant.’ She looks at the bird with that same tender frown as before.

Rosie glances down at the nameplate, but it’s missing. ‘You really like birds.’

‘I really do.’

There’s another silence, this one more companionable than the first. Rosie opens her mouth to introduce herself, but a sound from the doorway stops her.

‘Rosie?’

They both turn; Mattie’s peering into the exhibit. Rosie puts out her hand and Mattie trots over to grip it.

Rosie glances at the girl, whose eyebrows are raised. ‘Sorry. This is my sister, Mattie. I’m Rosie.’

‘Hey, Mattie.’ The girl’s gaze cuts to Mattie’s ammonite. ‘What have you got there?’

‘It’s a dinosaur fossil,’ says Mattie.

‘Hmmm.’ She puts out her hand, and to Rosie’s surprise, Mattie gives her the fossil to inspect without question. ‘This isn’t a dinosaur. It’s a Cephalopod. Like… a sea-snail, or a squid in a shell.’

Rosie raises her own eyebrows. ‘Where’d you learn that?’

The girl shrugs, reticent once more. She hands the ammonite back to Mattie. ‘So you two came here to look at fossils?’

‘We came here to find our dad.’ Mattie says. Of all the times for her to lose her shyness around strangers, it has to be now. Rosie doesn’t like the idea of some strange girl knowing about their lives, when she hasn’t even told them her name.

‘Your dad?’ the girl repeats.

‘Yep. We’re meant to meet him at the bear.’ Mattie points, and the girl turns to look at it. She walks towards it, tilting her head back to gaze
into its open mouth.

‘Doesn’t look like he’s here.’ Her words are salt rubbed into the wound of Dad’s absence.

‘Clearly not.’

The girl glances over her shoulder at Rosie, as though surprised by her cold tone. ‘I just meant... does that mean you’re leaving?’

Rosie looks down at Mattie, who shakes her head.

‘No,’ Rosie says, ‘no, we’ll stay for a bit.’

‘Cool.’ The girl smiles, unexpectedly bright in this dark, death-filled room. A dimple blooms in her cheek; she looks like a little kid, excessively joyful about almost nothing at all. ‘I’m Hazel, by the way.’ She leads them out of the world wildlife exhibit. Mattie skips after her.

But Rosie lingers by the bear. Just because Dad isn’t here now doesn’t mean he won’t be here another day. She picks up a piece of broken glass from the floor. She scratches her name into the wooden frame of the bear’s glass case. Then she adds Mattie’s, then the date. Now when Dad arrives, he’ll know they’ve been here, and he’ll know to wait.
SKYLAR KRESTON

Skylar believes in magic and monsters, and writes about both. While not writing, she can be found on horseback, making art, or not at all because she is too busy traveling the world. She likes miniature things and would work in stop motion animation if books ceased to exist. She usually writes YA magical realism.

Originally from Delaware, a small state nobody has heard of in America, Skylar completed her BFA in Writing at Ithaca College, on a mountain in Upstate New York. She moved to Bath, England to complete her MA. *The Voodoo Queen’s Vial* is Skylar’s first novel.

About *The Voodoo Queen’s Vial*

Evelyn Glapion comes from a long line of powerful Voodoo Queens. New Orleans is her home and she wouldn’t trade it for the world. After a mysterious tragedy, Evelyn finds an odd vial of luminescent powder. Something that has belonged to many ill-fated Voodoo Queens of the past.

Aurora Kalinsky has moved around a lot recently. Now she’s staying with her aunt in New Orleans and wondering how long it will last. Aurora is out horseback riding when she sees something terrifying. A horrible creature she’s seen before, the one that killed her mom.

The two girls meet in a twist of fate and realize they are linked by a curse that has affected their families for over 200 years. They must channel a common strength and connection to save New Orleans from corrupted, vicious beasts. Can they save themselves and the city in time?

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In the shade of the dense Northeastern woods, a creek gurgles alongside the path we’re following. Only tiny speckles of sunlight break through as the trees rustle in the slight breeze of autumn, raining confetti colored leaves of yellow, orange, and red. They crunch under the horses’ hooves.

I love going on trail rides in the fall. It’s that perfect weather – cold enough to ride without sweating, warm enough to not freeze your ears and nose off.

I shift in my fleece coat and feel its soft material soothe a shiver before it can begin. I bunch up the reins in one hand to adjust my gloves, and then slide my hands back into proper position.

‘You okay?’ Mom calls back without turning her head or stopping. She’s a few paces ahead of me, leading the way on her favorite old gelding. I watch the curve of her spine compensate for the movement of the horse, swaying back and forth, her long braided auburn hair swinging like a pendulum.

My own hair is identical, and identically braided. People have always said we look alike, and it never gets old. Each and every time someone says it, pride swells in my chest. But Mom is logical and sleek, a lawyer. And I am headed more toward the ruffled artist persuasion.

Mom seems bigger than life sometimes – superhuman. She juggles work, a social life, and family with such ease. She always seems so
sure and calculated. I don’t know how I’ll ever possibly manage to be anything like her.

But horseback riding is a space we have always bonded in, no matter the differences between her logical mind and my creative one. It’s our common ground. We don’t have to say anything out here; we can just enjoy each other’s company. Enjoy the peaceful sounds of nature. Leave our cell phones back at the barn.

‘I’m good!’ I call back.

I give Buddy a little nudge with my heels to catch up.

And for no apparent reason I can acknowledge, he spooks. Bad.

I let out a surprised squeak as Buddy rears, bucks, shuffles sideways, and then tries to bolt. But I hold him back, whispering soothing promises and affirmations.

I glance up to see Mom turn around and start making her way back over to me, a concerned look on her face.

‘Aurora. Stay still.’ Her voice is eerily grim.

And then I notice how quiet the woods have become. No sounds of birds or bugs. Even the gurgling of the creek seems subdued.

I feel as spooked as Buddy.

‘Mom, what is it?’ I whisper, unsure if it’s even loud enough for her to hear.

The leaves on the path kick up in an odd way, like a tiny tornado is pulling them. They twirl around our horses’ hooves in a multicolored frenzy.

I see a flash of white out of the corner of my eye. And then, suddenly, it’s like Buddy and I are hit by a meteorite. I’m thrown from the saddle by sheer force and hit the dirt path with a crunch of leaves and sticks. Buddy bolts this time. Off into the woods, back toward the barn, without me.

I see the white flash again out of the corner of my other eye, as if it’s circling us. The way hawks circle their prey. But this isn’t a hawk, or any type of bird for that matter... I don’t know what it is.

‘Mom.’ My voice is shaking too much to say more.

And then it’s bursting out of the woods in a blinding white flash,
surrounded by a flurry of leaves, aimed directly at me. It sort of looks like a horse but it’s not, it’s a streak of power like electricity rippling through the air. I can’t tell if it’s running or flying. It rears up in front of me, looking down at me with beady eyes in hollow sockets. Its horn is silhouetted by the sunlight breaking through the leaves. It’s white, shimmering spindle of a horn.

I blink.

And then Mom’s back is there, her long braided hair swaying from her quick movement to get in front of me. To get in between me and... I can still see its horn. Coming out of Mom’s back, surrounded by a ring of blood.

‘Mom!’ I scream, my voice shriller, an octave higher than I thought it was capable of reaching.

‘Aurora, I’m so sorry, I should have told you... please run.’ Her voice is too calm for what is happening. She turns her head as far back as she can toward me; only her side profile visible. ‘Run!’ She yells when I don’t move, and this time her voice just sounds desperate and wet.

I tear off into the woods. I look back when I hear Mom scream – a horrible mangled sound – and see the creature rear up, bringing Mom off the ground, her body skewered on its horn, limp as a doll.

I run and run. My clothes catch on branches and stinging nettle, but I don’t stop until the barn comes into sight. My riding pants are torn, and my jacket sleeves are shredded, my ears ringing.

No, not ringing. I’m screaming.

My voice sputters out, just as a few people come running out of the barn to see what the commotion is about. I collapse to my knees a few feet before reaching the barn entry.

I feel a trickle of something wet running down the corner of my mouth. I touch it and my fingertips are red with blood. My throat burns. I don’t think I can speak.

I try to stand up again when I see the barn owner among the crowd who are gathering to meet me. I stumble and then fall into the grass again.

*What did I just see? Was it real?*
‘Aurora! What happened? Where’s your mom?’

Mom... Did she really.... Is she really? No, it can’t be...

‘Is that blood?’

Could this just be a bad dream? A nightmare?

‘Quick, someone call 911!’

I can see its face now. Jagged, rotting teeth and beady eyes in skeletal sockets. Hungry, menacing.

I can hear them all talking, buzzing around me, but they sound muffled, far away...

It wasn’t quite a horse.

My vision is swimming and then dark. I feel my body swaying, falling.

It had a horn.

Chapter Two

Evelyn

I’m standing in the middle of an abnormally empty French Quarter. Where is everyone?

I see something white flit by, across one of the narrow alleys.

I start to walk along the cobblestone street. I see it down the next alley, too. A blinding flash.

Anxiety builds in my gut. Something is wrong.

I run.

It’s gaining on me, breathing rancid breath down the back of my neck. The scent of death and decay.

I jerk upright and awake. Fear courses through my veins, as if that was my reality and what I’m experiencing now is alien. But I look around, eyes sticky with the sand of my dreams, and I recognize my room, in my house, in my city.

Needles protrude from the dolls that line my bedroom shelves. Feathered dream catchers hang from every wall, hook, and doorknob.
My nightstand is piled with crystals and candles. I let out a breath of relief at the familiar sight.

While other girls were playing with Barbies, I was using my cloth dolls as tools and effigies. When everyone else wanted to give each other sparkly manicures at slumber parties, I was always dimming the lights to chant *light as a feather, stiff as a board.*

Now that I’m older, even when I want to blend in and be just like everyone else, my reputation precedes me and I hardly ever find a friendly face among others my age. But that’s okay, because Ma and Mamie are the only friends I’ve ever really needed.

This morning the air hangs still in my bedroom, though the window is open. Overnight, the humidity has crept in and settled inside my pores and frizzed my hair. I click the ceiling fan on with its pull string. I’m trying to cool the room, but also air out the sense of foreboding that my dream left under my skin.

I look in the mirror on the back of my closet door. My long, wavy, dark hair is thick with moisture. My olive skin tone makes me look like I could belong to any handful of ethnicities, and I have pale brown eyes that stand out in a way brown eyes usually don’t. The boys who try to hit on me at school or on the streets call me ‘exotic.’ The same boys call me ‘witch’ when I don’t seem impressed by their ‘compliments.’ But when I look in the mirror I just see me, an all-American girl, with bad bedhead, and dark circles under her tired eyes.

Twenty minutes later I’m dressed in a t-shirt and jean shorts, my waves slightly more tamed. I stand in the kitchen doorway, watching Ma, who is bustling about to get ready for work at the beauty salon that’s been in our family for ages. She recently renovated, made it more modern and glitzy, much to Mamie’s chagrin over the integrity of the place. It was supposedly once owned by Marie Laveau herself. But Ma doesn’t travel out of the salon and make house calls like Mamie used to before she retired to focus on Voodoo, so I understand why she’d want her daily scenery to be brighter than the dingy old décor. Plus, it has paid off, as business is booming.
‘Cher!’ she finally says when she realizes I’m here. A nickname, and Southern term of endearment, that she and Mamie often call me. ‘Can you come help out in the salon today? I could use a hair washer. Just for a few hours this morning. It would be such a big help. And you can keep the tips.’ She pauses what she’s doing, and looks at me with pleading eyes. How could I say no?

‘Alright, Ma.’

‘Oh, thank you, Evelyn. That is such a relief. I’m going to head over now and get set up for opening. Take your time, if you could just be there in an hour or so...’ she ambles off, mumbling to herself about appointment times. She kisses my forehead as she brushes past me toward the front door. It clicks shut behind her.

I make myself some scrambled eggs and a piece of buttered toast. I have no choice but to eat standing. Our kitchen table is uninhabitable at the moment due to being covered in books and candles and incense, etc. from Mamie’s last spell. She said it had been a tough one and, looking at the aftermath, I believe her.

Mamie’s still asleep in her bedroom down the hall, supposedly just sleeping off the bad juju, some negative energy the spell gave off. But she’s been sleeping in a lot recently. It seems a bit odd – she’s been an early bird for as long as I can remember.

Ma and I moved in with Mamie when I was four. Ma wasn’t thrilled about exposing me to all the ‘Voodoo nonsense’ Mamie was supposedly filling my head with. But I’ve always loved it.

So for as long as I can remember, I’ve dressed, bathed, and slept in a haze of smoky candlelight. I’m accustomed to eating my meals while reading spell books, my legs folded up so I can sit in the spaces between precarious stacks of tarot cards and spirit alters. I don’t flinch at the sight of the hardly identifiable preserved creatures suspended in bottles of murky liquid that line the ledges of every window in my house. Pushed toward the back of every drawer, no matter its contents, are bags of gris-gris, amulets, or African fetishes – each a charm meant to ward off bad luck or evil spirits. It all feels like home.
Some houses are all shades of beige and look like something out of a Pottery Barn ad. Ours looks more like the Addams Family’s vacation home – if they were poor and lived in Louisiana.

‘Ugh.’ I huff under my breath when it hits me that I promised Mamie I’d stick around today and we’d work on my Voodoo together, or well, my lack thereof. I’m not exactly gifted in the magic department. But she’s still asleep and Ma needs my help. I’ll be back by lunchtime anyway, and maybe I’ll just have to bring her something that will make her forgive me...

Yes, that’s what I’ll do. Then, there should be time for some Voodoo practice... right after I work on my college applications for a bit... I sigh. Sometimes it feels like Mamie and Ma pull me in opposite directions on purpose, just to see how far I’ll stretch before snapping.

I rinse off my dish and put it into the dishwasher, my brain turning in circles. I slip on my Converse and head out the door, locking it behind me.

Visitors to the city are always grumbling about their feet throbbing from the uneven cobblestone streets. But I’ve lived in this city my entire life, so my feet have learned to form to the patterns of the uneven surface. I can walk almost anywhere in the city without a second thought, just knowing the destination is enough to put my brain on autopilot.

I make my way down past Bourbon Street and across the pathway in front of St. Louis Cathedral. The bars on Bourbon Street burst with tourists and locals, and there’s always some kind of parade, with people in elegant costumes handing out flowers or beads.

Today a little girl in a horse-drawn carriage, that seems to be part of a wedding procession riding through the Quarter, hands me a little bunch of yellow flowers.

As I’m walking along, through the chaotic crowds, I think I see Mamie out of the corner of my eye, walking with a strange young man in dark clothing. But when I turn my head to make sure, I only see a crowd of strangers. With a shrug, I continue on my way. It couldn’t have been her. Not out in the early hours of the morning with some strange guy.

No way.
Chloë lives in Oxfordshire and works as a secondary school English teacher when she’s not scrolling through Twitter. Her favourite things include her ginger cocker spaniel, festivals, cake, and travelling on a budget. She’s partial to cheese and chocolate, but never together.

‘The Download’ is her debut YA novel and is inspired by her brief experience of online dating and her fascination with modern app technologies. She is now working on her follow-up fantasy YA novel, ‘Kestrel’, but is also quite busy having her first baby.

About *The Download*

Isolated and alone in a new town following her parents’ divorce, Penny Lane Brown secretly downloads a boy. Although artificial, Adam seems like he will be the perfect escape... gorgeous and supportive, charming and loyal – someone who is truly there for *her*. Her little secret.

But as Penny falls for Adam, bigger questions arise that she can answer only by facing up to some hard truths: What is it that makes you human? What does it mean to love someone? And *who* does she want to be?

This is a story about love, technology, family, but most of all: identity. It is a coming-of-age domestic drama for the digital era, full of heart and humour, that is about finding your tribe and finding yourself.

clo.nicoll@hotmail.co.uk | @clo_nicoll
I’m on the bus – as usual, because I can’t afford a car or lessons or, let’s be real, even a Frappuccino right now – when I see the first advert. It has this amazing gleam to it; a kind of holographic sparkle. The impossibly beautiful model is smiling her impossibly perfect smile, and the text across her forehead reads: Wouldn’t you like to date me?

It shouldn’t peak my attention, not really, but I’m on my tenth left-swipe of blurry photos that look like they’ve been taken on webcams used for terrorist cells. I squint at the small print.

*Guaranteed satisfaction.*

*Create your Perfect Partner today.*

The logo is NEO Corporation – I’d recognise the heartbeat centre and lines and dots nestled around it anywhere. It’s showing up everywhere recently, that icon: on the new types of buses, under sponsored online ads, in the breaks between football matches on TV. They went viral with FriendFinder, the first app to be all about friendship instead of sex. Although, honestly, that was rife with douchebags, too.

I wonder...

I do a quick Google search. Perfect Partner is about creating the ideal person for you, so nothing can go wrong (they say), so they can’t be a slimeball, because you’ve made them exactly how you want them to be.

Interesting.

But it all sounds a bit too sci-fi for me. I don’t think I’m ready to stoop that low quite yet. To give up on the human race entirely and
go after an animated... cartoon? Hologram? Whatever the hell it is. That seems mad.

I mean, dating when you’re seventeen is, unequivocally, a nightmare. It’s every American teen rom-com on steroids; every snap judgement about someone’s looks elevated by a million. Don’t get me wrong, people slide into my DM’s, but that’s because I have a vagina, not because they actually want me.

And what alternatives are there? I’m not old enough to go to clubs or cool bars. No one actually approaches you in coffee shops or sidles over with effortless charm in the supermarket aisles. No one is a hero who offers to carry your bags; there’s no comedians striking up witty conversation on the bus home. The ones that do are all mental, anyway.

No, everyone is on their phones and everyone is swiping. Me and Nicole use the Closer app usually, but it’s full of guys with too much time on their hands who are mostly thinking with what’s in their pants. Like the messages I got last night:

[Delivered 11:34pm] **Mark from somewhere in Norfolk:** Hey u look cute 😊 I love live music too!

[Delivered 11:48pm] **Mark:** Think your too good to reply to me? I hope u die, bitch.

I didn’t see the first message until 12 o’clock. I’d been on the phone to Nic catching up. She’d just been dumped by some idiot with a moped and a too big ego and it had taken every bit of coaching and boosting in my repertoire to get her laughing again. But sure, not replying to a stranger in ten minutes means I should die. That’s logical.

I scroll through my other dating app DM’s – a series of terrible one-liners to break the ice from guys who say they’re eighteen but are probably in their fifties.

*Have you been to the doctors lately? Cos I think you’re lacking some Vitamin Me.*

*There’s something wrong with my phone. It doesn’t have your number in it...*
I’m not actually 6 foot tall. I’m sitting on my wallet so that adds a couple inches.

Barf.

There’s two obligatory dick pics, which I delete and block automatically. One guy even claims I’m being misogynistic because I won’t send nudes; that if I was a real feminist, I would be comfortable sharing my body with whoever. But what seventeen-year-old girl is comfortable sharing their body full stop?

I know I’m not; I’ve got pudge all across my belly which everyone preaches about being acceptable now, but I haven’t seen anyone with body fat on my Instagram feed in the last six months. I do my make-up okay, I think, thanks to YouTube tutorials, but I don’t go out with lash extensions and my hair done up like the other selfie queens I know. Fashion doesn’t make sense to me because it demands I wear crop tops in winter and oversized jumpers in the summer, and I’d rather just be comfortable and weather-proof.

So what am I bringing to the table? What would make someone want to date me?

Youth? An unfaItering hope in backward romantic ideals? A pretty awesome sense of humour when I get over the awkwardness of initial small talk?

That’s not much.

So I’m left scrolling whenever I’m waiting for the bus. Swiping left and right. Hoping that one of these guys who claims they’re seventeen or eighteen actually is. That they’ll actually like me. That we’ll actually talk. Connect. Maybe even meet up in real life and have a real conversation.

Is that asking for too much?

This particular bus ride home is slow and quiet. There’s an old lady chewing on a wet bit of sandwich near the back. A young mum tries to soothe her baby in its pram, pulling stupid faces and giggling to herself at its smile. A guy, who may or may not be an alcoholic but certainly smells like he is, lies slumped in the front seat. The Perfect Partner advert stretches along the plastic pane above his head, glittering in the light.
But I’m not that desperate, I swear. The pier on the waterfront is quiet when we pass as most people are still out at work. On Wednesdays, college finishes early if you aren’t taking any extracurriculars. I’ve never been much of the extracurricular type.

I hop off the bus at the corner to our road and spy Dad’s car on the driveway.

That’s weird. He should be at work at 2pm on a Wednesday.

Birds flutter as usual on next-door’s front garden. Arthur has scattered bread crusts again. The gravel of our driveway crunches like it always does beneath my trainers as I veer around the parked car. The front door creaks on its hinges when I push it open.

That’s the moment where it all falls apart. Where everything crumbles.

I step inside and call, ‘Hello?’ into the hallway.

There’s the sound of fumbling. Hisses and snaps of broken conversation. A woman’s voice. One that isn’t Mum’s.

Dad appears at the top of the stairs, his jumper on backwards. ‘Penny,’ he says, his voice strangled. ‘What are you doing here?’ He runs his fingers through his hair, smoothing it out as he hurries downstairs, two at a time.

I can’t stop looking at the red smear on his cheek. Mum’s at the university till six.

‘Dad? What’s going on? What are you doing here?’

Upstairs, the floorboard in their bedroom creaks.

Dad’s eyes dart skywards. ‘Penny, it’s not what you think—’

I’m not an idiot.

I feel sick. The tiles on the floor swim before my eyes. I turn and lurch out of the still-open front door and back down the empty street.

‘Penny? Penny, please!’

I ignore him, trying to focus on just putting one foot in front of the other while the world around me spins. It doesn’t make sense. Nothing makes sense.

But Dad is always working late and then snapping at us when he is around in the evenings, like he’d rather be somewhere else. His eyes
are always distracted and unfocused when Mum talks about her day. He’s been spending more time than ever on his phone...

How could I be so stupid?

I rush past the birds on Arthur’s lawn that have stopped their quiet fluttering. Around the corner, back to the bus shelter, where another glittering advert looms with that same perfect smile on that same perfect face...

*Guaranteed satisfaction.*

*Create your Perfect Partner today.*

I collapse onto the plastic bench beneath it, my fingers finding the cold edges and clinging on, as I try to swallow back the tears that creep across my vision.

‘Not my dad,’ I whisper to myself, shaking my head as if that will make it all go away; but it won’t, and it is my dad, because perfection, when it comes to human beings, clearly doesn’t exist.

Two

Three months later

Moving boxes tower around me, but I force myself to focus on the Creation Questionnaire. If I don’t do this here, if I don’t do this now, I’m going to lose my nerve completely. And I’m sick of the disastrous DMs, sick of the douchebags, sick of the my Dads of this world. I’m tired of trying to let idiots in. Why not create a fresh new man to go with our fresh new start? Why not create my perfect guy? Someone who isn’t going to hurt me.

The questionnaire is straight-forward enough: *how old are you? Where do you live? What are your social media handles?* I sit cross-legged on the carpet to complete it, the little fibres tickling my leg through the
holes in my ripped jeans. I lie and say that I’m eighteen to get through the age barrier. All these apps want you to be eighteen and I’m not sure why; it’s not like anyone is ever the age they say they are online.

The ‘What You Are Looking For’ section gets slightly more interesting. I choose the hair of the lead singer of my favourite band: cocoa-bean brown with a sweepy fringe. I pick the sense of humour – snarky but sweet – of Lee Jones, the YouTuber I watch every morning before school. I list my favourite films and songs and select that they’re his, too, before scrolling through the selection of body builds – athletic or muscular? Tall or short?

The questionnaire ends in a sudden swipe of my finger. The ‘Submit’ button looms large at the bottom, a blood orange square.

I hit it and the payment window loads. I slide Dad’s credit card out of my purse and type in the digits, trying to ignore the guilt that gnaws at my stomach. My palms feel dirty from the plastic.

But no. Screw it. Screw him.

Sweat tickles my hairline while the payment transfers in a series of loading, dotted circles. At any moment it’ll recognise that I’m underage, that the card isn’t mine, that I’ve lied about a thousand things...

But the confirmation box rises, clean and strong. ‘Welcome to NEO Corp’ bursts large across the screen. I read the small print beneath: ‘Please wait 3-5 business days for the purchase of your Partner to be processed.’

‘Penny! Get a move on, love! We’ve got to go!’

I slam the laptop closed and shove it into the last sliver of space in my bag. ‘Coming!’ I call back to Mum.

It’s fine. It can wait. All of this can wait.

I clamber upright and take one last sweep of the mostly-empty room. There are shadows on the walls where my bed and desk were. Grooves in the carpet from my desk chair. Smudged streaks of Blu-Tac from my posters.

I shoulder my bag, the weight of it taking me off-balance for a second. My feet find familiar pathways on the carpet despite the missing furniture, and I step back out into the corridor. On the doorstep to my
room I pause, turning off the light for the last time. I could find that switch blind, the plastic case smeared with my fingerprints.

The empty spaces feel huge and sad, full of the shadows and ghosts of our life here. Where Bo hit his head on the corner by the stairs and cried for hours. Where I spilled an entire glass of orange juice as I tripped up on a race to my room. Years of Christmas decorations and family photos hanging at odd angles along the wall. A lifetime.

My feet carry me past the shadows and the ghosts, down the top stair that creaks in the middle and the bend in the banister where I always crack my elbow if I’m not paying attention.

I don’t look back.
A believer in science and magic, Sally spent twenty years as an engineer making jet engines, diamonds and recreating the sun. This taught her that failure is just a stumble on the road to success. It proved a valuable lesson as she’s spent the last decade doing something even more challenging – trying to become a writer. She’s learnt from two novels that went nowhere and is optimistic about her third.

Sally lives in Reading – which makes sense given the number of books she owns. Her spare time is spent being an inappropriate auntie, and searching for the perfect wine terrace, but rarely at the same time.

_Death Moves in Next Door_ won the United Agents Prize for the most promising writing for young people.

**About _Death Moves in Next Door_**

The Grim Reaper has relocated to 36 Lavender Close...

And the last thing Duncan needs is Death moving into his neighbour’s Airbnb. He’s only seventeen and is already dealing with a mum with cancer, bailiffs at the door and a bunch of mates whose good intentions keep kicking him in the nuts.

To grant his mum’s dying wish, Duncan decides to fight back. He finds help from all the strangest people and he’s going to need every one of them. It turns out there are worse things in life than Death... especially her brothers.

sally.pardieu@gmail.com | @SallyPwrites
I am Death. Certainty, inevitability – a full stop.

So why the hell am I waiting around Grand Central Station? I’ve got over six thousand souls to collect this hour alone. That’s a long shift, even for a celestial being.

A golden clock shines in the centre of the ticket hall; all four of its faces read one-minute-past-five. *My client is late.*

*They’re never late.* It must be a problem with A.D.A.M. – my Automated Death Appointment Management system. I switch my iPhone off and on again to reset. It restarts with a ping:

*<Urgent Overdue Collection: Miss E. Roberts
  Location – 51°27′5″ N, 0°56′34″ E>*

*Great.* I should already be across the Atlantic collecting some girl. I’ll have to go back for her.
Even though my scythe can bend space and time within the day, every minute counts. I’ve been so busy this decade that I haven’t wasted a second.

A young mother with a stroller flinches and veers away, almost slamming into the honey-coloured wall. The easiest bit of being Death should be creating a glamour – the illusion that should let me pass as human amongst those not due for collection. But even though I’m great at this job – I’ve kept up with a billion extra souls this decade alone – somehow a little of my deathliness always leaks out and taints my projection.

I’m glad that most of the commuters flooding the concourse rush past, not looking at anyone or anything apart from their phones. The odd ones who do, let their eyes slide quickly over me desperately trying to pretend I don’t exist.

Is what they see a reflection of how they feel about dying?

Take that dude with the double lip piercing and two teardrop tattoos. He’s leering at me across the hall, licking his lips like I’m dessert.

He’s even trying to take my picture. It’s pointless – I won’t appear in any photo. I can’t see my face, so that was just one thing I tried to find out what I really look like. All I know is that I have the necessary lady paraphernalia strapped down under my regulation cloak, and black clumpy shoes hiding average feet. The hand holding the scythe is small with long fingers – the nails neatly painted in blue sparkly nail polish I don’t remember putting on.

There’s a cough. A homeless guy huddled in blankets is tucked beside the information booth. He’s smiling at me like I’m an old pal. I raise my hand to him: not yet, my friend, but soon.

A man in a brown pinstripe suit shouts into his phone, ‘I don’t care – tell them you fell down the stairs!’ At the bottom of the escalators, he freezes – phone stuck to his ear. His face silently screams with the slack-jawed horror of me.
At last, my client.

I can relate. I was terrified when I met the old Death. We were in a hospital room and he loomed over me in a black cloak. The hood framed a gaping nothingness – instead of human eyes, dense galaxies bored into my soul. It was like teetering on the edge of a black hole as everything I loved was ripped away.

Those I’m here to collect look exactly the same as I felt. I can only presume they’re also getting the full Ghost of Christmas Future experience.

But he’ll get over it.

My client finally moves, running the wrong way up the escalator. After a couple of steps, he stumbles then falls. The escalator delivers him to my feet. Crab-like, he scuttles away then collapses. Clutching his heart, he writhes then stops.

I tower over him. Place a finger on his neck. Make sure there’s no life left in his physical body. With a swift swing of my blade, I separate the soul. Nice work.

He stands next to me. Well, not him… his spectral self.

I flick on the safety button of my scythe, rerunning the collection in my mind. Fishing out my phone, I tap in the data. Now, where’s that next appointment?

‘Excuse me,’ his spirit says. Without his physical form the man can’t speak, but his consciousness can communicate. Psychic waves travel, even on busy days like this when I wish they wouldn’t.

He asks, ‘Am I dead?’

‘Yup.’ I check the clock. Luckily, I can correct his lateness with a minor time distortion.


‘YES,’ I add a little reverb to my voice – the clients seem to like it and it finishes things off faster. ‘I AM DEATH.’

‘Oh.’ The spirit stares at his newly dead body collecting dust on the station floor.
I need to hurry this up. ‘**COLLECTION WILL BE ALONG IN A MINUTE. IT’S FULLY AUTOMATED – I DOUBLED THE EFFICIENCY OF THE SOUL COLLECTIONS AND—**’

‘B-B-But, where will I...?’ he stutters.

Always with the same questions, I should make a pamphlet.

‘**YOU’LL ASCEND**’ – I point to the sky – ‘**DESCEND OR BE RECYCLED.**’ I quickly scan his corpse. Bruises bloom purple and yellow on his knuckles. ‘**FOR YOU, I’D GUESS GROUND LEVEL OR BELOW.**’

‘There must be some way to reach an agreement.’ The man’s spirit pats down his jacket, obviously searching for a wallet that won’t have made it to the spectral zone. He winks. ‘One man to another.’

‘**WHO SAID I WAS A MAN?**’

I think he was less shocked when I said I was Death.

‘**DON’T GO WANDERING OFF. IF YOU MISS SOUL COLLECTION, YOU’LL BE DOOMED TO ROAM THE EARTH FOREVER.**’ I end with my Most Ominous Tone – it normally ends the conversation.

It doesn’t.

‘You have an iPhone?’

‘**OF COURSE. MY BROTHER, PESTILENCE, HAS TO KEEP UP WITH THE LATEST TECHNOLOGY. THE ILOVEYOU COMPUTER VIRUS WAS HIS WORK.**’

The golden clock reads five past five. *Damn, I’ve wasted so much time and I’ve still got to get to—*

‘Can I call my wife? I need to say sorry.’ He holds his hands in prayer.

I can’t meet his eyes – I know what I’ll see there. All the ‘**should havess’, ‘why did I...?’, and regrets. I learnt two decades ago that you can’t afford to feel in this job. But still I find myself checking his record for a loophole. Then I see it:

‘**YOUR WIFE HAS HAD FOUR NEAR-MISSES WITH ME**
IN THE LAST THREE YEARS. YOU CAN’T HAVE BEEN THAT SORRY.’

This place would be better if humans lived every day like I’m about to turn up. Then they wouldn’t waste my time begging for more of it. I should make another pamphlet with that on it. My phone pings:

<NOTIFICATION:>
Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Emergency Meeting
17:00: 17th January
Smells’ Bakery, Battle, Berkshire, United Kingdom.

That was five minutes ago. Great, my whole schedule’s ruined. We’re not due to meet for another two human weeks. This is what happens when I let my brothers organise things.

‘I’VE PLACES TO BE.’

He makes a grab for my scythe.

I step back out of reach. ‘I WOULDN’T DO THAT.’

Rule One in the manual: don’t let the clients touch the scythe. Before he can reply, the light changes: blood red shards spray across the walls.

As I suspected, he’s going down. It’s over before he has a chance to scream.

 Alone again, I program A.D.A.M. for Smells’ Bakery. Battle, Berkshire is obviously the place to be. When I check the address on the email, there’s a last line I’d missed. I re-read it twice. But there it is in black and white:

<ATTENDANCE MANDATORY>
The Apocalypse will commence in 21 days.
‘Duncan, breakfast’s ready!’ Mum shouts.

I yell back, ‘I’m awake!’ Like I could have slept last night after seeing Death at Smells’ Bakery.

‘Awake is not the same as up. Shift that backside!’

_Bloody Mum._

I don’t mean that. But if her post-chemo cravings weren’t so specific then I wouldn’t have been at Smells’ trying to get the only sausage rolls she can eat.

She’ll have a fit if she finds out the manager barred me for kicking over the crisp stand. I know it was a dick move, but since her diagnosis, when the red mist comes down, I can’t do much about it. At least her treatment’s finished. The last time I tried to slip her an own-brand pastry, she threw up after one bite then pushed the plate away without a lecture, or even a disappointed look. That’s how I knew she was really sick.

‘Duncan, I mean it.’ She sounds exhausted.

Hauling my carcass out of bed, I kick through the piles of clothes to find my massive black hoodie. Even though it’s two sizes too big, I have to yank the cuffs down to cover the river of scarred skin that a pan of boiling caramel carved into five-year-old me. My whole left side is roped with skin grafts, but it’s not them that are making me feel like I’m wearing a too-tight vest. That came with Mum’s cancer and has sat like a scrum-half on my chest ever since.

Actually, it’s my so-called dad’s fault. If he was still here, he could be
running around taking care of her. And I could have been at the new
*Star Wars* film with Tommo and Mark.

*But then I’d have to deal with Mark and his super-sized concern.*

Running wax through my hair, I pause for a moment and pull up my
sweatshirt hood. Turning off the lights, I check the mirror. It’s not even
close to what I saw last night – my eyes are still visible. Mum says they’re
her blue skies on a rainy day. Whatever they are, they’re ruining the look.

It *couldn’t* have been real – like the Grim Reaper was *really* going to
be sat in a bakery booth, his scythe tucked neatly under his feet.

Still, my heart races at the memory.

Those eyes – black holes boring into my soul. He, it – whatever *that*
vomit from my imagination was – looked so real. Right down to the
puff pastry flecks scattered on his cloak like our headmaster’s dandruff.

I hit the heel of my hand against my head, trying to knock the image
of that *thing* out. This is no time to start losing it. I’m all she’s got.

Clattering down the stairs two at a time, I flop into my seat at the
kitchen table. There’s a glistening pile of scrambled eggs on the plate in
front of me. I shovel a forkful into my face, then stop. ‘What’s going on?’

‘What d’you mean?’ Mum places a glass of orange juice in front of
me and sits.

‘Eggs on a school day? Normally, it’s toast or nothing.’

She avoids my eyes. ‘You’re so suspicious! Come on, they’re
getting cold.’

I dig in.

‘How did you sleep?’ she asks.

I could seriously tape one of our morning conversations and play it
on repeat. ‘Fine.’ The radio rumbles on in the background as I eat my
eggs. Eventually, I ask, ‘You?’

‘Fine.’ Judging by the thick black smears under her eyes, she’s lying too.

Slurping the juice, I immediately spit it back into the glass. ‘This is rank!’

‘It’s new – I’m trying to...’ Mum stands and fills the sink. ‘Things
need to change around here.’

‘But I like the old things.’
‘You’re seventeen. That’s not enough time to get stuck in your ways.’

A gap appears in the *chink-clunk* of crockery and when I look up, she’s staring at her reflection in the window, pulling at the fluffy tufts of hair trying to form a fringe.

I reassure her, ‘It’s growing back.’

‘Not my best feature.’ She washes a pan. ‘But I’m rocking the pixie crop. Who knew the upside of ovarian cancer was great cheekbones?’

‘Yeah, you’re a regular Kiera Knightley.’

‘Still, I’ll take my old gerbil cheeks for an all-clear today.’ A shadow flickers across her eyes before she blinks it away, plastering on a smile as fake as the wig she wore during her first three rounds of chemo.

Now I understand the eggs. ‘You weren’t going to tell me?’ She looks guilty and then admits, ‘No. You’d only worry.’

‘What time’s the appointment?’

After a long pause Mum says, ‘One o’clock.’

‘I’m coming with you.’

‘No, you’re not. You’ve missed enough school already. You know what Ms McCrae said at parents’ evening. You need to focus on your exams – pick your grades up.’

‘My grades are fine. If there’s one thing a mum with cancer should get you, it’s time off school.’

‘Cs and Ds are not fine – not for you. And you had a week off that you spent locked in your bedroom playing computer games.’ She raises an eyebrow at me. ‘Now, if there’s one thing a mum dealing with cancer should get, it’s an obedient son.’

Her words hit home. I’m trying, I really am.

Getting up, I butter a couple of slices of bread, stuff cheese in between, then wedge the sandwich into a Ziploc bag. I squeeze in two satsumas and a packet of cheese and onion crisps. ‘You’re going to be fine, Mum.’

‘I hope so.’ She finally meets my eye.

‘Are you not supposed to be the one telling me nothing can go wrong?’

‘I’ve never lied to you and I’m not going to start now. I’m hoping for
the best but until we know for sure…’

‘I was reading that survival rates are improved with a positive attitude.’

‘Your teachers won’t recognise you when you take your own advice.’

She grins and it’s like the clouds have cleared – like it was before her ovaries went mental. ‘But you’re right.’

It will be okay. It has to be okay.

She checks the clock. ‘You’re going to be late.’

I finish the last of my eggs, grab my school bag from the corner and I’m halfway out the door before I duck back and peck Mum on the cheek. ‘Good luck.’

The chilly January air smacks me in the face when I open the door. I take a couple of white puffy breaths.

‘Morning, Duncan.’

Doris’s voice makes me jump – I hadn’t realised she was there putting out the recycling.

‘Hi,’ I reply with a half-arsed wave.

‘It’s a lovely morning, don’t you think? I said to myself, Doris, this is a fine morning to—’

‘That’s nice.’ Doris is as round and bouncy as a tractor tyre, and as hard to stop once she gets on a roll. ‘Gotta go.’ I reach the pavement by the time her door slams shut. A movement at her upstairs window makes me look up. Big mistake.

It’s not Doris.

That thing from Smells’ stands stark against the rose print curtains. A Dementor on Steroids with an attitude problem. But a Dementor is wispy like cigarette smoke – this thing is all solid edges with a gravitational pull.

And this time it’s not eating a sausage roll.
HANNAH RIALS

A small-town Southern girl living in a medium-English city, Hannah started writing her vampire trilogy *Ascension* when she was 12 years old and published when she was 20. Her first novel won the IBPA Benjamin Franklin Award in YA New Voice, and her sequel won silver in the Moonbeam Book Awards. After earning her BA in Creative Writing from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, Hannah moved to Bath for Bath Spa University’s MA Writing for Young People. She loves writing and fills her hours reading, traveling across the globe, baking (no soggy bottoms!), and most especially, adoring dogs... specifically, Corgis.

About *The Invisible Century of Evangeline Wyland*

From the outside looking in, Evangeline Wyland lives a charmed life as the heiress of Solsikke Plantation. But from the inside looking out, all she can dream of is escape from her wretched father and the crimes that he blames her for.

After years of torment and abuse, a witch curses Evangeline with invisibility on her eighteenth birthday. To break the curse, she must first see the truth. Whatever that means.

With her sunflower pin in hand and her mother’s travel diaries, Evangeline sets out across the world and through the decades to find someone who can finally see her and free her from this miserable, invisible existence.

But finding the truth and being seen isn’t as easy as it sounds, and Evangeline is running out of time.

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Oxford, UK. Present Day

It was raining, but Evangeline never felt a drop. The water stopped centimeters from her head, diverted course, and slid down the invisible wall around her body.

A long time ago, she saw this as a sign of hope – someone was bound to notice a body-shaped gap in the rain, but no matter how hard she focused and willed it, no one ever looked her way.

Tonight, the pavement crowd was thicker than usual, even for a summer evening. There’d be no Shakespeare performances on the castle lawn, where she’d spent most of her evenings, so there was only one other option – the pubs. How she wished she could join someone, anyone for a drink. Maybe one day soon... She shoved the thought away. It was ridiculous to think like that anymore. She was just running down the hourglass.

Evangeline slipped easily into the Eagle & Child, passing through bodies as if she were air. She found an empty booth in the back room, the one that always seemed to be waiting for her. Except, she realized, tonight it wasn’t actually empty at all.

There was nobody occupying it, but a soaked leather jacket hung over the chair. On the table was an open pack of cigarettes. She looked around the pub, waiting for someone to claim the table. But no one came, and she resumed life as invisibly as she had for nearly a century.
Evangeline pulled her sketchbook from her weather-worn satchel and busied herself observing the people around her. Loud locals stood in rowdy crowds at the bar; her hands worked furiously to catch the looks of laughter and familiarity on their faces.

Even though she knew it wouldn’t happen, she held her breath, waiting for someone to come up and ask her, ‘What are you drawing?’ She’d have some witty response because she’d had days and weeks and months and years to think about it. She’d smile, bat her eyelashes, and think of something... She couldn’t be witty on command, of course, and she found that the more she tried to think about someone seeing her, the cloudier her thoughts became. It was best not to hope. She’d learned her lesson the hard way.

A few sketches later, Evangeline noticed a small older man who wore his slightly too large fedora with pride. He sat, talking kindly to himself and taking gentle gulps of his drink at a table for two. From across the room, she picked up snippets of his conversation, and it was only when he used the word ‘darling’, that she realized he wasn’t talking to himself at all.

The light outside the pub faded. Hundreds of faces passed Evangeline without a single glance at her or her perfectly empty table – tourists speaking tongues foreign to even her, couples on first dates, students relaxing after a long day of studying. They all found space in her sketchbook, though none of them would ever remember her.

When the moon was high in the night sky, a shadow fell across her page. She looked up, expecting to stare at the back of someone oblivious to the table behind them. But a face looked back – a face with deep-set, grey eyes, a long slightly crooked nose, and sharp-but-not-too-sharp features. Her heart pounded, but in his eyes, she saw... nothing. His gaze was blank, empty. And then she noticed the white cane in his hand, tapping against the side of the table.

Her heart sank.

But he smiled. ‘May I ask what you’re drawing?’

Evangeline froze and slowly looked back up at the boy. Years of
preparation for this exact question, and she had nothing. She’d always believed she’d be able to think on her feet when the time came. She couldn’t have been more wrong.

Her mouth gaped open, her tongue trying to form a word... any word would do. Words used to come so easily to her. But she could only think two things: How could he know that I’m drawing? And He can’t actually see me.

Her hesitation was too long for him.

‘Right then, sorry I’ve left my stuff for so long. I got caught up in a conversation.’ His smile was soft, but curious. Her fingers itched to sketch him before he disappeared, before her dream broke. ‘Mind if I take a seat?’

He didn’t wait for her answer this time. Evangeline flinched when he sat in the seat next to her, and she felt his body heat. She’d neither been warm nor cold for nearly a century. She’d simply been. Now, heat radiating from this strange boy flushed through her cheeks.

Her neck craned at a sharp angle to get a better look. Everything about him was pleasant. He even smelled nice, like rain and smoke and peppermint. Her heart sang when the scent didn’t just slip by her like everything else. It stayed and surrounded her with warmth.

‘How... can you... you can see me?’ Her words felt breathless in her mouth, and she was afraid that she hadn’t actually spoken at all. Until his head cocked to the side. Her heart pounded once more.

‘That’s a weird greeting, but if you must know, I can’t actually see anything.’ She winced at the wound she had unintentionally inflicted, but he was still smiling. At her.

Already this boy’s face was committed into the coils of her brain. She’d be able to draw him without hesitation when he suddenly couldn’t sense her anymore, or had entirely forgotten that she existed, which was likely to happen any second now.

Except it didn’t. He kept staring and smiling, though never looking directly at her. His cane sat across his lap, hands cupped around his pint.

‘Sorry,’ she stuttered. ‘Not many people ask me questions.’
‘At this pub in particular?’ He turned his head, listening to the crowd. ‘Um... well... in general, I suppose.’ Speaking felt like sand hitting a wall of bricks. Someone responding to her felt like a thousand jolts of electricity.

‘Why?’ He grabbed the table, making her sketchbook tremble. ‘Do you actually have seven heads? Or snakes for hair? Or a single eye? Am I actually talking to a monster?’

Evangeline froze, but then the boy released the table and leaned back. His most pleasant laugh circled around her, and she felt herself beginning to thaw.

He didn’t wait for a response before switching to his next question. ‘How often do you come here then?’

She wanted to repeat her question; she wanted answers even though she knew he didn’t have any. ‘Every night.’ She was surprised when he seemed shocked. ‘I’m a regular.’

His mouth pursed together, eyebrows raised. ‘A regular who doesn’t order a drink from the bar, eh?’

‘How can you...?’

‘The smell. I can smell my Guinness, but all I get from your side is charcoal and something sweet...’ He made a face followed by an uncomfortable laugh. ‘Sorry, that was cringy.’

She smiled politely, even though he couldn’t see it. ‘I don’t come for the drinks. I come for the subjects.’ She realized how extremely pompous she sounded and hoped it would scare him away. She wanted this all to be a dream because if it was reality, it might be like before. He’d blink, and she’d disappear and be crushed. Again. But at the same time, she wanted nothing more than to keep listening to his voice and watching his lips.

‘Ah. Isn’t that unfair to the pub? Taking up a perfectly good table for free?’ His smile started at the side of his mouth as he took a sip of Guinness. That’s what she wanted to capture.

‘Normally no one notices this table.’ Her words were quiet, and she hoped he hadn’t heard her over the crowd. But he did.
‘Why not? It’s a good table, good for observing, quiet enough to chat – perfect for a pint.’

‘Yes, but… I don’t know why.’ Evangeline’s chin dropped to her chest, and something inside her burned from her toes upward as he continued to tip his ear toward her, looking in her general direction with his empty eyes. The silence grew uncomfortable. Silence had never been uncomfortable for her before. And yet this boy’s blank gaze and sharp ears made her heart pound and her throat seize and had her demanding answers instead of following her silly wishful thinking.

Her nanny had told her stories of the stars aligning at just the right moment for people to cross paths – were two powerful stars aligning tonight, stars she never thought would meet?

‘I’m George, by the way.’ From her bowed head, she watched him stick his hand out so that it was directly under her gaze. Slowly, she raised her hand, trying to keep the shock from her face. This was normal. People introduced themselves with names and handshakes. ‘Do you have a name, or should I just call you Artist?’

She contemplated letting him do that. It would be easier if this was a fluke. She’d be the nameless girl who’d drift from his memory when suddenly he went to say something and forgot what he was saying or why he was talking to an empty chair. A name might stick more. But she just couldn’t help herself.

‘Evangeline.’

‘Evangeline the Artist.’ He said her name slowly, and shivers ran up her spine. ‘That’s a nice name.’

Her heart hadn’t stopped trying to slam its way out of her chest.

‘How could you tell that I was drawing?’ she asked, embarrassed by the question.

‘The scratch of the pencil. And the smell of charcoal. And I took a wild guess.’ He was kind about her questions, and though she supposed that he was used to them, she felt rude asking. Her nanny would’ve chided her – she could hear her voice as clear as if she were standing right next to them. ‘Child, mind what you say!’ An incredible ache
formed in Evangeline’s whole body for the only adult who’d ever shown her love.

‘You’re very perceptive then?’

He nodded with a playful little smirk. ‘You might call it my superpower.’

When she didn’t say anything for a while, George said, ‘Do you have a superpower, Evangeline the Artist?’

‘No.’ This answer came quickly. She’d had nearly a century to know herself, and she knew this much: ‘There’s nothing special about me.’

George laughed harshly, making Evangeline jump. ‘I’m sorry, but that’s utterly ridiculous.’

‘It’s true!’ Irritation flared on her tongue. ‘I’m nobody and no one, and you don’t even know me.’

The instant the words slipped from her lips, she regretted them. And yet her arms wrapped around her chest, and she pulled away from George, even as he leaned in closer, squinting his empty, gray eyes.

Silence fell, but this time, she could feel him thinking. Even though a part of her was willing him away because he obviously wasn’t who she needed, she liked that she made him think. She liked that she made him anything at all. Impossible. ‘Is that why you asked why I was able to see you?’

For a long time, Evangeline didn’t know what to say. Her tongue felt like a pile of tangled ropes. And for the first time in her century of invisibility, she felt herself wanting to tell him her story – her whole story. Only, she wasn’t sure she had enough time left.
From the moment Chlöe could read, she devoured stories. From the moment she could write, she filled notebooks. Chlöe has a BA Honours degree in Creative Writing and a Masters in Writing for Young People from Bath Spa University. On the Masters, Chlöe completed her first novel, *The History of A, B and Me* and began writing *Mathilde from Hell*. There are hints of all the countries she’s visited in everything she writes — beaches, quirky cafés, or foggy backstreets in Le Touquet that inspired *Mathilde from Hell*. Like her characters, Chlöe can always be found with a coffee in hand.

**About Mathilde from Hell**

Mathilde’s life got dark and scary very quickly after *that* night. Desperate to escape her house, she stumbles across the church... dark and abandoned, it looks more like the gateway to Hell.

Orion’s life went from bad to even worse after *that* night. Desperate to feel like a normal eighteen-year-old, he tucks his sister into bed, leaves the house, and then he finds the little, abandoned church.

At the centre of both their worlds is guilt, anger and the smoking memories of the night that started all of this. Together, in the gloomy church hidden from the rest of the world, they can pretend everything is okay. Aubermont is a small town though, and their lives are more intertwined than they could ever imagine.

chloewiththedots@gmail.com | @chloewithdots_
It had been beautiful once.

Stained glass windows so ornately painted that it bought a tear to the eyes of visitors. The beautiful faces depicted on the glass danced on wooden floors with pools of blue and gold, the sunlight flooding in. The doors were always open, and the sound of singing travelled into the town beyond, drawing more visitors with every verse, like sirens serenading the seas. They were songs about hope, healing and love. Not a single soul left without feeling like they’d found something – they were never always sure what had been found, but it was a certain something. Fresh flowers lined the pews, filling the little place with the scent of spring. Candles glittered all along the front and in every corner, bathing the room in the gentlest of glows, soothing even the most broken of hearts.

The people who came here were a family of sorts. They helped each other with problems neither party even knew they needed help with. They melted the cracks in hearts and bones and bodies so they could function again. They effortlessly raised one another up to reach the highest of goals.

The groundskeeper had been broken by a cheating wife, and a set of friends who didn’t seem to care when he went to them with a hurt so deep it was pulling him into the ground. Upon discovery of the church, his heart and mind were mended. His new friends held him at any hour of the day or night until the pain wasn’t quite so vast. To say thank you, he decided to plant a tree for each and every person – a little pine tree each to make the surroundings outside as wonderful as the beauty that was inside.

It had been beautiful once.

Then the trees grew.
PART ONE

Chapter One

Mathilde

It was either leaving or screaming the house down.

The second option would have got me kicked out anyway. I remembered to pick my backpack up on the way out. It wasn’t until I was half a mile down the street that I realised I hadn’t put shoes on. I wasn’t running away, so it didn’t really matter, I was just temporarily escaping... not that there was any true escape from what we’d done.

The sun was slowly rising, but it was struggling to make its way through the dense fog. You couldn’t ask for a more typically Aubermont morning. I liked the fog; it provided cover. I walked the streets aimlessly, my mind too full of everything else to pay attention to where my feet were going.

_There had been three of them._

The scream was building in my throat again. Dad had said it so matter-of-factly, and then he’d smiled at me. I wanted to shout the words back at him until he registered their meaning. I think it was meant to be a comforting smile, make me feel like everything was going to be okay, but it had just been the catalyst for turning any words I might have spoken into this scream. It felt like a creature clawing its way up my ribs.

I only half-registered walking into the forest. The population of Aubermont collectively avoided this place. Maybe that’s why my subconscious led me here, a silent middle finger to all the times my parents had told me to stay away. They can’t tell me what to do anymore though, not now.

I couldn’t work out if the fog was thicker in here, or if there was just less space for it to spread between the trees. Either way, the combination was a welcome one. More hiding places. Not that anybody else was going to come through here – good little Aubermont children didn’t do that.
Three of them.

I wanted the fog to take my thoughts away, just whip them out of my head and take them somewhere far, far away. I inhaled, the smell of pine filling my lungs. Unexpectedly, it pushed the thing dangling off my ribs down a little bit. I did it again, and again and again until the scream was almost evaporated.

I’d been following a path, absent-mindedly, but some functioning part of my brain had made sure I stuck to it. I was paying complete attention now though. The path had come to an end, leading all the way up to the wooden doors of a church. Sat on the cross on the roof was a crow. At the sight of me it let out a single caw, so hoarse it was as if it had been silent for years, and then flew away.

I was confused about everything at the moment, but I knew for certain that it hadn’t just been coincidence that had led me here. It looked exactly like where I was meant to be.

Hell.

Chapter Two

Orion

I loved her, I really did, but sometimes you need a break. No matter how much space a person takes up in your heart.

‘You all right, little star?’ I asked. ‘Got everything you want?’ I tucked her threadbare blanket higher around her shoulders.

‘Yup.’ Cassie’s mouth was already full of popcorn.

‘Be good for Carter.’ I kissed her temple, brushing the stray baby hairs off her forehead. ‘I’ll be back to watch the end of the film with you.’

‘Yup.’ Her eyes didn’t waver from the television screen, already completely engrossed.

I understood now exactly how my mum had felt every time she
had left us and been overbearingly cuddly. I’d always acted just like Cassiopeia was now. If I could travel back in time, I would squeeze Mum tight every single time she left and tell her I loved her. But we can’t go back in time, can we, Orion?

And if I could, that’s not the first thing about my past I would change. I’d fix the day that had made this very situation happen, the one that made me hate myself a tiny bit more every time I left Cassie. Or saw the slowly healing marks up her arms and legs.

I kissed her temple once more, then headed into the kitchen.

‘She’s all set. You’ll barely know she’s here. Thank you for this,’ I said to Carter.

‘Oh, you know I don’t mind having you guys here. You don’t have to keep saying thank you.’

‘But I need you to know just how thankful we are. Really, I don’t know where else we would have gone.’

‘It’s all good, brother.’ He patted my shoulder. ‘Now get outta here. Go be Orion for a bit.’

‘I won’t be long.’ I pulled my coat on, wound my fox fur, Viola, around my shoulders.

‘What’s she watching?’ Carter asked, peering around the doorframe.

‘Monkey Chronicles.’

‘Dude, that’s my favourite.’ His face morphed into an expression of pure joy, and I couldn’t help but smile back.

‘Go on.’ I laughed as he ran to the sofa, practically dive-bombing into the gap next to Cassie, slinging his arm around her. We called each other brother, but I wasn’t sure Carter would ever fully realise how much he felt like family to me.

The sun was setting, dousing Aubermont in a peach-coloured glow. The day’s fog had only burned off a couple of hours ago, but I was certain it would return by the time the moon came out. I breathed in the fresh air. Carter’s words came back to me: ‘Go be Orion for a bit’. I knew he meant it in a nice way, but I couldn’t help feeling guilty. Cassie and I were in this mess because of me, and I was the one running
away because I needed a break. My worst nightmare was becoming my father and I was heading straight towards that. My throat was dry, my eyes itchy with tears. Cassie deserved a million times better than me for a big brother.

I wasn’t paying attention to where I was going, but my feet naturally took the path to the forest. All Aubermont parents made sure their children didn’t come to this bit of town. All except one.

We’d breathe in the woody air together, hide amongst the trees, wait for the other and collect mushrooms for dinner (Mum knew all the non-poisonous ones). I hadn’t come here since her death – it was too thick with memories of her, her aura still hanging in the branches along with the fog. It ploughed into me as I walked through the gap in the trees and onto the dusty path.

I could just about see the sky from this spot, a tiny patch of it still unobscured by trees. I looked up, it only took a few moments before I found her stars. I wasn’t sure what constellation they were part of, not Orion or Cassiopeia, I knew that much, but they had been her favourite. She would search for them every evening, even on foggy nights — just in case. Mum would always, at least, throw a smile their way. Sometimes she’d have full conversations, telling them every part of her life, good and bad.

‘They listen to me. Listen like nobody else can,’ she’d said one night when I asked what she was doing. ‘They don’t judge or try to advise. The stars just take it all in, take some of the weight off your shoulders. They have your back.’

I’d never really got it before, but these days I understood. There were so many thoughts in my head, crashing into each other and getting mixed up. I couldn’t quite form words to send up to the stars, so I smiled at them instead. I hoped it would be enough for them to know I needed some guidance.

If the stars were appearing, I knew it would be dark soon, but I didn’t want to go back just yet. The fresh air was intoxicating. I would walk just a little longer, to the pine tree where Mum and I had etched our
names into the bark. I counted up the years as I walked and realised eight had passed since I’d last come here.

The forest had changed in those eight years.

The trees taller. The pathway thinner. And it was darker. The kind of dark that had always terrified me.

Eighteen years old, and I wanted to hold my mum’s hand. A pain sharper than any of the pine needles stabbed my heart, knowing I would never be able to hold her hand again, or watch a film on the sofa with her, or ask her to help me figure out the budget for groceries. None of it. I brushed away the first of the tears from my cheek. Then I saw it.

A church.

This was new, or maybe I’d just never made it to this part of the forest before. It was built from wood blacker than night. Devils with good intentions and angels with bad ones were carved into the door. A crow was perched on the wonky cross on the roof. It cawed once in my direction, then flew into the oncoming fog.

It looked like the entrance to Hell, and I was going down.
Brought up in Cornwall, Carly’s childhood was far from ordinary. Her mum died of cancer when she was nine, and from that moment her world felt entirely different to everybody else’s. She would love to connect with today’s children who may feel the same.

In addition to more than three years in local journalism, Carly completed a two-day picture book course with Penguin Books in 2017 and now writes for children’s magazine publisher, Kennedy Publishing. You can find her in Bristol where she lives with her boyfriend, cupboards crammed with tea bags, and a large pile of waiting-to-be-washed-up mugs.

About The Treatment

It’s 2091. Treacherous floods have left New Land’s End isolated from the rest of the UK. Women are hanged for witchcraft, children are forced into marriage, and science is scorned. It might be the future, but it looks a lot like the past.

Fourteen-year-old Alexandra hates it. She hates that Governor Parris rules the island, she hates that her father won’t let her study medicine, and most of all, she absolutely hates that her mother is dead. With nothing left but anger, she runs away into the forbidden depths of the woodland, where she not only finds friendship in two wild orphans and a crow named Crow, but a dark secret about Governor Parris.

Will this knowledge save them all or kill them all?

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The year is 2083.

I’m six-years-old.

‘She’s hurting me!’

I think the screaming is in my dreams, but it doesn’t stop when I open my eyes. I scramble across my bed and push my nose up to the window. There’s flames and angry faces and children in pyjamas. I grab hold of Florence, my best bear friend, by the paw and dash to Ma and Pa’s room. They’re not there. I step-by-step down the stairs, feeling the thud of Florence’s body on each step. It’s okay, Ma can help me bandage her up later. She’ll be good as new.

I walk into the main house room, where Pa has a candle lit on the table in front of him. His eyebrows are buried into the middle of his face, and he’s drawing an invisible circle around and around and around on the floor. Even though I can’t actually hear it, I imagine the sound of his nail scratching against the wood surface. It’s weird, like he can’t hear the commotion outside. He might tell me off for being awake but—

‘What are you doing, Pa?’

He jumps. I step out from the shadows.
‘Alexandra, get back to bed,’ he says, sternly.
‘Where’s Ma?’
‘Outside, pet. Now come on, you really shouldn’t be up.’
‘Why is she outside?’
‘As much as I love your curiosity, you don’t need to know every single tiny thing young lady, now back to bed with you.’
‘There’s lots of people shouting, I can’t sleep. What are they doing?’
‘No!’
‘Alex...’
I start to walk towards the door. Pa lifts up from his seat on the floor.
‘Don’t you dare—’ he says.
I might only be little, but he knows he can’t stop me. I take another step.
‘Alex, I’m warning you—’ he adds.
I don’t listen. I need to find Ma. I jump up, narrowly missing his reach, open the door, and come face-to-face with a crowd of angry faces. They’re hurling abuse into the open door of Janet’s house, all-while holding logs lit on fire. Janet is our next-door neighbour. Ma and her sit and gossip together on Fridays while I play with her cat, Treacle. Ma’s a doctor, and because Janet is an old lady and gets ill a lot, Ma looks after her. Janet taught me how to play cards once; it was really fun.

She screams as she is yanked from her home by three big men. My cheeks flush at the sight of her hunched over in just her nightgown and a suit of shackles. Lit by flames, her white bed hair swings in front of her face. She has a pointy nose and chin, and small, scared eyes. When she tries to pull away, the big men pull back harder on her chains.
‘Please make her stop!’

It’s a small but pained voice. I duck and dive between the legs of my neighbours and spot Georgie. Georgie is Governor Parris’ eldest son, I think he’s about eleven – much older than me anyway. He’s pale and shivery and clasping onto his father’s thick jacket.
‘She’s hurting me! She’s working with the Devil!’ he says, louder this time.

‘I’m not doing anything!’ Janet whimpers. ‘I swear! I was just asleep…’

Treacle the cat sneaks around the corner of the door. She looks up to see Janet and miaows desperately – like she’s a little kitten again. I want to comfort her, but I’m too afraid.

‘Janet Cosgrove,’ Governor Parris, a big man with a big belly, booms. ‘The lady with the cat. Stop what unholy things you are doing to my child! We know you are the Devil’s friend.’

‘He must be mistaken!’ she says, falling to her knees. ‘How could I hurt him? I’m nowhere near him? He’s only a child – why would I? This makes no sense! Please let me go!’

Georgie lets out a scream. He falls to the floor, too. The crowd gasps. He crawls along on his hands and knees towards Janet and points his finger towards her.

‘You just made me fall! I saw you dancing with the Devil! You signed your name in his book!’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ she replies. She goes to try and help him, but he grabs his hands around his neck and squeezes.

‘She’s strangling me!’ Georgie struggles to say. ‘She’s trying to stop me from speaking! Somebody help!’

The crowd gasps. They run to him. Despite wanting to be anywhere but here, my feet feel glued to the floor. I can’t stop watching. With force, the crowd manage to pull Georgie’s hands away from his neck. They form a wall in front of him, protecting him from tiny Janet in her thin nightgown. It’s weird, because even though Governor Parris is Georgie’s father, he doesn’t give him a cuddle or anything. He just watches, from far away. My Pa always gives me a hug if I’ve hurt myself.

‘He’s freezing cold!’ a male voice calls out from the wall of neighbours.

A gargle of worry bursts from the crowd.

‘What? How? No!’ Janet cries. ‘This is utterly ridiculous. There’s no such thing as the Devil! I don’t understand—’
‘That’s exactly what a friend of the Devil would say,’ Governor Parris tuts, strolling towards Janet. He’s oddly calm and holds his hands behind his back. ‘I will not let you get away with hurting my son. You, madam, are a danger to us here in New Land’s End! After the floods that The Holy One sent, it was only a matter of time before the Devil showed up. Guards! Take her away. You, Janet Cosgrove, will be imprisoned until trial. I would suggest you not only keep quiet in the meantime but keep your demons away from my son.’

‘Georgie – please! Tell the truth, honey!’ Janet begs. ‘I don’t understand.’

I don’t understand either. Janet normally has a lovely, big smile and is always kind. Why is she doing these awful things to Georgie?

‘That’s Georgie Parris to you!’ Governor Parris bellows at Janet. Just then, I spot Ma’s hair, wild and blonde, in the crowd. I rush between the knees of adults to get to her. I bury my face into her skirt. I sniff in her smell. She pulls me back to look at her.

‘Alexandra! What are you doing out here? Get back inside.’

But she sees that my eyes are wet and afraid and not sure where to look. She pulls me in close.

‘Why is Janet hurting Georgie?’ I ask.

She sighs and smooths my hair.

‘She’s not sweetheart. This is all nonsense. I thought that we had left this back in the 1600s! I don’t know what this boy is playing at, but we’ll get the truth out of him, whatever it takes. Janet is a good woman – the best – and don’t you forget it.’

The crowd leads Janet away. Ma calls after them to stop, and I join in, but the clanking of the shackles and the deep groan of the neighbours drowns us out as she’s carried away.
Chapter Two

Ma tucks Florence and me back into bed with a kiss on the head. As I drift off to sleep, the sound of Janet’s screaming rolls around in my ears. I have horrible nightmares full of shouting men and Treacle and Georgie, with his hands around his neck, and his skin as pale as snow.

The next morning, there’s no conversation at breakfast, instead there is only chewing and bottom shuffling on the wooden floor. I tear a piece of bread from the crusty loaf which is plated in the middle of us, also on the floor. Pa lays a tea towel underneath it to, in his words, protect the wood. I feel the heat on my fingertips as I dip my bread into a bowl of warm, melted butter. Sat cross-legged in a circle, we each take our turn. Pa, then Ma, then me, and then Pa again. Pa keeps glancing at Ma, but she refuses to look back. Our small main room feels even smaller when they fight. I look to the window, where a baby crow pecks at the handful of wet breadcrumbs Ma left for him on the open windowsill.

‘It must have been left behind by its family, it’s all alone,’ Ma had said a few weeks back. She started off by feeding him a glob of wet breadcrumbs using her finger, but now the bird was big enough to eat all on his own. His beak is strange and different from other crows, black but with striped orange markings. Like tiger stripes, but the other way around.

‘So, we’re just going to sit here and let this happen?’ Ma cuts the quiet of the room with her sharp tone. I don’t know what this is, exactly. But whatever this is is definitely bad, and definitely involves neighbour Janet and what happened last night.

‘Let’s not talk about this in front of Alexandra,’ Pa replies, trying to finish his mouthful of bread.

Ma reaches for my hand. ‘No, let’s. She might be a child, but she’s not an idiot. What’s happening right now is madness. Surely you can do something?’

‘What exactly do you want me to do, Patti?’ Patti is my ma’s name, and if Pa uses it in front of me, it means he’s angry. He hardly ever calls
her Patti. He sighs, and leans back onto his hands. ‘She’s been arrested. I’m not a lawyer.’

‘I don’t even know how this man feels like he has any right to decide what happens in New Land’s End! We’ve let him get away with too much for too long, laughing at how ridiculous he is. But this is serious now, Russ. This isn’t a joke anymore.’

Pa’s first name is Russ. Ma uses it when she’s angry, too.

‘I’m not laughing,’ Pa replies.

‘You work for him!’ Her voice gets louder. She waves her piece of bread around in her hand, letting crumbs go everywhere. ‘Make him let her go!’

‘How, exactly?’ Pa’s voice gets louder. ‘Honestly, Patti, I can’t get through to him. Everybody is backing him up. I’ve told you all this.’

‘You haven’t tried hard enough if this is still going ahead. We can’t stop trying. They’re saying they’re going to kill her! Something to do with giving her the treatment – whatever the hell that means,’ her voice breaks. ‘It’s terrifying, Russ!’

‘Kill her?’ I say. I thought killing people was only something that happened in stories. Surely they couldn’t kill Janet? Killing people is wrong.

Pa holds my free hand.

‘See Patti, you’re scaring her! I’ve told you, I’ve tried. That’s it. There’s nothing else I can do. I have no idea what’s going on. Please, I’m begging you to stop this.’

Ma throws her piece of bread out of her hand. She looks like she’s going to burst. I wrap my arms around Florence. She must be as scared as I am.

‘Well, you might have given up, but I haven’t. Janet is our friend. She’s been there for us when we needed her the most. What’s happened to you? Before the floods happened, you wouldn’t have been so quiet about what’s going on!’

Pa moves uncomfortably on the floor.

‘I can’t sit here and stuff my face while the poor woman is chained
up,’ Ma huffs. ‘It won’t end here, we need to put an end to this now. We can’t let this happen.’

‘Patti, sweetheart, please, you have to stop this. You’re putting us all in danger.’ He lifts up my hand. ‘We have a daughter to think about.’

Ma stands up on her feet and looks down at Pa.

‘Yes. We do have a daughter, which is why this is so important, Russ. We can’t wait around for this to get worse and worse. If we don’t speak the truth, who will?’
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