

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES

from SCBWI British Isles and Europe

SPONSORED BY WORKING PARTNERS



**undiscovered voices**



A PROJECT OF SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

# What will you discover?

## 11 UNAGENTED AND UNPUBLISHED WRITERS 12 UNAGENTED AND UNPUBLISHED ILLUSTRATORS

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

### UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2018 INCLUDES:

AISHA AND THE OMEGAS by David Hall  
JEDEDIAH DREAMING RANSOME by Annie Walmsley  
SAFFRON SAPPHIRE AND THE BIG FAT INDIAN  
WEDDING OF THE YEAR by Serena Patel  
RETURN TO THE WILD by Nicola Penfold  
KELSIE CARTER AND THE EVIL CHIHUAHUA ARMY by Katie Hayoz  
SHADOWSCENT by Peta Freestone  
THE SPY WHO GROUNDED ME by Matthew Olson-Roy  
THE CURSE OF THE WEIRD WOLF by Dale Hannah  
THE BOY I AM by Kathryn Kettle  
THE KNIGHT SHIFT by Emma Mason  
THE DARLINGTON MIRACLES by Sarah Merrett

### WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY:

Laure Allain • Emily Jones • Deborah Sheehy • Sandy Horsley  
Kate Read • Rachel Lovatt • Jacob Turner • James Crosland-Mills • Sally Walker  
Monika Baum • Janet Catherine Gibson Pickering • Hannah Mosley



ISBN 978-0-244-94910-5



9 780244 949105

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

NOT AVAILABLE IN TRADE

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES

The sixth anthology of unpublished  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

published by

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



WP



# CONTENTS

▶ CLICKING ON THE ENTRIES BELOW WILL TAKE YOU TO THE RELEVANT PAGE

FROM FRANCES HARDINGE	4
FROM ALEXIS DEACON	6
FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES	8
FROM WORKING PARTNERS	10
SPECIAL THANKS FROM THE CO-CREATORS	11
<b>THE ILLUSTRATORS</b>	14
RIVERSIDE PICNIC by Laure Allain	15
TOAD CAR WASHERWOMAN by Emily Jones	17
EVERYTHING WAS VERY STILL NOW – MOLE IN THE WILD WOOD by Deborah Sheehy	19
BADGER'S STUDY by Sandy Horsley	21
UNDER THE YELLOW MOON by Kate Read	23
A BABBLING PROCESSION OF THE BEST STORIES IN THE WORLD by Rachel Lovatt	25
DRAWING EXCALIBUR by Jacob Turner	27
HOW HE GOT HIS BIG FOOT by James Crosland-Mills	29
PANDORA'S BOX by Sally Walker	31
NESSIE by Monika Baum	33
PANDORA FINDS HOPE by Janet Catherine Gibson Pickering	35
POOKAH AND THE HUMAN CHILD by Hannah Mosley	37

<b>THE WRITERS</b>	39
AISHA AND THE OMEGAS by David Hall	40
JEDEDIAH DREAMING RANSOME by Annie Walmsley	53
SAFFRON SAPPHIRE AND THE BIG FAT INDIAN WEDDING OF THE YEAR by Serena Patel	64
RETURN TO THE WILD by Nicola Penfold	76
KELSIE CARTER AND THE EVIL CHIHUAHUA ARMY by Katie Hayoz	88
SHADOWSCENT by Peta Freestone	101
THE SPY WHO GROUNDED ME by Matthew Olson-Roy	111
THE CURSE OF THE WEIRD WOLF by Dale Hannah	123
THE BOY I AM by Kathryn Kettle	136
THE KNIGHT SHIFT by Emma Mason	149
THE DARLINGTON MIRACLES by Sarah Merrett	163
HONORARY MENTIONS: Illustrators	173
HONORARY MENTIONS: Writers	174

**ISBN:** 978-0-244-94910-5

**COPYRIGHT NOTICE:** All works contained herein are copyrighted by their respective authors. No reproduction of any kind is permitted without the owner's written permission.

# FROM FRANCES HARDINGE

## Honorary Chair for Writers

Writing is not for the faint-hearted. Giving shape to our dreams and letting other people judge them is more than a little terrifying. We meticulously scoop out our still-beating heart, then let people poke it a bit and tell us that it needs trimming. (They're usually right.)

We venture outside our comfort zone, because that's the only way to find our own voice, our individual style. I always feel that my books *should* scare me a bit. When they do, that means I've set myself real challenges, tried something new, ventured into emotionally raw territory, or taken risks with the reactions of my readers.

And at the same time we have to fight the relentless brain-weasels which tell us that we have no talent, that everything we've produced is rubbish, that we're 'wasting' our story idea and will never get another one, and that anyway somebody else has already done it better. This battle can be exhausting. Given the circumstances, writing anything at all is a victory. Every completed chapter is a triumph of willpower.

It doesn't seem that triumphant a lot of the time, however. There's often a discouraging feeling that one has made no progress at all.

Picture a hero on their great quest, carving a path through the dense forest of other commitments, wading through swamps of uncertainty, battling the dragons of self-doubt, breaking out of the stagnant dungeon of lost momentum...only to find themselves walking down a familiar path towards their own farmstead. A rejection letter lies on the doormat.

After all their trials, perils and determination they are back exactly where they started. It's unbelievably unfair! Some heroes might decide to give up on the whole quest and go back to growing turnips.

But some do not. Some realise that they are not *really* back where they started. The whole journey may still lie in front of them, but now they are more experienced travellers. Along their route they have learned tricks and won friends that will serve them well in the future. So they sit down

with their hand-scrawled maps to work out where they went wrong last time, then bandage their blisters and set off again. And again. And again.

Even for the intrepid, the solitary nature of such a quest can wear on the spirit. Thankfully SCBWI provides a much-needed base, where such adventurers can find assistance, share tips and warn each other about pit traps.

Better still, SCBWI's *Undiscovered Voices* competition shines a spotlight on striking new talents. Many of them go on to achieve great things.

The authors appearing in this anthology should be congratulated, but also thanked for adding their fresh, distinctive voices to the world. There is a special pleasure in falling in love with a new author, and knowing at once that you can trust them to carry you somewhere wondrous without dropping you. I wish them the very best, and hope that they find all the enthusiastic readers they deserve.

**Frances Hardinge**

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# FROM ALEXIS DEACON

## Honorary Chair for Illustrators

We live in a world full of voices, each one unique, each one a world unto itself. It can be such a struggle to be noticed at all, let alone heard. For many of us who dream of writing and illustrating our own stories, the struggle to make our way can be so tough that it grows to dominate all else. We forget what we wanted to say and why we wanted to say it. We just want someone to listen to us, to acknowledge we are here. And so we shout louder and louder, saying outrageous things that mean nothing to us. We forget that our story was a quiet story that began as a whisper.

I was very fortunate when I first began in children's books to have the support of two wonderful editors, Ian Craig and Caroline Roberts. I sent them a book dummy I had made about a zoo full of monsters. I had tried to make it as much like other children's books I had read as possible. I copied the prose style, I borrowed phrases, I drew heavily on influences like Sendak and Steig. Try as I might I couldn't hide my own voice. I was called in to meet Caroline and Ian at what was then Random House Children's Books. Gently and patiently they explained that severed hands was not suitable content for the under-seven age bracket and that a story should traditionally have an ending. They also stripped away the garble of voices I didn't understand and weren't my own and picked out what was authentic. Over the next six months I sent them story after story, each one wrong in a different way. It was a kind of crash course in picture-book making. When I began what was to become my first book, *Slow Loris*, I remember how patiently they kept guiding me back to my first dummy. I wanted to do the book in etching then to redraw everything in fine pen, then to make oil paintings. Each time they insisted that I look again at what I had made first, unconscious of trying to please anyone, just trying to tell a story.

The world has changed a great deal in the short time I have been making books. In the age of the internet, anyone can put their work in the public domain. Your work might be seen daily by thousands without it ever



having to be 'published'. For the artist, this is a wonderful opportunity, but it is not without its dangers. Just as publishing can seem sometimes to value profit above all else, so we as creators can be seduced into thinking that a larger and larger audience is the ultimate goal. Such immediate access to feedback, both positive and negative, can distort us. All too easily we fall into the trap of pandering to our audience, forgetting that we first began to write or draw so that our own voice might be heard.

If we make work for its own sake; if we care about what we do; if we write and draw in sadness, in anger, out of love, out of joy, then our work will always be worth sharing. If we speak with an uncommon voice of experiences few others share or care about then those who did share them will care about them all the more and take strength from finding that another soul felt the same. Stories are not told to bring money or fame but to communicate ideas. For all those who want to be heard, take the time to ask what it is you want to say and why. There is no voice on earth that is not worth listening to. As an author or an illustrator, sometimes the best thing you can do is stop and look and listen. There are stories to tell that haven't been told; there are those without a voice, crying out for someone to speak on their behalf. Writers and illustrators do not make the world, they tell it, and there is still so much that remains undiscovered.

**Alexis Deacon**

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# FROM SCBWI BRITISH ISLES

Welcome to *Undiscovered Voices 2018*, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators' (SCBWI) sixth anthology of undiscovered writers and illustrators.

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

Over the years, the British Isles region has grown into the go-to organisation for writers and illustrators looking to benefit from our inclusive and supportive professional community. The market for children's books is filled with eye-watering competition, yet we are always amazed at the high calibre of new and exciting submissions to this competition. This is why we are particularly proud of *Undiscovered Voices*, our flagship programme that aims to get new authors and illustrators 'discovered' by editors, art directors, agents and publishers. Sometimes, you just need a bit of a helping hand, a dash of luck and someone who believes in you.

The first five *Undiscovered Voices* anthologies have an amazing track record: 37 of the selected authors and illustrators have received publishing contracts for more than 200 books. These have been honoured with nominations and included on prestigious literary lists, including the Blue Peter book award, the Barnes and Noble top teen book, the American Library Association Best Book for Young Readers, Borders Book of the Month, Waterstone's Children's Book Prize, Crystal Kite Award and the Branford Boase First Novel award.

This year we had a record-breaking number of submissions, attesting to the wealth of talent in SCBWI. Congratulations to all the longlisted and shortlisted authors and illustrators!

This anthology would not be possible without an incredibly hard-working, enthusiastic team of volunteers, editors and judges. Thank you! We are also extremely grateful to Working Partners for their enormously generous support and funding of this exciting project from the get-go.

**Natascha Biebow and Kathy Evans**

Co-Regional Advisors (Co-Chairs)

SCBWI, British Isles region

[www.britishisles.scbwi.org](http://www.britishisles.scbwi.org)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# FROM WORKING PARTNERS

Working Partners is delighted to sponsor the sixth *Undiscovered Voices* anthology, twelve years after Sara Grant and Sara O'Connor first came up with this inspired way of bringing new voices to the world of children's literature.

*Undiscovered Voices* has become one of the most effective ways for agents and publishers to discover new writing talent in a world where more books are being written, but fewer are being published.

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

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

**Chris Snowdon**

Managing Director

Working Partners

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

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# SPECIAL THANKS FROM THE CO-CREATORS

Welcome to the sixth *Undiscovered Voices* anthology! More than twelve years ago, we came up with this idea to help unpublished writers achieve their dreams of publication. We agreed that if one of the writers from the first anthology received a book deal then we would be pleased. *Undiscovered Voices* has succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. It evolved to include illustrators and also broadened to feature work from SCBWI members in the EU. From the five previous anthologies, 37 of the selected authors and illustrators have received publishing contracts for more than 200 books published around the world, winning and receiving nominations for too many awards to mention.

The success of *Undiscovered Voices* is thanks not only to the abundance of talented writers and illustrators in SCBWI, but also to a generous sponsor and a team of dedicated volunteers. The entire project – from the kick-off event, to reviewing hundreds of submissions, to producing this anthology – is 100% volunteer-driven.

- Without hesitation, **Working Partners** came on board as the sole sponsor and have fully funded and supported the project since 2008. *Undiscovered Voices* would never have happened if not for their generosity. Continued thanks to **Chris Snowdon** and **Charles Nettleton**, and everyone at Working Partners for their support for writers – both published and soon-to-be-discovered. And a special thanks to the following Working Partners editors who helped us review a record number of submissions: **Elizabeth Galloway**, **Clarissa Hutton**, **James Noble**, **Samantha Noonan** and **Crystal Velasquez**.
- We are also thrilled to have **Frances Hardinge** as our honorary author chair and **Alexis Deacon** as our honorary illustrator chair. They are an inspiration and have been incredibly generous with their time, talent and wisdom.

- A huge thanks to our *Undiscovered Voices* planning committee, which has spent thousands of hours planning and plotting with no compensation – except the satisfaction of helping fellow writers and illustrators: **Rosie Best, Catherine Coe, Jenny Glencross, Simon James Green, Patrick Miller, Anne-Marie Perks, Loretta Schauer, Benjamin Scott and Tioka Tokedira**. You are truly an amazing team. We can't thank you enough for your dedication, creativity and professionalism. You are the unsung heroes of *Undiscovered Voices*.
- Thanks also to **Sandra Nickel** and **Mina Witteman** for helping with the EU submissions and **Bridget Marzo** for lending her expertise on the illustration selection process.
- Unending appreciation to **Natascha Biebow** and **Kathy Evans**, SCBWI Co-Regional Advisors for British Isles, for leading the region, supporting innovative projects and championing writers and illustrators.
- The esteemed judging panels so graciously shared their experience and expertise – as well as an incredible passion for children's and teen fiction writing and illustration.

#### UK JUDGING PANEL

**Chrissie Boehm**, Artful Doodlers

**Claire Cartey**, Holroyde Cartey

**Lauren Fortune**, Scholastic

**Andrea Kearney**, Bloomsbury Publishing

**Sarah Leonard**, Orchard Books

**Joanna Moul**, Skylark Literary Agency

**Polly Nolan**, The Greenhouse Literary Agency

**Gillie Russell**, Aitken Alexander Associates

**Hannah Sheppard**, DHH Literary Agency

**Kirsty Stansfield**, Nosy Crow

**Will Steele**, Usborne Books

**Nghiem Ta**, Walker Books

## EUROPEAN JUDGING PANEL

**Erzsi Deak**, Hen & Ink Literary Studio

**Clelia Gore**, Martin Literary Management

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

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

**Sara Grant and Sara O'Connor**

Co-Creators of *Undiscovered Voices*

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES: THE ILLUSTRATORS

For this anthology, artists were asked to illustrate a moment or scene from one of the following artwork briefs:

- **BRIEF 1:** Reimagine a scene from Kenneth Grahame's classic, *The Wind in the Willows*. We were looking for a fresh, modern and lively take on this riverside favourite.
- **BRIEF 2:** Illustrate a scene from a well-known myth from anywhere in the world. The scene had to include one or more human characters, plus a creature or animal. The scene could be set in ancient or modern times.
- **BRIEF 3:** Illustrate a scene to include three characters, Lily, Jack and Rose, who are thrown together in the school holidays. The illustrators chose from specific locations and situations to show their characters' personalities.

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



# LAURE ALLAIN

## A Riverside Picnic

### Illustrating Brief I

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Laure Allain is a Brussels-based illustrator and author. She has studied Dutch and English literature and linguistics and – more recently – graphic storytelling. In the past, she has worked as a researcher, editor and teacher. When she is not working, she is busy chasing after her toddler and her parakeet.

#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A perfectly framed world which provides narrative, decoration and a great perspective. The foreground details and style of draughtsmanship suit the brief of a modern interpretation.'

**Contact:** [laure\\_illustrations@icloud.com](mailto:laure_illustrations@icloud.com)

**Website:** [www.laureallain.com](http://www.laureallain.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# EMILY JONES

## Toad Car Washerwoman

### Illustrating Brief 1

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

When Emily isn't working as a design technician, she's in her studio painting and drawing comics. Emily has a degree in illustration for children's publishing and is determined to put it to good use. She was shortlisted for the 2017 Stratford Literary Festival/Salariya Children's Book Competition, so she's getting close.

#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'This image has quite a retro feel with nice line-work and draughtsmanship. The sense of action and energy is engaging. Love it.'

**Contact:** [emilydrawsandpaints@hotmail.com](mailto:emilydrawsandpaints@hotmail.com)

**Website:** [emilybobmandrawsandpaints.weebly.com](http://emilybobmandrawsandpaints.weebly.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# DEBORAH SHEEHY

## Everything Was Very Still Now – Mole in the Wild Wood

Illustrating Brief 1

### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Born in Glasgow, Deborah has lived in lands near and far, including the Philippines, India and Wales, before moving to the Scottish Isle of Bute, where she became a full-time artist in 2015. Her artwork is inspired by a love of stories and animals of all furs and feathers.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Although very dark and simply presented, this is an atmospheric and beautifully lit composition. The limited tones provide a wonderful dramatic tension and a great sense of the scale and mystery of the woods through soft and interesting mark-making.'

**Contact:** [hello@deborahsheehy.com](mailto:hello@deborahsheehy.com)

**Website:** [www.deborahsheehy.com](http://www.deborahsheehy.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# SANDY HORSLEY

## Badger's Study

### Illustrating Brief I

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sandy is a printmaker and illustrator who likes to combine traditional printmaking with digital techniques. Having recently graduated from the MA in Children's Book Illustration at Cambridge School of Art, Sandy is currently developing several picture book ideas. She lives in Suffolk and likes nothing better than inky fingernails.

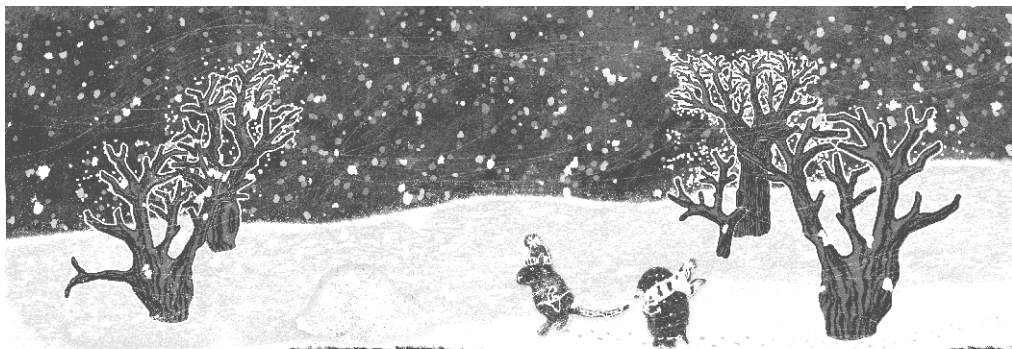
#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'We enjoyed the playful composition and the contrast between the interior and exterior worlds. Good use of black and white, with lovely lines and textures that give clarity and impact to the design, and the characters are appealing too. This has various layers of narrative to work through and discover.'

**Contact:** [sandyhorsley13@gmail.com](mailto:sandyhorsley13@gmail.com)

**Website:** [sandyhorsley.com](http://sandyhorsley.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)





# KATE READ

## Under the Yellow Moon

### Illustrating Brief 1

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Kate Read is an aspiring children's book illustrator living in Norfolk, UK. She loves stories, drawing and snipping paper, exploring colours, textures and shapes in the process. She lets the project dictate the direction of media, including collage and print-making.

#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A suitably atmospheric image which draws us in to a lovely, intimate central scene. Even with such loose mark-making, the surrounding world is believable.'

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

**Website:** [www.kateread.co.uk](http://www.kateread.co.uk)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# RACHEL LOVATT

## A Babbling Procession of the Best Stories in the World

Illustrating Brief 1

### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Rachel Lovatt is an illustrator based in the Peak District. Since completing her MA in Children's Book Illustration at the Cambridge School of Art, she has exhibited widely. Storytelling is at the heart of Rachel's practice, and she employs hand painting, drawing and collage techniques to create her work.

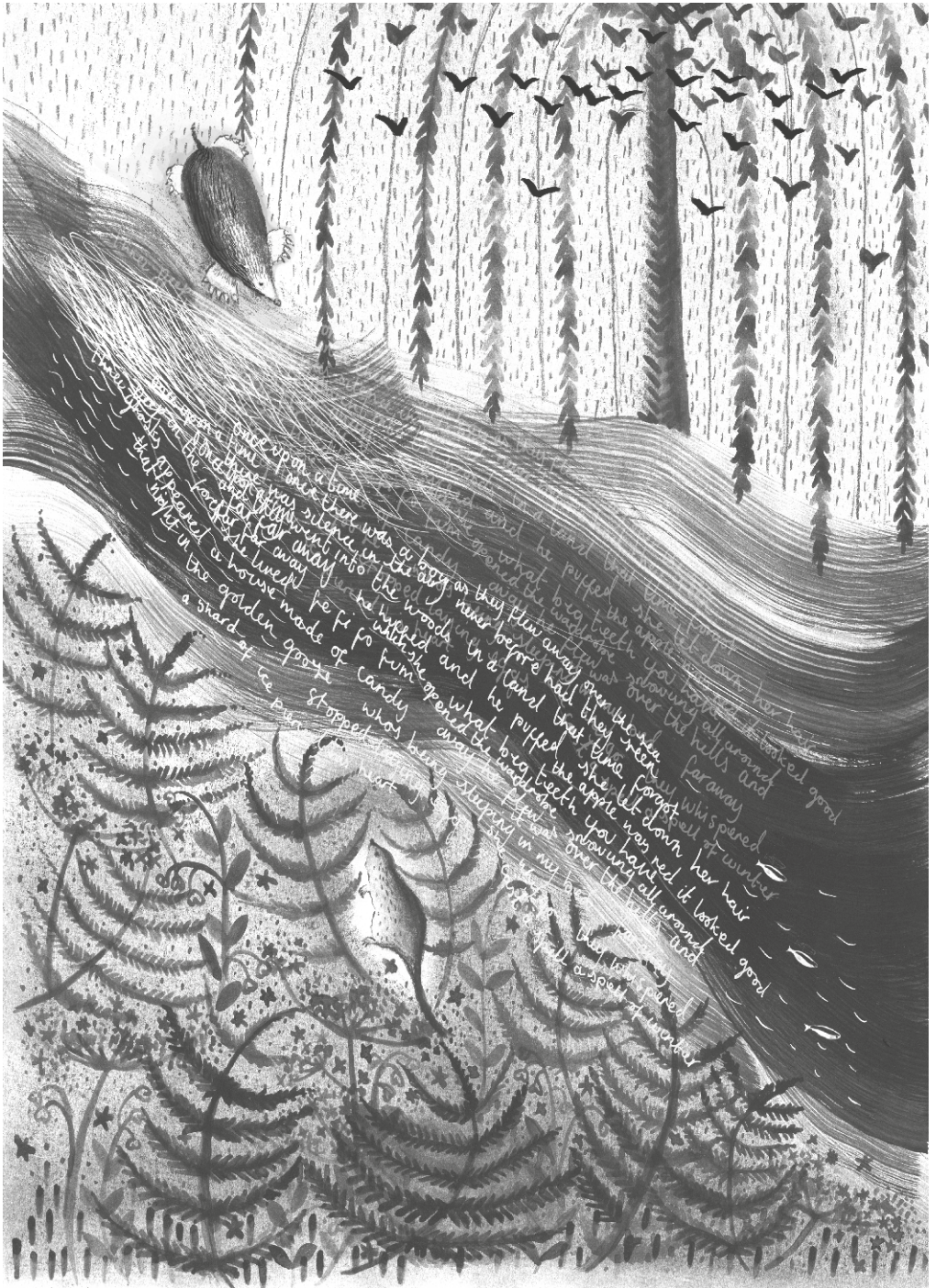
### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A fascinating image with a dynamic composition. The stories take you on a journey in themselves and the details along the way keep you enthralled.'

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

**Website:** [www.littlewolfillustration.com](http://www.littlewolfillustration.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# JACOB TURNER

## Drawing Excalibur

### Illustrating Brief 2

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Jacob seems destined to travel through life with the purpose of covering any available paper with drawings. To fund this expedition he has worked in stage design, storyboarding, sandwich-making, web design and teaching. His last decade has been spent in librarianship, where he spends his days surrounded by children's books.

#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A bold and inspiring use of positive and negative space. This is very engaging and, while seemingly simple, is packed with very necessary detail to convey the myth.'

**Contact:** [design@jacobturner.co.uk](mailto:design@jacobturner.co.uk)

**Website:** [www.jacobturner.co.uk](http://www.jacobturner.co.uk)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# JAMES CROSLAND-MILLS

## How He Got His Big Foot

### Illustrating Brief 2

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

James currently works as a natural history video editor, and has always wanted to pursue a career in illustration. He builds his portfolio in his free time, focusing on the natural world and science communication inspired by his degree in Zoology, and a strong affinity with animals and education.

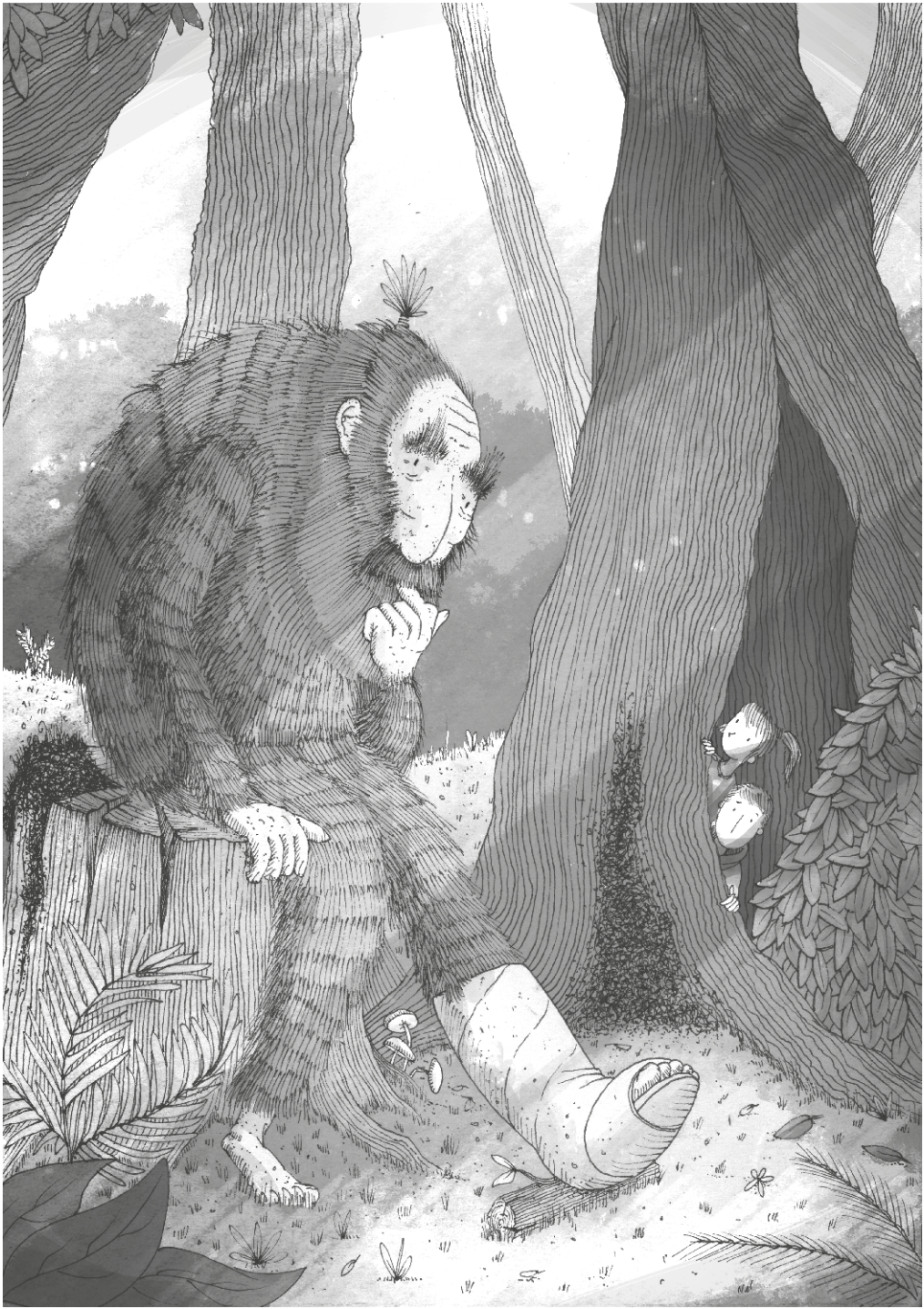
#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'This image has a great sense of light. The characterisation and the interplay between the characters is particularly successful and enjoyable. The world felt solid and rich, rendered with a lovely line style and sense of fun. This has a clear commercial sensibility.'

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

**Website:** [www.think-jcm.com](http://www.think-jcm.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)





# SALLY WALKER

## Pandora's Box

### Illustrating Brief 2

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Sally has a love of experimenting in the print room and combining with digital techniques to create her artwork. She loves creating shapes and textures and lets that lead her work. She's a recent MA Children's Book Illustration graduate from CSA and silver winner of the 2016 Golden Pinwheels Award.

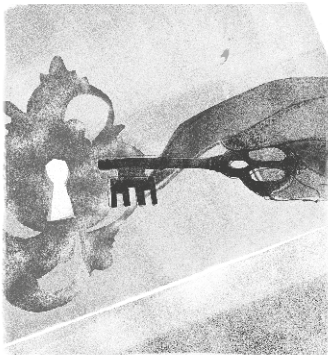
#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'A thorough representation of the myth; the viewer is presented with a clear narrative to follow. The layering and texture is beautiful, and it has a good sense of movement and pacing. It shows a great use of tone to highlight, focus and move the narrative on; for example, the key looks like a skull – a nice touch!'

**Contact:** [sallyanne\\_walker@hotmail.com](mailto:sallyanne_walker@hotmail.com)

**Website:** [www.sallywalkerillustration.com](http://www.sallywalkerillustration.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# MONIKA BAUM

## Nessie

### Illustrating Brief 2

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Monika is an illustrator living and working in Switzerland. Coming from a background in linguistics and corporate accounting, she is passionate about visual storytelling. She works in watercolours and digital media, and is interested in fantasy and adventure, as well as more traditional illustration subjects.

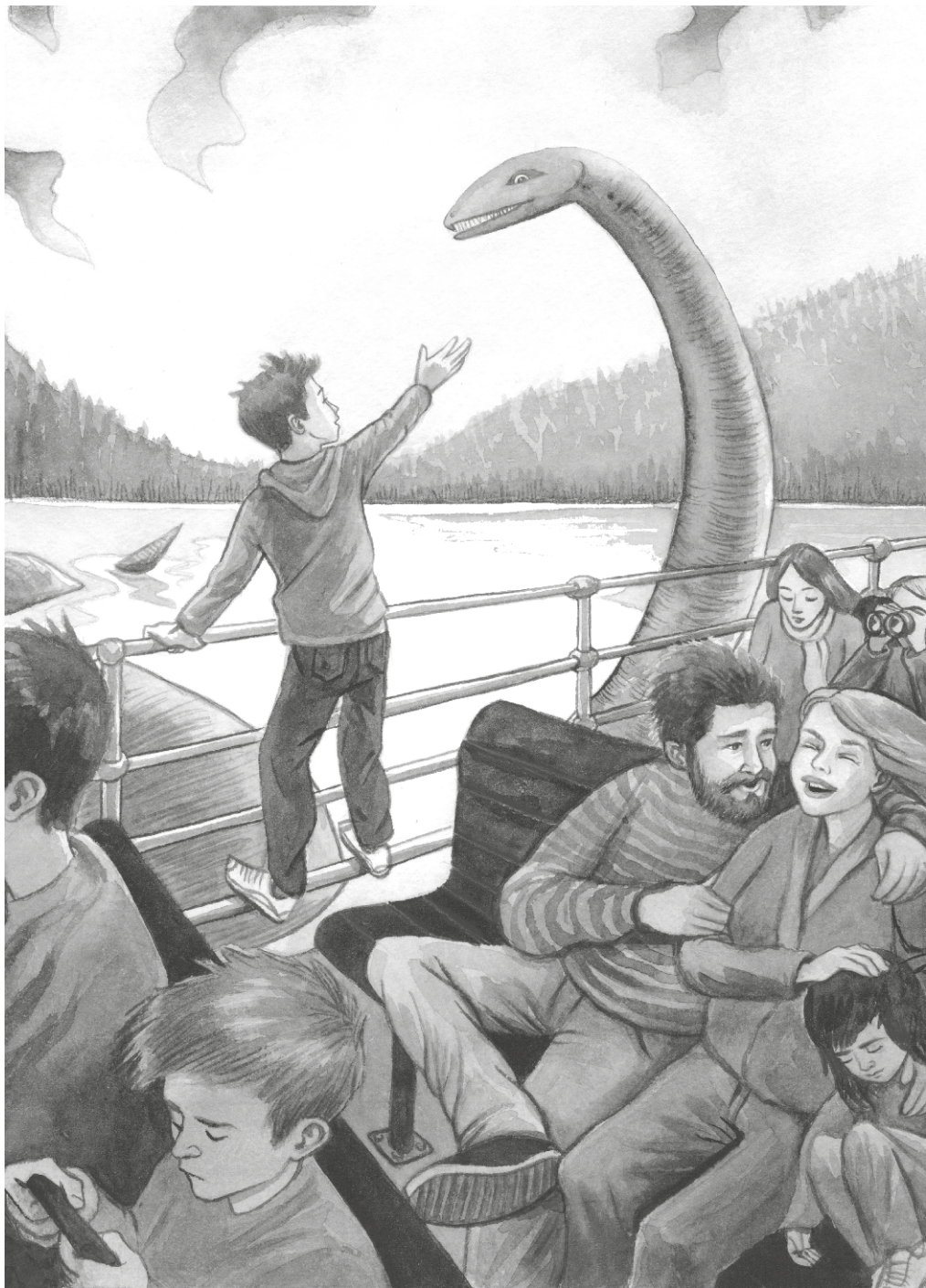
#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Realistic characters are rendered with confidence and quality. The characters felt alive, each with their own interests and motivations, and the real and fantastic elements were elegantly combined. The composition was well crafted, with a clear focal point and a strong sense of drama.'

**Contact:** [info@monbaum.com](mailto:info@monbaum.com)

**Website:** [www.monbaum.com](http://www.monbaum.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# JANET CATHERINE GIBSON PICKERING

## Pandora Finds Hope

### Illustrating Brief 2

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Janet's favourite aspects of teaching were introducing children to the wonders of art and storybooks; now she's retired, she is busy putting her own ideas on paper. Turtles, dolphins, spooky creatures and naughty children all bounce around, having a party in her imagination!

#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'An eye-capturing, arresting image. A simple and clever interpretation of the myth, it conveys so much emotion through very engaging lighting and technique. It pulls you in.'

**Contact:** [omgpmt247@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:omgpmt247@hotmail.co.uk)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# HANNAH MOSLEY

## Pookah and the Human Child

### Illustrating Brief 2

#### ILLUSTRATOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Hannah Mosley tells stories on paper and screen for small folk, and on skin for big folk. When not illustrating, writing or tattooing, she can be found up a trapeze, adventuring on bikes, or being a real-life wicked stepmother. She lives in Manchester, England.

#### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Top-quality draughtsmanship alongside dynamic composition. The use of tone gives focus to the central character and also provides a sense of danger. This world is full of things to discover and every element, from the characters to the foliage, felt authentic and served the picture as a whole. This piece would work well across foreign markets.'

**Contact:** [hello@hannahmosley.co.uk](mailto:hello@hannahmosley.co.uk)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)





# UNDISCOVERED VOICES: THE AUTHORS

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

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

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

# AISHA AND THE OMEGAS

By David Hall

## Chapter One

‘Good morning, Aisha,’ said the washing machine. ‘I hope you slept well.’

The washing machine had always been nice like that. Well, ever since Aisha’s mum had installed its voice interface. Aisha had actually asked for a puppy, but her mum had decided a talking washing machine was the next best thing. It wasn’t the next best thing. It wasn’t even close. You couldn’t stroke a washing machine. You couldn’t teach a washing machine tricks. And playing fetch with it had been a total disaster. But Aisha’s mum liked it because it kept her company while she tinkered with her inventions, and Aisha had somehow grown fond of the rinse-cycle monstrosity. She’d even started calling it Wanda.

‘Thanks, Wanda.’ Aisha took a seat at the kitchen table and stretched her back until it clicked. Her head still felt foggy, like there were wisps of sleep still fading. She scanned the kitchen in search of breakfast and noticed the toaster had changed. A faint green glow surrounded its base like a luminous ink spillage. ‘Don’t tell me the three-second toaster’s back,’ she groaned. ‘I thought the government confiscated it?’

Aisha’s mum was hunched over a circuit board in the corner of the kitchen, wearing that weird half-smile that meant she was really concentrating. Trails of smoke curled up from the grimy soldering iron clutched like a paintbrush in her hand. Inspiration must have struck her deep in the night again because she was still wearing her peach pyjamas and coils of springy hair poked out from beneath her hair cap. She’d probably been down here for hours. ‘They only took it away for testing,’

she said, without looking up from her soldering. ‘They declared the toast perfectly edible in the end.’

‘But what if it happens again? The whole...*explosion* thing?’

‘Oh, that was just a one-off. It’s all fixed now. And you know how the government can be these days.’

Aisha eyed the toaster warily. It might have made toast in three seconds, but it also might have destroyed half the country. Deciding it probably wasn’t worth the gamble, she grabbed some milk from the fridge and headed for the Coco Pops.

‘Good morning,’ Aisha’s dad announced, strolling into the kitchen so quietly the sudden sound of his voice made Aisha jump.

It might have been his tall, slender build that made his every step so silent, or the fact he didn’t like wearing shoes, not unless he absolutely had to – weddings, funerals, that sort of thing – but, realistically, it was all those years of training. All those hours of practice. He’d spent so long creeping and skulking and sleuthing through the shadows that moving with all the sound of a cloud across the sky had become second nature. He kissed Aisha’s mum on the cheek and made a beeline for the laundry basket.

Aisha watched him rummage through it and sighed. ‘Lost your phone again, Dad?’

‘No,’ he answered flatly. ‘Absolutely not.’

‘Really?’ Aisha ducked from a flying sock. ‘Where is it then?’

‘I don’t know,’ her dad admitted.

‘So you don’t know where it is, but it’s not lost?’

‘Exactly. It’s not lost.’ He gave up on the laundry basket and glanced around the kitchen with a puzzled frown. ‘It’s just locationally challenged.’

Aisha rolled her eyes. When it came to losing his phone, her dad was basically an expert. He just hadn’t gotten very good at admitting it yet. Aisha’s mum had even made an app for his tablet that could discover his phone’s location when it was switched off, silent or even twenty-feet underwater. It would have been the perfect app if he wasn’t too stubborn to actually use it.

Wanda trundled into the kitchen. As well as the ability to talk, Aisha’s mum had fixed Wanda with a set of treaded wheels like a small tank’s, so

they now had a washing machine that could wash stubborn stains at thirty degrees and storm enemy strongholds under heavy fire. ‘I will help you find your phone, Arthur,’ she announced. ‘I have detected three hundred and twelve possible locations so far.’

‘No, thank you, Wanda. That won’t be necessary.’

‘But I am here to help. I am here to serve.’

‘Yes, but you’re also blind as a bat.’

Wanda made a confused sort of bleep, but Aisha’s dad had a point. The washing machine could recognise voices and the sound of footfall throughout the house, but it couldn’t actually see. Aisha’s mum had planned to give Wanda some form of sight eventually, but it was one of many tasks on her to-do list. And that was a long list. It still had things on it like ‘Fix Aisha’s crib’.

‘I will assist your search nonetheless,’ said Wanda, undeterred. ‘Research suggests background noise can be helpful for focusing. Would you like a Colorado Thunderstorm, perhaps, or Tranquil Waves?’

‘I don’t want—’

‘Amazon Rainforest, you say? Excellent choice, Arthur.’

The sound of rain and chirping frogs broke through Wanda’s speakers. Aisha’s dad sank into his chair at the table. ‘I think I’ll just look for it later.’ He poured himself a bowl of Weetabix and peered across the table at Aisha. ‘I hope you’ve been revising for your test tonight, anyway, Aisha.’

Aisha moaned. She’d been hoping he’d forgotten. He hadn’t forgotten in three years but she was still hoping he’d forgotten. ‘Do we have to do it tonight, Dad? I wanted to go to volleyball.’

‘Volleyball?’ His nose wrinkled like he’d smelt something foul. ‘Why on earth would you want to go to volleyball?’

‘Because it’s fun...apparently.’

‘I see. Well, do you know what’s more fun than volleyball?’

‘What?’

‘Staying alive. There’s nothing more fun than that. And the best way of staying alive is remembering everything I teach you.’

‘But you teach me a million different things a day, Dad. How to turn the contents of my pencil case into a flare gun. What a phone sounds like when it’s been bugged. How a whiteboard eraser can become a lethal

weapon. How am I supposed to remember it all? Especially when half of it I'll never even use.'

'Everything I tell you is important, valuable information, Aisha. Information imperative for your everyday protection. Things that might one day save your life.'

'Last week you spent an hour teaching me the best stance to use for wrestling a crocodile.'

'Yes, well, crocodiles can be tricky.'

Aisha's hands flew up in exasperation. 'When will I ever run into a crocodile?'

'I'm not saying you will. I'm just saying it's important to be prepared.'

Aisha shook her head incredulously, yearning for some kind of escape from the madness that had become her life ever since her parents had retired from their jobs as secret agents. To think she'd actually been looking forward to it. She'd actually thought it would make life better. And yet somehow it had only made everything worse. Before Aisha could argue any further, the sound of footsteps crunching up the gravelled path snatched her dad's attention away.

And that was when the morning shattered.

Aisha's dad shot to his feet, his eyes flashing to the door, his spoon dropping back into the bowl with a plop that meant things had gotten serious. Aisha's mum spun. Even Wanda bleeped in alarm, cutting off her rainforest sounds in an instant.

'What's wrong?' she asked.

'Nothing's wrong,' said Aisha.

'But my insides are churning. Doesn't that mean I'm nervous?'

'No, Wanda. It means you're a washing machine. That's how you wash clothes, remember?'

'Quiet,' hissed Aisha's dad.

'Relax,' said Aisha. 'It's probably just—'

But it was too late. His eyes darted around, scanning, surveying, every muscle in his body tense like a coiled spring. His eyebrows were pressed together like commuters on the tube. He was back in secret agent mode. Back on a mission. Back saving the world. And Aisha's mum was right there with him, sliding over to the cutlery drawer to pull out a four-inch

Kershaw launch blade that glinted in the bright lights of the kitchen like an extravagant jewel. Apparently, it was expensive and dangerous and not the kind of thing you were supposed to use for slicing your ham and cheese toasts, which was something Aisha had discovered the hard way.

‘Seriously, guys. It’s probably just—’

‘Shh!’ hissed Aisha’s mum.

Outside, there was something that sounded like whistling. To Aisha it sounded a lot like the wedding march but her dad flinched like it was some secret code amongst the enemy and drew his gun from his holster. He stretched to peer through the window but scowled as if he couldn’t. He gestured to Aisha’s mum with his hands. Something that might have been: ‘Possible enemy at two o’clock. Could be armed. You protect the rear while I take point.’ But, as far as Aisha could tell, could just as easily have been: ‘Two geese. Possible bananas. I’ve got an itchy back. Doorknobs.’

Aisha’s mum nodded as though she understood perfectly.

Aisha’s dad pressed his ear against the door. ‘GET. YOUR. GUN,’ he mouthed at Aisha.

‘IT’S. ALL. THE. WAY. UP. STAIRS,’ she mouthed back at him.

‘I thought I told you to keep it on you at all times?’ he hissed.

‘Yeah, but I hate guns. And I’m not allowed guns to school, remember?’

‘Schools,’ her dad muttered disapprovingly. ‘Fine. Just get your backup.’

‘My what?’

‘YOUR. BACK. UP.’

Aisha gave him a what-the-hell-are-you-talking-about sort of shrug and he pointed under the kitchen table. Aisha reached underneath it and sighed. Guns. Knives. Throwing stars. There were more weapons strapped to the underside of the kitchen table than there were in Genghis Khan’s weapons tent. She felt around for a gun, tugged one out and cocked it, giving it a ‘Happy now?’ wave in her dad’s direction.

Aisha’s dad nodded, pointed towards the door handle and counted down with his hand. Aisha’s mum crept to his side and touched his back supportively, the knife clutched in her hand, ready to strike. Her dad’s countdown reached three, and the whistling stopped. It reached two, and there was a scratching sound beyond the door. It reached one. He gripped the door handle, wrapped his fingers around it.

Zero.

Aisha's dad yanked the door open and dived. Her mum pirouetted, spinning past the intruder to grip them from behind. Aisha's dad completed his forward roll and rose to the intruder's side, his gun flashing to their chest. Aisha's parents struck with the speed and precision of striking cobras. It was like they'd never retired. The intruder didn't stand a chance. They'd been captured in an instant, frozen and helpless and at the whim of Aisha's parents' every command before they'd even had a chance to blink.

Given that it was such an impressive, flawless manoeuvre, it really was a shame the intruder was actually just the postman.

The postman shrieked at a pitch Aisha never knew grown men could reach, his letters flying into the air like giant confetti. Aisha's mum tucked her knife behind her back like it had never even existed. 'Good morning, Rodger.' She tugged off her sleeping cap and buffed her hair. Her eyelashes fluttered. *Actually* fluttered. 'You're looking well today. I do love those shorts of yours. They do bring out your knees, don't they? And they're such lovely knees. Aren't they lovely knees, Arthur?'

Aisha's dad was lunging as though he'd been doing a spot of aerobics all along. His gun had completely disappeared. Aisha had a horrible feeling he'd lobbed it over the fence. 'Oh, absolutely. Brilliant knees, Rodger. Strong knees. I'd love a pair of knees like those. Bit, err, early for your round today?'

'I-I was trying to g-get an early start,' Rodger whimpered.

'Ah, great dedication. Very impressive. Isn't that impressive, Grace?'

'Remarkable,' Aisha's mum agreed.

The postman glanced between them. For a moment, it looked as though he might compose himself. Like he might laugh the whole thing off and turn it into a funny story for everyone at the local pub rather than a story for the nearest psychiatrist. But then Rodger's lip started to quiver. His hands started to tremble. His resolve crumbled like a biscuit dunked in tea and, with surprising nimbleness for a man of his portly stature, he bolted down the path, wailing like a troublesome toddler, leaving a trail of forlorn letters scattered in his wake.

Aisha's dad picked up some of the nearby letters and tossed them across the kitchen table as he shambled back inside. 'I suppose I should probably deliver those.'

‘And the rest.’

‘*Aisha*,’ her mum scolded. ‘Your dad was just trying to keep us safe.’

‘From what – paper cuts?’

Aisha’s dad shook his head ruefully. ‘I thought it was Rassler. Come for his revenge.’

Aisha groaned. ‘You can’t still be going on about him, Dad. Hasn’t it been years since anyone’s even heard about him? He might have been your nemesis once, but that was ages ago. You’re retired now. No one’s come after you. No one’s hunted you down. I think it’s safe to accept Rassler’s gone, and he’s not coming back.’

‘But there’ve been signs lately. There’s been these reports I’ve been looking into, about this business. And these people. People who can do things they shouldn’t be able to – ow!’

Aisha’s mum had wrapped her fingers around his shoulder with the warm smile of a loving wife and the iron grip of a disgruntled grizzly bear. ‘Let’s not scare our daughter unnecessarily, Arthur. She has enough to be scared of with exams, boys and me in the world. She doesn’t need you and your foolishness as well.’

Aisha’s dad looked like he was about to argue but seemed to think better of it. ‘Fine,’ he said, sagging. ‘But you have no idea how difficult that man was to get rid of.’

‘He was like a stubborn stain,’ Aisha’s mum agreed sympathetically.

‘I don’t care what he was like,’ said Aisha. ‘There’s no excuse for attacking the postman, okay? What if everyone at school finds out? They think I’m weird enough already!’

Aisha’s dad looked taken aback but then sat straighter, prodding the table as if to emphasise his point. ‘What people think of you isn’t more important than your safety, Aisha. Nothing in the world is more important than that.’

‘It is when there’s no real danger, Dad. You don’t work for the Agency any more. Neither does Mum. No one’s coming after us. No one’s attacking us. No one cares about us, okay?’ She flew from her chair, knocking it to the floor. She stomped across the kitchen to grab her schoolbag. ‘You’re finally normal. *We’re* finally normal. Why can’t we just *act* like we’re normal for a change?’



Aisha's parents looked hurt. Aisha probably should have felt guilty, but a feeling that had been welling up inside of her for a long time – probably longer than she'd realised – had erupted. She wanted to punch something and pull out her hair and scream at the world all at once.

In the end, she did a strange sort of frustrated body shake and slammed the front door shut behind her. She stormed up the path, careful not to trample on any of the forlorn letters, blood throbbing in her ears. She was angrier than she'd realised. But there'd been too many moments like this. Too many cringe-worthy memories. Too many times her parents had embarrassed her, made her feel so *weird* when her life was unusual enough already. With a frustrated breath, Aisha shoved in her earphones, turned up her music as loud as it would go and began her walk to school, ignoring the calls of her parents at the door.

Which was a shame.

Because by the time Aisha got home from school that day they would be gone.

## **Chapter Two**

'What's up with you?' asked Harry, struggling to keep up with Aisha's long strides as they made their way home after school.

Aisha hadn't even realised she'd been walking so fast. 'Nothing,' she said, slowing down.

'You sure?'

'Yeah,' she answered. 'I'm fine.'

She was only half lying. After everything that had happened that morning, it had actually been a decent day at school. They'd had a substitute teacher in Maths and in English they'd watched the movie version of *Romeo and Juliet*, which meant Aisha had been able to sneak in a ten-minute nap. One of the girls in Science had even invited Aisha to her birthday sleepover next weekend. Aisha's parents wouldn't have let her go – not without a three-generation background check, and they took months – but Aisha was still glad to be invited. If things kept going the way they were, she might even find a new best friend. Hopefully one that wasn't a washing machine. That would have been nice. But still, despite

the decent day, Aisha had shoved everything into her bag the instant the bell rang and raced out of the room like it was about to explode. As much as she hated to admit it, she was desperate to get home so she could make things right with her parents.

‘My dad reckons when a girl says she’s fine she’s usually not,’ said Harry, eyeing her suspiciously. He was shorter than Aisha, with bright eyes, soft cheeks and blond hair cut short at the sides but so long and curly on top it was a lot like the Great Wall of China in the sense that it was enormous and impenetrable and definitely not the kind of thing that belonged on somebody’s head.

‘Oh, yeah?’ said Aisha. ‘Didn’t your dad also reckon the best way to deal with bullies was to be nice to them?’

‘Yeah.’

‘And how did that go, again, when you gave that lemon sponge to Elliott Reese?’

‘He, err...he buried my face in it. And then he chucked it at me. And then he kicked me in the shin.’

‘So I guess your dad’s not right about everything then?’

‘I guess not,’ Harry admitted.

Aisha flashed him a smug smile, and they turned off the main road, walking onto Culvert Lane instead. The trees from Hawsham Park stooped over the pavement, their autumn leaves already trodden into the concrete like a carpet of crumpled paper.

‘It was just banter, though,’ Harry continued. ‘Elliott’s not a real bully.’

‘Doesn’t he take your lunch money every day?’

‘Yeah, but I like giving him my lunch money.’

‘Why?’

‘Because it stops him beating me up.’

Aisha rolled her eyes. ‘That means he’s a real bully, Harry.’

Harry had walked home with Aisha almost every day since she’d stopped Elliott messing with him in front of what felt like half the school. Well, she’d tried to. She had been just about to serve Elliott a considerable slice of karma pie when she’d noticed just how many people were watching. And then she’d noticed all the people filming. And then she’d made herself look like a total idiot by backing down completely. The thought of it still

made her cringe, but it was the only choice she'd had. If everyone saw how she could really fight, they'd probably start asking questions. All those videos might have ended up on YouTube. If someone found out about her parents she'd be in massive trouble. Her parents would be in even bigger trouble with the Agency. They'd probably have to move again.

'Okay,' said Harry. 'Maybe. But it's better to have bad friends than no friends at all, right?'

'I'm pretty sure it's better to have no friends.'

'Is that why you haven't got any friends?'

Aisha scowled at him.

'Just wondering.'

'I'm new to the school, okay?'

'Yeah, like four months ago. I'm pretty sure that excuse runs out after the first month.'

After they'd passed the park they turned onto Aisha's road. Harry grabbed an energy drink from the corner shop and gulped it down so quickly he'd finished it by the time they reached Aisha's house. Usually, they stopped there to say goodbye and agree a time to meet in the morning, but this time Aisha stopped because she saw the broken window.

That was when she realised something was wrong.

'What is it?' asked Harry, after chucking his crumpled can into the neighbour's bin.

'My kitchen window.'

'What about it?'

'It's broken.'

'Oh.'

'It's not supposed to be broken.'

'Oh.'

'It wasn't broken when I left this morning.'

'*Oh,*' said Harry, finally sounding like he understood why this might have been a problem. 'You reckon someone's broken in, trying to steal something?'

Aisha chewed at her lip. A stream of scenarios played out in her head. Most of them made someone breaking in and trying to steal something seem like a good thing.

‘Aisha?’

Aisha left Harry standing there. She was at the front door in seconds. Where the lock, well, one of the locks – her dad had about a million – should have been, the wood was splintered. One of the bolts was on the floor. The door itself was ajar. Aisha took a moment to compose herself before pushing it open. It swung with a painful creak.

‘Hello?’

She inched inside. Usually, the house was alive with the sound of her mum’s tinkering, her dad making dinner in the kitchen and Wanda clunking around, bleeping frustratedly whenever she bumped into something she couldn’t see. But now there was nothing. Only silence. Thick and heavy like oil in the air, it sent a wave of goosebumps prickling down Aisha’s spine.

‘Mum?’ she called out. ‘Dad?’

The silence only seemed to grow. She crept through the hallway and poked her head into the front room, but it was empty. So was her mum’s dusty workshop built into the basement. It was when she reached the kitchen and saw what lay inside that her gut clenched and curled like something protecting itself from assault.

Chairs were toppled. Her mum’s soldering equipment from this morning – the iron, the circuit boards and the components – were all strewn across the counters, as though they’d been flung across the room. The kitchen table was on its side, some of the guns and tasers and weapons underneath it scattered across the floor. Fragments of smashed plates dappled the floor like pieces of some ceramic jigsaw. A strange canister Aisha had never seen before caught her eye, lying against a leg of the kitchen table. There was another one beneath the fridge. Wanda was turned-off, back in her usual corner, but there was a dent in her casing. A putrid scent clung to the air. Something acrid like bleach. Something that turned Aisha’s stomach, made it difficult to breathe. But that might have just been because the kitchen looked torn apart, like some wild beast had wandered inside and ravaged it enraged. It might have been because her parents were nowhere to be seen.

‘Aisha, what the hell’s—’ Harry’s mouth hung open the instant he stepped into the kitchen. He stared at the weapons, glanced at Aisha then

stared at the weapons again. Eventually, he found his voice. 'Aisha, why do I get the feeling your parents aren't landscape gardeners like you said they were?'

Aisha pushed past him and barrelled up the stairs. 'Dad?' she cried. 'Mum?' She checked her parents' bedroom, her own room, the bathroom. She checked all the rooms in the house then sped outside to check the garden too but it didn't matter. Her parents weren't there. They weren't anywhere.

They were gone.

She yanked out her phone, tried to call them. Her mum's phone rang out. Her dad's didn't ring at all. It must have been off. Maybe dead. Maybe he still hadn't found it. Aisha tried again and again but she couldn't get through. She took a moment to steel herself, sucking in a deep, shaky breath, then found another number in her contacts.

'You phoning the police?' asked Harry.

Aisha shook her head.

## **AISHA AND THE OMEGAS** by David Hall

### **SYNOPSIS**

Twelve-year-old Aisha couldn't think of anything worse than following in the footsteps of her retired secret agent parents. She just wants to be normal. But when they're kidnapped by Rassler, her dad's former nemesis, Aisha's forced to become the super spy she's never wanted to become in order to save them from being turned into Omegas, Rassler's army of brainwashed super soldiers rumoured to be gifted with impossible abilities.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

David lives in the Midlands. Specifically, without being smart enough to buy a bookcase, beneath a wall of books so large Jon Snow keeps trying to defend it. When he's not reading or writing, he enjoys football, poker and running. Mostly away from writing synopses but sometimes just for fun.

### **JUDGES' COMMENTS**

'Great first line – the washing machine wishing Aisha good morning. Really engaging and fun – my attention is hooked from the start. Aisha's parents being retired secret agents is a fun and commercial concept – and the prose style is both dynamic and polished.'

'The opening is wonderful: original, funny and arresting. The humour throughout the extract is handled really well. I like the way the author has captured Aisha's embarrassment about her parents, but also her love for them. The description of Aisha standing up to the bully at school tells the reader so much vital information and gives great insight into her character.'

'I like the premise of Aisha who just wants to be a normal kid in a house with eccentric scientist parents – and a robot washing machine. Nice pace and could be a great mix of fun and scary.'

**Contact:** davidhall5@hotmail.co.uk

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# JEDEDIAH DREAMING RANSOME

By Annie Walmsley

## Chapter One

“Jedediah Dreaming Ransome! Son of John Digging Ransome! Grandson of Jerome Singing Ransome! One of God’s children but easy to mistake for the Devil’s! Time to stop your dreaming, son of mine, and start the feeding, son of mine.”

A pause now while she peers into the dawn’s half light. She’s like a wolf, all instinct and expert listening, and I swear she can hear the heart of me beating in the long grass. Just the same as she can hear the wind change and the eagle swoop.

“You better get those oxen fed, you hear me, Dreaming? Or I am liable to feed YOU to them for breakfast, all trussed up like a skinny chicken – no meat to speak of but a little bit of bone and some gristle round the backside.”

I run.

I always run when Mama calls but I’m grinning wide and fulsome. She always does that to me when she’s shouting. Her scary is a fine and funny thing. It’s the image of me all trussed up like a chicken...all trussed up but being no kind of sustenance whatsoever for those lumbering beasties; those huge, hard-skinned, tough-backed, breathing sons of monsters. You’d never want no truck with oxen if you didn’t need to. But they’re strong like great rivers and they can pull on the wagon for days on end.

And anyway, Mama says it matters how you treat each and every

creature and especially those you don't like. It doesn't stop me squishing spiders but it gives me the guilt.

I've been doing my dreaming. That's when I go off and be on my own and think a lot. It's not exactly dreaming, I don't suppose, but it's a close cousin. Kin. Truth is, things bother me and if I don't let them in, all around and upside down, it ain't no good. I'm likely to get sick if the thoughts get stuck. Like a gourd on a withered vine, Mama says, hanging on but only just. "Go into the long grasses," she says, "and find a way, Jedediah Dreaming Ransome. Son of mine. Find a way." And she watches me with the light grey of her wolf eyes.

This morning I had to creep out, only just dawn early, to scratch the itch. It's a thing that's getting to me more and more, although I'm trying to act like it's just my normal dreaming cos I don't want Mama to know. It's what happened that won't let me go. The past's like fire and flames to me and this morning's no exception, this itching early dawning that comes to me, whispering about death and dying. Asking questions about death and dying. How can death sneak up on a person in the night like it did for Granddaddy Singing Ransome, soft and welcome? And then how can it be hiding round the corner in a field one morning, dark and monstrous, like for Daddy Digging? My Daddy Digging. I don't know. I don't have no answers, but I have memories squirming like a sackful of rattlesnakes.

*Mama was doing her fine teatime shouting and, oftentimes, I liked this more than the supper itself...*

*"John Digging Ransome! Son of Granddaddy Singing Ransome! Though not in possession of anything like so sweet a voice as your father, more's the shame; more like a squawkey crow in a high wind on a winter's day, matter of fact. John Digging Ransome! Bring your big swinging spade home to Mama! Your beans is done just right and they is waiting sweet and steaming!"*

*But he didn't come.*

*Then even after the didn't-come minutes had puzzled Mama and were fast turning like buzzing flies into half an hour, one hour, two hours, too long; and the puzzling turned angry... "That Digging's gonna be sorry!" And then sad and wringing: "Digging can eat them beans cold, you know, even all shrivelled*



*up doesn't matter, it's still sustenance; he's done it before, you know, when he's away high up and overnighing...*

*But he didn't come.*

*The still isn't here and where can he be? Stretched out so thin Mama began to trip up on it. "Where's that Digging-shaped shadow across the door?" said she. "Where's that moping of an honest day's sweat? Where's those shirtsleeves he's pulling down ready for supper? That weather report? And that, what the soil's doing in them high fields? That soil so thin and measly, only Digging can tease a green shoot from it..." said she.*

*And as the missing grew tall as the room we were worrying in – and I was thinking that, in a minute, it's gonna bust right up through the roof – I had my own "Where's that?" question:*

*"Where's that swirl Mama up in big Digging arms that love earth and her, earth and her?"*

*But still he didn't come.*

*There was just a whole cloying clump of nothing. Only the air that was always there winding itself up into a tantrum, a door defying to open and Little Drawing Janey on the floor with her wax crayons.*

*And as that day wore on empty of John Digging, I picked it up from the floor. The picture she'd done. The long blue line on it was the horizon. It was the thing I saw every day stretching itself long and see-through and there was our little house with the chickens and pigs, so I knew straight away. The chickens and pigs was particularly the things I cared for and here they were just as real, Old Spotty with his big wet nose pushed into anything that might be good for his huge, hanging stomach and Madame le Cluck with her wings out chasing on anything that dared cross her ornery path. She was the scariest piece of pecking kit ever, scarier even than the big black cockerel who liked to think the mortgage on the place was his.*

*Little Janey's drawings could make you stop in your tracks with how she got to the heart of things and, with her being only little, it was a thing truly to be awed by. And on this day, I was hungrier than most for some studying diversion. This is why it took a while for my eyes to slide up the page. In the top corner, there was a tree. I'd seen that tree over and beyond in the high, far field. I'd climbed it sometimes. It was easy to climb on account of its long, sweepy branches and there was a good view from the top: all across the valley with its belly full of river. But that tree had never seemed like this, it'd never seemed so*

*huge and old and gnarly as Little Drawing Janey had made it. Here, it was a thing to fear with its branches stretched dark and grasping, half across the page.*

*I was wondering how that little gift of a girl would conjure such a demon, I was studying hard on that tree, when I saw it. There, in amongst its tangle and darkness, in amongst its rat king branches, was the figure of a man and he was dangling from a rope. I just couldn't figure it out; especially why that man dangling from a rope should have Daddy Digging's boots on.*

## **Chapter Two**

I'm still asking myself how the heck that little sister of mine knows this stuff. It's like her dreaming's done with crayons. I don't even know if she knows what she does. It's a gift, but I'm worrying also that it's a curse, especially in present company that don't stand no thing other than itself. That same picture's folded small and secret in my pocket as I run through the swishing grasses to the oxen Mama's been calling about.

They give me a "Where you been at?" kind of look and make a lot of snorting and huffing noises. Righteous indignation, Mama would call it. She doesn't like nobody, man nor beast nor bird, going hungry – although she is herself skinny as a string bean cut in half. Too busy making sure everyone else is fed, I guess. That means me and Little Drawing Janey and, in the days before, Daddy Digging. Of course. Must remember the big plates for Daddy Digging's supper loaded high and lovely. Must remember. How his eating meant stories of birds and clouds and snakes. Must remember also all the chickens and the pigs. Old Spotty and Madame le Cluck. They're all gone since we left the farm so I have to keep them here with my dreaming.

And anyhow, now we have the dogs. Mama's busy collecting as many as she can. She's on number three, her third skinny stray dog, and that was the last time I counted which was only this morning so there may well be a number four by now. They seem happy to run along behind the wagon as long as Mama's in their sights. I don't even know how they find her out in this wilderness, this prairie place of endless light and shadow. I don't even know where they come from, but they do.

Anyway – you needn't look at me like that, I say to the oxen with

their needling eyes. I am here and you will get your mushes soon enough. Sometimes, I think you two do eat better than some of the children here cos Mama's leftovers is like another person's firsts. Like, for example, today, you lumbering beasties; you have corn fritters on the menu, thank you very much and that stew that gets straight to the heart of you and makes you glad to be alive with teeth to chew on it. Yep. I know it's good, you munching, crunching machines of things, thank you very much indeedy. Never so much as a thank you, mind, more a grunting sense of entitlement and something high and mighty in that slow, righteous chewing.

When I reach main camp, Mama's eyes rest on me and she's looking in my darkest corners for my deepest secrets...and she's gonna know I been dreaming Digging back. And the farm. But then she smiles like a wolf licking her young. It's only a sort of smile cos those old wide brimmed ones have gone these days. (I swear I'm gonna bring them back. I swear.) And I'm glad for anything and mostly, also, I'm glad I'm getting better at hiding from her cos, truth to tell, I'm still doing an awful lot of worrying about what's happened. The questions steal up on me and they go on and on asking about how things could've happened like they did because there's so much that doesn't fit. It's not like one piece of the jigsaw's missing, it's like there's no jigsaw at all, just a few scattered pieces of something. And also, along with the what-really-happened, there's the what's-going-to-happen and it's like a rat's gnawing on the dry bone of my brain.

"Sit down, young Jedediah Dreaming Ransome," she says, and her voice is honey, dripping and golden. The kind you eat too much of because you can't help it. "You feed those oxen good?" says she, and I nod. "Now you get your breakfast, my lovely dreaming boy. You been out there a long time, you must've built up some mighty hunger."

I do sit down beside the little fire and the dogs which are still three, but I'm expecting a fourth at any minute, and I eat some grits and wink at my little love of a sister. The others in the camp are doing pretty much the same, and there's John James scoffing like Old Spotty, and his wife, Sarah James, keeping their plates full. Son – Amos James – can't seem to get enough down in one go so he fills his mouth with two or three spoonfuls and his mama's beaming at him, readying to fill up his plate should it show the slightest sign of waning. Like father, like son. (Mama used to say I'm a

Little Digging, what with the thoughts and questions, and caring so much it makes everything opaque.) Amos James comes up for air and sees me looking and scowls and splutters and his mama follows his eyes and does the same. I see that thing in their look I'm used to and it doesn't bother me cos I can't let it – there's not much room in my mind what with the questions and the caring... That look they're doing, it's a kind of hate but it's hesitant like they're not sure which exact bit they hate the most. I give them time to make up their minds, but then Mama comes and sits by me and stares back with those light wolf eyes that say, "I ain't riled but if you wanna try, go ahead." They look away.

Old Obadiah's come over for some of Mama's grits. He's tilted his hat and sat down beside me and he's carefully filling his spoon just so. He's got that sort of tidying brain.

"Full of logic you are," says Mama to him, smiling at how he tips his spoon just so and there's no waste going on in that bowl. She likes that. "It's a necessary thing on the trail," says she and Obadiah grunts like he'd rather have a wrench in his hand than a word in his mouth. I think to myself that maybe he's the fourth stray I've been anticipating, and Mama sees me smile. She's saying, "We can't all be gifted dreamers like my Jedediah..." And although I love it when she says that, I also know by now it's not a particularly common occupation – dreaming – and it can make people give me the Amos James look and snigger like they know something secret. Obadiah just looks at me like I'm a wheel broke off a wagon he's been called on to fix.

The wagons are all in a circle because we need the animals safe and Pastor's always going about the hordes of savages hereabouts, the heathens, and how they're coming in to kill and rape and steal in a minute, so better keep that circle tight closed. It's a good camp though. I'd like to stay a while longer cos I've found the perfect dreaming patch over beyond in the long grasses and there's the sky like a good memory that just goes on and on and never seems to get worn out. Not like me. Truth to tell, there's something inside me that's been worn over and over like an old shirt and now it's fraying. I think it's the sad. Also it's a lot of energy needed for my dreaming and, along with that, I'm like one of those damn stray dogs with my watching eye on Mama. I'm seeing how her smiles shrink and

I'm hearing how her words are sort of flattening out, like that long prairie behind us.

And that ain't Mama – or only her shadow and not her substance. Oh Lord, her substance brings grown men weeping to their knees. I know cos I've seen it happen. It's something so rare and treasureful that I suspect only ever Daddy Digging was able to stand there and survive it.

“Just gonna change my shirt before the preaching starts,” I say to Mama, and she nods.

### Chapter Three

I'm pulling on my clean sermon-worthy shirt but I'm going slow because I need to put some order to the thinking stampeding all over me.

I pull on one sleeve.

I say to myself, *Daddy Digging's dead.*

I pull on the other sleeve.

I say to myself, *Little Drawing Janey's picture foretells his death.*

I button the front up.

I say to myself, *Mama's in trouble and it's a secret.*

I brush myself down.

Pastor Billy's preaching words come stomping through the camp with their big boots on and they make me jump.

“Nigh is the fiiiire! Niiiiiggghhhh I say!”

But they're not funny like Mama's, those shouting words. There's bullying in them and damnation anyway, whatever you might or might not have done. Mama's flurrying with her one best skirt and bonnet and Little Drawing Janey won't put away her crayons until Mama says, “You can have them after and a new one as well, come on, my lovely little dove.”

Me and Mama and Little Drawing Janey take our seats in the silent circle and Liza winks at us, on account of our being late and last, and Pastor's frowning our way with all his words ready and lined up like stones to throw – and that tickles Liza, that particular priestly impatience. She's about two hundred years old, with wrinkles that gouge her face like rivers through rock, but her eyes, her eyes are the lightest blue and if you only saw them, you'd think she was young as a spring dawning sky. She's always

been the same, even before when she lived in the next but one valley. When I look around, it's her I'm always seeking. She's one of the reasons we're here, and Mama says if Liza thinks it's a good idea, then it must be. "What more've we got to lose?" Liza said to Mama when I wasn't meaning to listen. Next day, we was up and packing for Pastor's Promised Land.

Pastor Billy is holding court, loud and fearsome in his long black robe; the robe of doom Liza calls it. "Comes out," says she, "with the fire and the brimstone talk. Someone's always in trouble for something, eh, Jed?" says she. "It's a god that seeks to punish that Pastor Billy serves," says she.

This particular morning, he's outdoing even himself – staring wide and hungry with his eyes and playing with a word that hisses like a snake in the grass.

*Covet-ous-ness.*

"Covetousness," says he, "is when you want something someone else got. You want it so bad, you can't focus on the good things you have."

He's staring at Mama now, his hungry eyes fixing on her face: her sharper-than-before cheekbones, the dark arch of her eyebrows, those grey wolf eyes, her mouth all wide and generous...and he's saying about another man's wife, about the wanting of another man's wife, and I'm starting to feel jumpy because there's things I want too.

I want his eyes off Mama.

"And the gravest sin of all is this..."

He stops and looks around and there's a dam breaking in his words and Liza raises her eyes to the sky in a "here we go" way and that makes me want to giggle but there's no time for giggling cos Pastor Billy's planning a deluge.

"Whhhhhhyyyyyy? Because it's the root of all the others, of lyyyyying and steeeeeaaaaaaling and muuuuuuordering, that's why! It is the root of avaricccccccceeeee!"

There's spit coming from his mouth and some of it lands on me. "The root, I say!"

So now I do a little giggle cos that *avarice* sounds like the baby snake in the tall grass chasing on its mama, *covet-ous-ness*. That and the spit that's falling's got the better of me. And Little Drawing Janey joins in and Liza's grinning at me and she's stretching her mouth wide and crazy, miming

with the word *avaaaaariiiiiccccceeeeeee*. I can't look at her any more cos the giggling will grow big, so I turn from her and do the thing that will stop any giggling feeling in its tracks. I study on Pastor's wife.

Her head's down – she's not the looking-up kind – but the dark ribbon on her hat is twitching like a leaf getting ready to fall and little wet spots darken the grey cotton of her smock. Looks to me like she's already drowning, even before the Pastor sends his deluge our way. Poor Mrs Pastor Billy what's her own name? Does anyone know her name? It's a sad thing to be missing a name, after all. Especially she; silent and small and drowning she.

After the sermon, there's the hand-shaking. Pastor Billy hardly touches mine and ignores Liza's old bird-thin one altogether. But he lingers long on Mama, turning her hand over and smoothing it. And I think, *That's what covetousness is*. Something in his palm catches the sun and makes me blink and then, when I look again, it's like there's going to be a tug of war with Mama being the rope and Pastor and Liza the opposing teams. What I want to do is chase on Pastor Billy and knock him down and hit him until my anger clears. I've wanted to do that for a while, so I smile instead – a smile that means I'm a bit daft and Pastor can do what the hell he likes to Mama because I won't notice a thing. I'm one step up from his wife in the food chain, me. Pastor sees my daft smile and sneers, loosening his grip.

But really, I'm watching Mama – like the stray dogs do – and she coughs, covering her mouth with one hand. The other hand is in her pocket. When it comes out, it leaves behind a shape. A shape like a small bottle. A vial.

## Chapter Four

“Come on,” says Liza, and we all head for the last wagon. It's tatty and rickety but it's hers so it's full of stuff Little Drawing Janey likes fiddling with. Me too, truth to tell. It's just like her house was. There's little wooden people with actual tiny clothes and bright scraps of pictures and even some books and a bowl from China and that's a long way away, longer even than the trail we're on. Dried herbs hang from the top and you can bang your head on them, if you're not careful, but they make it smell lemony and lovely. They must have all come from Liza's garden.

Liza steers Mama to sit down and it's quiet and Little Drawing Janey's playing with the little wooden people, talking to them and making them talk back, and I'm looking at a book with pictures to do with the sky, the sun, and stars. But all I really see is that shape in Mama's pocket and I just know it's a vial, but what's in it? I'm angry with it for being there and I'm angry with Mama for taking it from the Pastor cos now I'm thinking all sorts of things.

I can see from the corner of my eye that Liza's shuffling her Tarot cards ready for Mama to choose and I try not to hold my breath.

*Is it poison?*

Mama runs her finger along the jagged rim of the cards and stops at one. She frowns and then carries on. I turn a page. Little Drawing Janey's babble goes on with, "And yes, I told you what would happen..." and, "Put your clean shirt on!"

*Is it a sleeping potion?*

Mama stops again and this time she nods and takes the card and gives it to Liza. Liza turns it over and lays it down.

"Death," Liza says, and smiles gently, like a salve. "It's not always what it seems. Death can mean new beginnings. It can mean change... it's not always..."

"I know what death means," whispers Mama.

Mama draws another card. It's the Devil. I'm not sure Liza's ever seen such a bad reading cos she's stumped and that's the first time I've ever seen that happen.

Then there's another quiet. I look over and see that all the little wooden people are lying down and Little Drawing Janey's found some paper instead.

I edge over, trying to keep the sackful of rattlesnakes quiet.

But it's true, nonetheless.

Little Drawing Janey's done another picture.



## **JEDEDIAH DREAMING RANSOME by Annie Walmsley**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Jedediah is sure that his father wouldn't have killed himself, as Pastor Billy insists. He's also sure it's a mistake to leave their farm and follow the Pastor's elect band on the wagon trail to the Promised Land. But he has no choice if he is to help Mama and his little sister. He begins a journey that takes him not only across nineteenth-century America, but also to the furthest reaches of himself.

### **BIOGRAPHY**

Annie Walmsley has taught a variety of subjects including English, drama and EFL. She has always been an avid reader and writer and now spends as much time as she can writing. She resides in deepest, darkest Cornwall and has recently been published in the *Guardian*.

### **JUDGES' COMMENTS**

'*Jedediah Dreaming Ransome* has a gorgeous, rich, authentic voice that brilliantly evokes the Deep South.'

'A great, engaging first-person voice here – it's so distinctive, you're in Jedediah's head from the off. A lively and imaginative writing style.'

'Some of the writing here is terrific – especially some of the metaphors and similes. They make the whole thing fresh and original. The opening is intriguing as well.'

**Contact:** [annie.bv@btinternet.com](mailto:annie.bv@btinternet.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# SAFFRON SAPPHIRE AND THE BIG FAT INDIAN WEDDING OF THE YEAR

By Serena Patel

So, it's Friday the 13th and it's the weekend of the **BIG FAT** Indian wedding, of course bad stuff is going to happen. This is my life we're talking about – expect the unexpected, which usually involves something going wrong! If only I lived in a normal quiet house with a normal quiet family.

I'm at home today because of teacher training which basically means I get an extra day off to sit around and read my book in peace. Except I can't because my Auntie Bindi is home today as well. Right now her fists are clenched and her face is turning purple – I'm quite worried she might actually explode as she screams at the flower delivery man. “**No, no, no,** this is terrible! I said *pink* carnations. If I wanted *red* ones, I would have asked for *red* ones!”

This is already the third time she's sent the poor man back and he looks like he's going to cry. I bury my head in my book: *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking. (Dad says I should be reading “more appropriate books for girls my age”). I'm not sure what kind of books those are, but I like reading about time, space and numbers. I love numbers. They make sense, unlike people, especially the people in my family.)

The delivery man is apologising like his life depends on it. “I'm so sorry, madam. I just deliver the flowers, as I explained before. Perhaps you should ring the shop and tell them exactly what you wanted.”

“**I DID** tell them. It’s not rocket science is it? **Incompetent idiots!**” and with that she slams the door so hard it bounces back and hits her in the face.

“Aunty, maybe you should calm down. It’s not good for your health,” I say, looking up from my book to see her rubbing her nose. Mum says this to my dad all the time. He gets stressed out too – not by flowers but by his job as a lawyer for Bundi, Bandu and Bhaskar LLP. I’m not sure exactly what he does, but it seems to involve going all red in the face and shouting down the phone a lot. When I grow up I’m going to work in a lab where it’s clean and quiet and I don’t have to deal with people.

“This wedding is going to be a disaster, I tell you, a first-class disaster!” Aunty Bindi wails. She’s been speaking like this in a high-pitched voice ever since she started planning her wedding. **THE WEDDING OF THE YEAR**. The wedding that is happening **TOMORROW**. She’s marrying her “sweetie pie” (that’s what she calls him – **urgh!**). His real name is Vikram, except only his mum calls him that. Everyone else calls him Tony. I don’t really know why.

According to the grown-ups, a wedding is a really big deal, with flowers, frilly dresses and ridiculously large cakes with little people on top and expensive crystals round the edges, but it all seems totally unnecessary to me. Uncle Tony says there’s going to be a huge surprise on the big day, which he hasn’t told anyone about. I imagine it’s something completely over the top. The worst bit is that Aunty Bindi decided I should be a bridesmaid and I have to wear the most awful orange dress with a gold frill edge. I’d rather wear a lab coat but Mum said I’d better not suggest that.

“I’ll ring Tony. He’ll calm me down. He always knows what to say,” Aunty Bindi says as she taps on her phone with her bejewelled false nails – Aunty Bindi loves things that sparkle. She has sparkly bags, sparkly clothes, and she’s been talking about getting a sparkly pink car. I told her I am not getting in it with her. I sigh and try to get back into my book but the quiet doesn’t last very long.

“**Humpfh**, he’s not even answering. What else could he possibly have to do that’s more important than speaking to his sweetums?” she whines. “Do you realise the wedding is tomorrow? I’m having my mehndi done today and I’ve got a huge zit on my nose, all the relatives are arriving and the florist can’t even get the garlands right!”

She takes a deep breath for effect and flops onto our green corduroy sofa with the back of her hand on her head like a damsel in distress. Auntie Bindi really likes to be dramatic. I think that she thinks she's in a Bollywood movie sometimes. This one time she got really upset because her and Uncle Tony had an argument so she sat by the window sobbing and singing an Indian love song at the top of her voice. She was so loud and out of tune, the neighbours complained.

I want to ask her how the big zit on her nose affects having her mehndi done on her hands and feet but decide it's probably not the right time. Maybe she's starting a new trend – nose mehndi!

I pull out my notebook and make a quick list of the benefits of nose mehndi. I make lists a lot, it helps me think.

The benefits of nose mehndi:

- 1.** It would cover up the planet-sized spot that is emerging from Auntie Bindi's forehead. It looks a little like Saturn, or maybe Mars, and it's getting redder by the minute.
- 2.** Mehndi is a bit swirly twirly for me. I prefer right angles but I'm guessing that mehndi squares might look a bit odd. I'm sure it will look nice on Auntie Bindi though as she's a swirly twirly kind of person.
- 3.** If Auntie Bindi has mehndi on her nose it might draw attention away from the horrid orange and gold outfit they are making me wear because I'm the bridesmaid. (Honestly, the lab coat would look much better!)

I think about telling Auntie Bindi about my list but instead I say, "I'm sure it will all work out in the end." This is something else my mum says a lot, usually when everything is going wrong. Mum likes to see the positive in every situation. The rest of my family are completely bonkers and seem to attract trouble – sometimes I think I must have been adopted or beamed down by aliens.

As I picture myself as an alien baby in a lab coat, Mum appears from the kitchen. “What is all the noise about? Is everything okay, dear?” Mum calls everyone dear.

“It’s fine, Mum,” I say, rolling my eyes. Any sort of fuss makes me cringe.

“It is **NOT** fine! It’s all a disaster, Didi!”\* Aunty Bindi grabs my mum and starts to cry noisily into her shoulder.

“There, there, we can’t have the bride crying, can we?” Mum says, stroking her head gently whilst pushing a tissue towards her sister. She’s good at this making-it-better malarkey. I guess she’s had a lot of practice growing up with Aunty Bindi.

I shuffle in the armchair – I’m not good at this emotional stuff. It makes me feel all itchy and uncomfortable **PLUS** no one listens to what I think anyway. Grown-ups like to ruffle your hair and comment on how much you’ve grown but they don’t really care what you think about important stuff. They just want you to stay quiet and behave. Actually, I wish **THEY** would just **BEHAVE** like a **NORMAL** not crazy-bananas family. I mean, how difficult is it? Instead it’s always a drama and a commotion around here. I can’t stand it.

So, while Mum comforts Aunty Bindi, I jump up and say, “I’m just going to Milo’s.”

Mum waves with her free hand and says, “Don’t be long, sweetie. Remember the mehndi party is starting in a couple of hours.”

“Yes, Mum,” I answer even though I can’t think of anything worse than a house full of people **AND** having to talk to them for hours about swirly twirly mehndi.

As I get to the front door I see an envelope sticking halfway through the letterbox. I didn’t hear the postman – he usually comes later on in the day. I bend down and pick up the envelope. It’s a bit soggy from the rain and it doesn’t have a stamp on it. On the front someone’s scrawled “To the Bride”. I turn the envelope over and the soggy flap sort of slides open in my fingers, revealing part of the letter inside and one word jumps out at me: “ransom”!

---

\* Aunty Bindi calls Mum “Didi”, which is weird because her name is actually Gita, but they tell me it’s the Hindi word for sister. My Hindi is not great. I only know the bad words that Grandma taught me.

I quickly open the front door and look around. The street outside is empty. I go back inside and look at the envelope still in my hand. What do I do? Without really thinking, I pull the soggy note out of the envelope. The paper is thick and has a red “S” emblem embossed in the corner. I read it:

*To the bride,*

*We have your groom. If you ever want to see him again,  
bring a ransom of one million pounds to the statue in the  
park by 9am tomorrow morning.*

*Or else!!!!*

*From*

*The kidnappers*

I gasp. Someone has kidnapped Uncle Tony and on the day before the wedding! Is this some sort of joke?

I peek back into the living room at Aunty Bindi who is still blowing her nose (how much snot does she have in there?) and Mum who is still trying to reassure her that the wedding isn’t cursed and that the zit on her face doesn’t look that bad. I realise if I go in there now and show them this note, it will be like a **volcano** erupting. So, I decide to keep it to myself for now. It could just be a joke, although it’s not really that funny. Who would leave a note like that shoved through our letterbox?? I need to think. I need my best friend. Milo will know what to do.

And that’s how I end up running like lightning down the road to number 58.

## **Chapter Two**

Milo Moon is my best friend in the world. There are three things you should know about Milo:

1. He is the kindest person I know.
2. He loves animals – he loves them a **LOT**. This will sound weird but he thinks he can talk to them like Doctor Doolittle

or something. He says he has A.I. (Animal Intuition). I've never seen any evidence to support his theory, but Milo has been really, really sure he has it ever since he saw a programme on TV with David Attenborough talking about people who think they have it.

3. I do think he might actually be from another planet sometimes. He has bright orange hair and freckles on his nose and, like me, he doesn't really fit with the other kids at school.

I can hear shouting as I walk up the wonky front path to Milo's house. Weeds are pushing up through the cracks and I just about manage to sidestep the longest, slimiest worm I've ever seen.

**"Get it out! Get rid of it right now!"** I hear the voice of Mrs Moon, Milo's mum, through the open living room window.

Milo comes shooting out of the red front door and almost knocks me over. He's struggling to hold onto Yasmine, their very round ginger tabby cat, but she's squirming and hissing and looking like she's not very happy **AT ALL**.

"Jasmine brought home a dead mouse again," Milo explains over the head of the disgruntled cat.

"Well that's nothing new," I say, shrugging. "She's been doing that for years."

"She put it in my mum's bed," he continues.

"Oh," I say.

"Plus there was a bunch of dead bugs and one that was still crawling around."

"Eww!" I scrunch up my nose. "That's disgusting."

"Yes, Mum is not happy," says Milo. "She's threatening to take Yasmine to a shelter but I just can't let that happen. She's my best friend – apart from you, of course. We had a really good talk last night and she agreed with me that it's hard being ginger – people just don't get us, we look different, our hair is orange, but we still have feelings, you know? People don't realise but cats are very sensitive, loving creatures." He cuddles Yasmine the cat close to his face. She squirms and hisses but Milo seems not to notice.

I think it's time to change the subject and tell Milo about the **EMERGENCY WEDDING CRISIS**.

"Anyway, never mind all that – I need to show you something, something big. It's **TOP SECRET** so you can't tell anyone, promise?" I say.

"Big, like the biggest zoo in the world, San Diego Zoo?" asks Milo.

"Just promise, Milo. It's nothing to do with animals or the zoo," I snap.

"Oh, okay," he says, a bit disappointed, "I promise."

I drop my voice to a whisper. "Someone has kidnapped Uncle Tony and now they want a million pounds to get him back!"

"**One million pounds!**" Milo shouts.

"Shhhh! It's top secret! Auntie Bindi can't know. She's already in meltdown mode. I tell her this and she'll go totally nutty."

"Actually, she's already a bit of a walnut whip," says Milo. "So, what are you going to **DO**, Saff?"

But I really don't know the answer right now. The thing I do know is that I'm not showing my family. If I show them the note, they'll start squawking like chickens, running around bumping into each other, making things worse, and it'll really be a complete disaster then.

"I have to try to figure this out, Milo. It could just be a joke. I need to find out who sent it before I do anything else and before Auntie Bindi finds out and **TOTALLY FREAKS!** The wedding is tomorrow so we don't have much time. We need to examine the note for clues and make a list of suspects."

"Don't you have a magnifying glass at home? We used it for our biology project, remember?" Milo reminds me. "Let's go back to yours." He looks down at Yasmine the cat sternly and tells her, "We'll talk later. I think you should go and think about what you've done." Yasmine meows, jumps down, lands neatly on her paws and darts away round the back of house, probably to find more dead mice and bugs.

"Mum, I'm just going up the road with Saffron," Milo shouts into the house and pulls the front door closed with a click. Milo and I have lived exactly six doors away from each other on Jewel Street ever since I can remember. I trust him with my life. (Except when he's not really paying attention, which is actually quite a lot of the time, especially if there is an animal nearby. He even tried to have a conversation with a bumblebee



once. It kept boinking him on the nose. I think it was just short-sighted but Milo thought it was making friends and started making buzzing sounds, which seemed to make it quite angry.)

As we walk back up the road, with Milo chattering on about Yasmine the cat, I think about the ransom note and how it's very lucky that I'm the one who found it and I'm being very responsible and calm. I'm going to figure it all out and probably save the entire wedding, averting an **EMERGENCY WEDDING CRISIS!** I feel quite proud of myself but then I see a black beast of a car pulling up by my house and I slow right down. I shudder. It's them.

"Why are you walking so slowly all of a sudden?" Milo asks.

"Shhh, it's them!" I whisper loudly and grab Milo's arm, pulling him down to crouch behind a nearby car.

"Who's *them*?" Milo asks, pulling himself free of my grasp. "And can you let go of my jumper? Mum only bought it for me last week – she'll go mad if it's all stretched."

I let go of his sleeve but keep my hand on his arm. "My soon-to-be cousins," I say with another shudder. "**The evil twins!**"

Milo has never met the evil twins or he wouldn't be laughing right now. The evil twins are Mindy and Manny, Uncle Tony's kids from his first marriage and the meanest kids I know.

First to get out of the big black car is the chauffeur. (Uncle Tony is quite rich because he owns a chain of well-known phone shops and that's how he met my Auntie Bindi. She went in looking for a new phone and, being totally clueless, needed some help. Uncle Tony said it was love at first sight over the Samisungs, as he calls them. I hate when they talk all soppy.)

The chauffeur is called Mustaf and he's a giant – not an actual giant of course, that would be silly, but he's very tall. He wears a long black coat and a black turban. He has a thick bushy beard and the most impressive moustache I've ever seen. It actually curls up at the ends. I've never heard Mustaf speak but then I'm not sure I want to.

Mustaf opens the passenger door and I see a bony hand reaching for the door handle as Mindy steps down onto the pavement. She has sleek black hair parted in the middle which just about reveals her nose and mouth. I don't think I've ever seen her full face. She is dressed head to toe

in black: coat, dress, shoes – all black, like a vampire out of one of those shows she’s always watching. Mindy carries her pet dog Bella (which is named after some girl in a vampire movie) in a black shiny handbag under her arm. It’s skinny with pointy ears and, yes, you’ve guessed, it’s black. It’s also completely bald except for some tufty bits on its ears and tail. Bella’s head turns in my direction and for a terrifying moment I think she’s seen me but then she woofs a squeaky kind of woof and turns away.

“I bet that dog is wondering about quantum physics,” Milo whispers as we crouch behind the car. “I think she’d love that book you’re reading by Stephen Hawking.” He shuffles about to stretch his legs. “Why are we hiding behind a car, Saff? My legs are going numb. Can’t we just get up and go inside now?”

“No! You don’t know what they’re like,” I say. “Keep your voice down and stop wriggling.”

Right behind Mindy comes Manny, her brother. His hair is set into concrete spikes, probably with half a tub of gel. He wears thin, square-framed spectacles and is also dressed in black. He’s got his nose stuck to an iPad and almost trips over the curb as he steps out of the car.

When they have disappeared into the house, I breathe out and relax a little.

“Do you want to explain to me what just happened, Saffy?” Milo demands. In my head, I list the reasons I hate the evil twins:

1. They are **MEAN** with a capital T – oh wait, that’s Trouble with a capital T.
2. They have been doing evil stuff ever since Uncle Tony met Auntie Bindi two years ago, especially when they come to our house, which thankfully is not very often. They don’t seem very happy about the fact their dad is marrying my aunty. She doesn’t seem to notice and calls them her “sweet peas” (I sort of feel bad for them about that, but not really). Their mum left Uncle Tony when they were babies to become a Bollywood actress. I’ve seen her movies – they’re not very good.
3. Whenever I see used teabags and really smelly socks I shiver.

Like a proper quivery shiver. And that's because of what they did to me last Christmas. I don't like to talk about it.

I don't say any of this to Milo. Instead I say, "Well they're just not very nice people, Milo, trust me." And that's when I think that maybe it was **THEM** who wrote the ransom note.

"Milo!" I hiss, grabbing his arm again, but before I can get my words out I see someone else I don't want to see, and I know right then today is definitely a **BAD** day.

### Chapter Three

"Well **HELLO**, losers!" Cynthia Snoot, my arch-enemy from school, swaggers up to the back of the car, looking down her nose at us as if we're something she's found on her shoe. I didn't think I was the type of person to have an arch-enemy, but then I must just be unlucky like that.

"Quick, hide! No wait. She's seen us. Oh no! What do we do?" Milo panics.

Cynthia Snoot is the most hideous girl you could ever meet. I've made a list about that too:

1. She has very rich parents and makes sure everyone knows it.
2. She says her dad makes super-spy gadgets for the government, but I think he probably just makes something boring like loo roll.
3. She talks to everyone like they are a complete idiot.
4. She is very clever but extremely lazy, which is the reason we became **ARCH-ENEMIES**.

It all started because one day she cornered Milo and me in the playground, going on and on trying to get us to let her use our homework for presentation day in history class because she is too lazy to do it herself. Anyway, she wouldn't shut up and I just wanted to leave. I was getting all hot and itchy and then **IT** happened. I really didn't mean to knock her

down as I pushed past her to make a run for it. But I did and she fell over and everyone in school saw her **frilly pink pants!** It wasn't my fault that it happened. And it definitely wasn't my fault that she was wearing fancy pants. It was an accident!

Then everyone was laughing and pointing. I don't need to tell you how angry that made her. She went all red in the face and stormed off, vowing to "take me down".

"Hey there, weird girl," Cynthia snorts, flicking her shiny blonde hair as she walks up to us. "What are you doing lurking down there?"

"I *live* here," I reply as bravely as I can make my voice sound. "What are *you* doing lurking about?" I push the ransom note deeper into my pocket.

"And she's not weird," adds Milo unconvincingly. "She's perfectly normal actually. Even my cat Yasmine says so."

"Well I know what I know and **I KNOW** you are **WEIRD** and I'm going to make sure everyone else knows it too!" Cynthia does her best menacing smile. It makes my eye twitch.

I try to shrug like it's no big deal, but I wish she would just go away.

"I have my **EYE** on **YOU!**" Cynthia points two fingers at her own bright green eyes and then at me, flicks her hair again and strides away.

I wait till she's gone around the corner at the end of our road before I speak.

"Maybe we should add Cynthia to our list of kidnapping suspects," I joke.

"Nah, she'd never want to get her hands dirty," laughs Milo.

We get up from behind the car, walk up to my house and sit down on the steps outside. I get my notebook out and write:

### **LIST OF SUSPECTS**

1. Cynthia Snoot
2. Mindy and Manny
- 3.

I start to feel quite pleased with my very neat list, but then I hear the ear-splitting scream from inside my house.

**AAAARGHHH!!**

## SAFFRON SAPPHIRE AND THE BIG FAT INDIAN WEDDING OF THE YEAR by Serena Patel

### SYNOPSIS

Ten-year-old Saffron wants a quiet life, but she has a completely bonkers family who attract chaos at every turn. When Uncle Tony disappears the day before his wedding, bride-to-be Aunty Bindi goes into meltdown.

Pitted against evil twins (Uncle Tony's children from his first marriage), her arch-enemy, Cynthia Snoot, and a mischievous lobster that escaped from Granny Jas's cooking pot, Saffron has to find Uncle Tony and get everyone to the wedding on time.

### BIOGRAPHY

Serena Patel is a mum of two little munchkins. She writes in between school runs and a part-time day job for a law firm. She is working on her stories with the Golden Egg Academy and dreams of publication or unlimited supplies of chocolate, whichever comes first.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'*Saffron Sapphire and the Big Fat Indian Wedding* is a fun, engaging read with a strong voice – I'd pitch this as an Indian Louise Rennison!'

'Saffy is a great STEM girl protagonist, and I love the authentic Hindu family and wedding details. The friendship with Milo is nicely done, and the kidnapping plot sets us up for a lot of silly wedding hijinks.'

'This is an enjoyable read with some nice touches of humour. The author manages real insight into her characters in a very short space of time, which is difficult to do and admirably handled here.'

Contact: [serenakk@hotmail.com](mailto:serenakk@hotmail.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# RETURN TO THE WILD

By Nicola Penfold

## One

The glass tank is slippery in my hands and my cheeks burn red as I walk down the corridor from Ms Sato's room. Stick insects. They're such a cliché: the last remedy at this place – the final attempt to get someone to engage and quit whatever disruptive behaviour they're involved in.

Before they're sent to the Institute. That's the next step. The cliff edge. There's no going back from that.

There's a whisper around me – they're not going to forget this in a hurry: Juniper Green, getting the Sticks! But if I concentrate hard I can shut it out. I can shut them all out.

I grab my coat and bag and storm through them – through the door, and the playground, and then across the road that separates Secondary from Primary. I'm picking up Bear tonight. He'll be glad of the insects at least.

But Bear's not in the surge of noisy little bodies rushing out of his reception class. I catch Ms Arnold's eye quizzically, and she moves her head to the side to beckon me over.

'Where's Bear?'

'I'm sorry, Juniper. He's with Mr Abbot. You'll need to go and collect him.'

I gulp, and my eyes sting with held back tears. Not again. Not today.

She looks at the tank. 'Your turn for the phasmids, huh? Bear will be happy!'

I nod vacantly, and start to make my way through the classroom. Ms Arnold puts a hand on my shoulder as I pass. She was my teacher once too. One of the good ones.

Abbot's room is at the top of a tiny spiral staircase, up in the rafters of the school – a glass observatory from where he can survey not just the playground but the whole of the city, almost. I put the tank down, leaving it outside so as not to give him the satisfaction of seeing it, and I knock.

'Enter!'

Bear's curled in a plastic chair opposite Abbot. He's been crying. He's been crying a long time. I can't help it – I rush over, wrap my arms around his soft, neat little body.

'Bear. What's happened?'

Abbot clears his throat. 'If you'd care to take a seat, June.'

But Bear's not going to let me disentangle myself now, so I sit on the same chair, and he folds himself onto my lap, into me, his red eyes shut tight, his head pressed against my chest. He's shaking.

'I'm afraid it was another disruptive day for your brother.'

Abbott's frowning at me, and at Bear, who's completely turned away from him, his hands over his ears.

'OK,' I say warily, stroking Bear's long brown locks.

'I would much prefer to be talking to your grandmother. I've made several attempts to contact her this afternoon.'

'She'll be in the glasshouse. She never hears the phone in there.'

Abbott nods his disapproval. 'Yes, well I shall be here till 6pm this evening. I would appreciate it if you could get her to call before then. We have to come up with a plan of action. Your brother's becoming increasingly difficult to control.'

Use his name, I shout silently at him. It's just because he hates it, the same way he hated mine when I was here. I was forever June to him. Plain, ordinary June.

'What happened?' I ask instead.

'Your brother threw a chair. It could have hit another child.'

'It didn't?'

'That's not the point. He's wild.'

'He'd like to be,' and I laugh – some lame attempt to defuse the situation, in the way I know my grandmother would. She'd wade in and defend Bear, make a mockery of all their accusations. *'Well, of course he won't sit at a table all day and be quiet. He's a child. He needs to be outside more!'*

Abbott looks astonished – to him any defence is just impertinence.

‘Bear wouldn’t mean to hurt anyone,’ I go on, quieter now. ‘He’s a good kid.’ If you knew him, I think. If you could see him with the plants in our glasshouse, how gentle he can be.

‘I think it’s clear that when your brother’s temper flares up, all intentions go out of the window. Perhaps you’d care to see a clip of him this afternoon.’

‘No,’ I say quickly. ‘I don’t need to.’

But it’s already playing. On the white screen he has waiting on his desk: for the ritual shaming, the humiliating rerun of misdemeanours.

Bear’s a different person on that screen. Like a caged animal, if we even knew what that looked like any more.

‘I’d really rather not watch it.’

I can feel Bear’s heart racing – fast, fast, too fast. His fingers are white, from holding them against his ears so tightly, so not one decibel goes in. I want to pick him up and carry him away – from this sterile prison at the top of the school – but I’m not brave enough. I’ve had enough warnings lately about where rebellions lead.

I wish I could shut my eyes, like Bear has, so I don’t have to watch, but Abbott’s gaze doesn’t leave my face – he’s watching my reaction. He’s enjoying this.

On screen, Bear’s thrown a pot of pencil crayons across the floor – scattered them, like a broken rainbow. Ms Arnold’s come over, looking wary. She’s smiling, but cautiously. The other children have formed an arc: leering around him, they’re laughing, expectant. It’s all longed for drama for them.

‘Why did he do that? Bear loves drawing. Something must have provoked him.’

Abbott remains silent. I can hear the chant coming through the speakers, rising in the background: *‘Through the city storms an angry bear.’*

The on-screen Bear is bristling. If he were a bear, all the hairs on his body would be standing up.

‘*Shall we pick these up?*’ Ms Arnold is saying. She’s kneeling down to help him, but the chant behind her is getting louder:

*‘An angry bear, with his long brown hair. Send him back! Send him back! Send him back to the forest!’*



*'Class, please, quieten yourselves,'* Ms Arnold is pleading, but Bear's already starting to scream. Hands over his ears, he's opened his mouth as wide as he possibly can and he's screaming.

The children explode into laughter – they're pointing, and coming closer. Too close. It's not an arc any more, it's a circle, and Bear's in the middle of it screaming, lashing out.

'Please turn it off,' I say to Abbott beseechingly. The tears are coming now.

'This is the part, here,' he says dispassionately, his eyes not moving off my face. Clearly he knows the clip by heart.

And that's when Bear breaks free of me, and runs out and down the stairs. And I go after him – I have to – only just remembering to pick up the Sticks on my way out. So I never see Bear picking up that chair. I never see whether he meant to hurt anyone. I wouldn't blame him if he did.

## Two

'Bear, wait! Slow down.'

He's fast, my little brother. In a couple of years he's going to be way faster than me. He's over the playground already, onto the astro.

'Wait, Bear!' I call. 'I've got the phasmids! I'm bringing them home.' Despite himself, Bear starts to slow at that. 'The phasmids, Bear! Like you wanted!'

He turns around. His eyes are on the tank in my hands. The vivarium. The stick insects, for me to take care of, to concentrate on, to control my out-of-control imagination.

Bear starts to walk over. Warily, head down, for we both know Abbott will be watching.

'Wow, Ju. What did you do?' There's a gleam in his eye. He's amazed at me.

'I wrote something they didn't like.'

'I drew something they didn't like,' Bear says, proudly now.

'What did you draw?'

'Trees. In the city. What did you write?'

'Something about the ReWild. I tried to defend it. They didn't like it.'

‘But you got the Sticks, Ju!’ He’s peering into the top vent. ‘Have you seen them? How many are there?’

‘Five. But I’ve only seen one so far.’

‘Wow. What are you going to call them, Ju?’

‘We’ll decide tonight. You can help me choose.’

‘Can I?’ He looks at me, completely grateful and excited. I love this little boy so much it scares me.

‘Let’s get out of this place, Bear.’

‘Skedaddle?’ he says, looking up at me.

‘Scarper,’ I join in, and we ping back all the words we can for leaving as we wind our way through the city, to the edge of the estates, where our apartment is.

Bear’s amazing for five. He knows as many words as me. He just won’t write them down. The only mark-making he’ll do at school are his drawings, and then he’s always getting in trouble, for drawing the wrong things.

Trees in the city. Make believe. The education authority’s obsessed with keeping it real – in case some inner yearning is released, some innate longing for nature that they’ve managed to suppress all this time. That’s why Abbott won’t use our real names.

When our words for leave-taking are all used up – the fleeing and the bolting and the bunking and the disappearing – we’re almost there.

You can spot our building a mile off, because of the tall glass dome at the back. My grandmother calls it the Palm House. That is what it was once, for the old stately Victorian mansion house where we live. We have a tiny little apartment on the ground floor, at the entrance to the Palm House. Of course, there are no palms now. They’re banned species. They need far too much water. It’s mostly just cacti and sedums – the plants that require the least water of all and could leach nutrients out of a stone if they needed to. Still, they’re the best things about this city.

My grandmother’s a licensed plant keeper. People need to see green things. It’s a medical fact. So the keepers are tasked with growing safe species to be distributed through all the estates of the cities: into the schools and workplaces, into the hospitals and institutions. Our fix of green.

‘Annie Rose,’ I call, as we go into the glasshouse. She’d never stand for

being called Grandma or Nanny or anything like that. She's always wanted to be Annie Rose. 'We're home.'

'Juniper Berry! Bear Cub! Come find me!'

I'm thirteen now, but I still love this game. This must be the best place in the city for hide and seek: old, towering cacti, dense mats of sedums. We creep through them. Bear runs off ahead, silently. He's learnt to pad.

I know from my grandmother's squeal when he's found her. I see his tousle of hair, lifted up triumphantly – brown, against her beautiful silver head.

'How was your day, Bear?'

Bear pulls a face and kind of grunts and pulls away, and a shadow falls across Annie Rose's face.

'Not good, huh?'

'I hate school,' Bear says.

'You're home now,' and she reaches out to him.

'I'm going to be sick tomorrow.'

'No, Bear,' I say, pleading. 'It just makes it worse.' His absence record is already too long. It's even longer than mine. Any more days off and we'll have Educational Welfare coming round, asking questions.

'Come into the house,' Annie Rose says, gently. 'Let's make some tea.'

'No,' Bear says. 'I'm playing!' And he's off, through the plants – howling, squawking, hissing. Every animal noise he knows.

'You come then, Juniper,' Annie Rose says, putting out her arm for me to take. I try to manoeuvre the tank to one side, so she doesn't notice it, but it's wide, and the edge clangs against her. 'What's that?' she asks suspiciously, feeling the smooth surface with her hands.

There's no point lying. They always send an email, when anyone gets the Sticks, and though my grandmother's not great at checking that kind of stuff, even she has to sometimes, to get the new plant orders.

'They gave me the phasmids,' I say quietly.

'Oh, Juniper.' Annie Rose sounds sad, but there's not a hint of anger. This is what I love about her most. She's always on our side. It's unconditional.

### Three

My grandmother saves all her fury for Abbot. I'm not meant to be listening – after our sweet tea she tells me to go and play with Bear in the Palm House – but I can't help it. I wait, silently, outside the door.

'I was told it was because he drew a tree. Couldn't you have let that go? You have to understand, in Bear's world...'

'But did the chair actually hit anyone?'

'Well, what I'd like to know is what you are going to do to prevent this relentless victimisation? Juniper says his class have made up a rhyme about him.'

'He's only five!'

Later, Bear and I open up the tank together and search through the regulation leaves to find its occupants. Ms Sato was right. There are five. Only two of any significant size though. The other three are only a couple of centimetres across and I don't let Bear take them out. It's not that I think he'll hurt them – years of plant-tending with our grandmother have taught us both how to be careful – it's because I'm sure we'll lose them. That they'll quietly slip away and I'll have failed from the start at my redemptive project.

'This one looks fierce, Ju!' Bear says, his eyes shining, as he lets the largest insect of all climb onto his hand. 'Who shall he be?'

'How do you know it's a boy, Bear?' I tease.

'Cause he's so fierce!' Bear says.

'I think she's the queen of the Sticks,' I say. 'Queen Lady Jane Grey,' I pronounce, in a solemn voice, remembering a recent old history lesson.

Bear nods approvingly, before repeating my words. 'Queen Lady Jane Grey. Who's the other big one then?'

'He's for you to name.'

'I'm going to call him Phantom. 'Cause they're ghosts aren't they, the Sticks?'

'Yes,' I say. 'Phasmids, that's what it means – ghosts. They're so good at camouflaging themselves they can disappear. Who shall the little ones be?'

Bear frowns. 'I don't know, Ju. I don't reckon they look much like anyone yet.'

'Let's just call them Stick, Twig and Leaf for now.'

Bear smiles. ‘You’re funny, Ju,’ and he sits himself down on my lap, Queen Lady Jane Grey still crawling up his arm. ‘I’m sorry about school, Juniper,’ he says, in a quiet voice.

‘No, Bear,’ I say sadly. ‘You just had a bad day. I had a bad day too. Some days are like that.’

‘They say I’m wild. They say I should be sent back.’

‘They don’t know what they’re talking about,’ I say angrily. ‘They don’t have the slightest idea about the Wild.’

‘We do,’ Bear says conspiratorially.

‘A little,’ I say, sighing. ‘But we can’t talk about it at school can we?’

‘It’s our secret, Ju. Yours and mine and Annie Rose’s.’

‘And Mum’s,’ I whisper.

‘When will she come for us, Juniper?’

‘One of these days,’ I say, my voice breaking.

‘I’m fed up of waiting.’

I squeeze him tight. ‘Me too, Bear.’

‘Careful, Ju. You’ll crush Lady Jane!’ And he gets up and spins away from me. ‘Can I take her to the glasshouse? Show her round? It can be her kingdom!’

When Bear’s asleep, I walk through the glasshouse alone – row by row, checking for signs of disease. It’s my evening ritual.

At the furthest end from the house, the tallest plants we have are stacked together, close together. Too close really – it can make them prone to disease, to blight and mildew, to be so confined. But they’re our screen, our camouflage. We don’t want to see what they’re hiding.

For the Palm House is right on the edge of the Buffer Zone: a three mile wide stretch of rocks and gravel drenched in herbicide and insecticide. Nothing could survive there.

Sometimes I look out though. There’s a place where it’s easy to get behind one of the tall cacti plants – a little space, where you can be right up against the glass. I don’t allow myself to look at the Buffer, I only look beyond. Right to the horizon, where I swear I can see the beginning of green. That’s where the Wild begins. That’s where Bear comes from.

He was almost two when Mum sent him. We don’t think she brought him herself, for Annie Rose says the note wasn’t in her handwriting, though it had her name at the bottom. It was only a few lines.

*Dear Mum,*

*This is Bear. He's for Juniper.  
Take care of him, and my Juniper Berry.*

*Love always, Marian.*

This tatty page torn from some notebook somewhere, it's the most precious thing I own. Apart from Bear himself of course. And he's not really mine, not ours, despite what we like to think. Bear's his own person. And he's just lent to us, from the Wild. We know someday he's got to go back. As much as this breaks our hearts, we know it. Maybe that's why Annie Rose and I both ignore so much of what his school tells us, when they say that he won't sit down to be taught, that he won't form letters or write numbers or even draw anything they want him to draw. We don't want him taming.

Annie Rose says babies develop according to their environment. That's one of the most incredible things about being human: how adaptable we are when we're little. Those first formative months. That's why they can stand living here, all of them. Nature has been banned from the cities, to keep the ticks out, to keep them safe, and they hardly mind at all, because they grew up in this grey, concrete jungle. They're thriving. It's positively boom-time in this city, and my grandmother's little plants are the only bit of green they need.

And, equally, that's why Bear hates it so much. Because when he was little, his brain grew for being out there. He got used to trees and flowers and animals. And even though he says he can't remember any of that, this whole city to him must be like one big cage. One huge pristine prison he can't break out of.

I don't have his excuse, but I hate it too.

I have this dream that when Bear goes back, when he makes his bid for freedom and goes back into the Wild, I'll go with him. And even when the ticks bite and the Lyme disease takes hold and I start to die, I won't mind, because just for those days or weeks I'll have experienced it – I'll know what it's like to be free.

**Four**

In the night, Bear comes into my bed. He's half-asleep, rubbing his eyes. Usually I go straight back to my dreams, but tonight I can't. I'm worried about Bear, but I'm worried about me too.

Ms Sato says I've become disconnected – that my attention's dropped at school, along with my grades. That's why she gave me the Sticks. She says it's the last thing she can do. It's ironic really, that the last intervention of all is one you'd actually want, if it didn't mean you'd already had your last warning.

'Your teachers are all really concerned, Juniper. They don't understand what's happening to you!'

'It's not one thing,' I had started to say, but I'd stopped there, because how could I begin to explain? It's not one thing, because it's everything. Everything's just gone on too long. Each long day at school like the one before, and the one before that. Everything regulation. Everything the same.

When it's cold, they turn the heating up. When it's hot, they put the air con on. When it's dark, all the city's lights are put on to make it exactly as bright as the day before, for the exact same period of time. Until switch off: 8pm.

I know it'll be autumn soon, because it's the end of September, and I'm four weeks into the start of year 8, but there are no leaves to colour and fall, and in our crowded, clean, future-proofed city, the cold never really penetrates too much. The breaks go up if it's windy, the canopies if it rains. We really have got everything sussed.

And every morning I'm waking up – from my dreams of an altogether different type of canopy, of branches and leaves – and I think I can't stand it any more. Another day in this city.

Then I think of Annie Rose, and the hard place inside me softens a little. I think of the lines on her face, like a map. Worry lines. She's getting too old for this.

But Annie Rose was weird last night, after that phone call to Abbot. She didn't even want me to show her the Sticks. Bear said it was because she can't see them – she's so blind now she can only make out shadows – but I know that's not what it is. Annie Rose doesn't need to see to appreciate things. Her hands are magic, and I was sure she'd want to feel those living

creatures on them, crawling over her. I was sure that would appeal to her almost as much as Bear.

And then she said this really strange thing. She asked if school had ever mentioned a blood test, said I mustn't ever let them take my blood. Even if it meant pretending to faint, or running away, or fighting them off. Whatever it took. They can't take my blood.

And I must not defend the ReWild again. If it comes up in class, I'm to go along with the official view: that it was a terrorist act by extreme conservationists; a selfish and naive move to disconnect the human species from nature, but one that humans have emerged triumphant from. That we have found ways to keep nature at bay so our cities can flourish (I mean they actually use that word!), and only the ReWilders – the people who actually cared about nature in the first place – lost out. They shot themselves in the foot, because they made the Wild dangerous for themselves too.

But I know the truth. I know it wasn't terrorism. I know the scale of the sacrifice. The Wild was dying and the ReWilders engineered a way to save it. To bring it back from the brink. So it could regrow, without us.

Humans couldn't be part of the plan, of course we couldn't. We'd had too many chances already – we weren't bothered enough to save it. We were too greedy, too selfish.

The Wild had to be kept from us. So the ReWilders made it dangerous. Toxic. Lethal. To keep us humans out.

We'd go back in if we could. If it weren't for the ticks, and the disease they carry. Of course we'd go back. All of us.

Bear's stirring beside me – tossing, turning. 'No,' he's saying urgently. 'Go away!'

'Shush,' I murmur, into his ear. 'Shush.' Like the wind, whispering to him.

These are the dreams he comes into my bed to banish. He never talks about them. I don't know whether they're all just a rerun of his school day, I don't know what he's trying to push away as he kicks out with his legs and hits out with his hands.

If I wake him, he's more afraid than ever, so I put my arms around him instead and try to whisper him back to a deeper place. To when he was little, out there with Mum. She would have known what to do.



## RETURN TO THE WILD by Nicola Penfold

### SYNOPSIS

When Juniper Greene is given a tank of stick insects to take care of, everyone at school knows she's in trouble. Sticks are one step away from the Institution. And her wild little brother Bear won't be far behind her. But Juniper and Bear know a way to leave the city far behind. They set out on the journey of their lives. They're going into the Wild. They're going to Ennerdale.

### BIOGRAPHY

Nicola lives in north London with her four children, husband and two Siamese cats. She loves adventures with her children, out in green spaces, and loves bedtime too, because of the amazing worlds you find in children's books. She's always wanted to be a writer.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'In Juniper and Bear, the author has created two great characters. I immediately felt empathy with them both and was rooting for them all the way.'

'The voice is incredibly strong and the world and characters really leap off the page and pull the reader in. I love how the author layers the information so that the reader learns about the world the characters inhabit as the action progresses.'

'The writing is good. The author teases the reader well with glimpses and hints of what the world in this novel is like. I love the idea of plants and vegetation being banished and the people thinking the city is "flourishing" because all of it is concrete and they've never known anything else.'

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

**Twitter:** [@nicolapenfold](https://twitter.com/nicolapenfold)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# KELSIE CARTER AND THE EVIL CHIHUAHUA ARMY

By Katie Hayoz

## **Chapter One**

This summer I blew up my sister's birthday cake and created an evil chihuahua army.

It wasn't my fault.

Okay, maybe it was my fault. But it wasn't on purpose, and everyone knows that you shouldn't be blamed for something you didn't intend to do.

None of it would have happened if two things had been different:

First, if my parents were normal scientists. But they're not. They're Specialists of Super Science. They create formulas and serums that are almost magic. Like the Effluvium Floater that allows you to hover ten feet off the ground. Or the Jellitonic Jellifier that turns anything – even concrete – to jelly for one whole minute. The list goes on.

If it's amazing, it came from my mom and dad.

And it's really, really hard to ignore that kind of amazing stuff.

I mean, if you knew where the Teleportation Pellets were hidden, wouldn't you want to stuff one in your pocket, too?

Second, none of it would have happened if it weren't for my sister, Claire. She's three years older and she thinks she's three times better. According to her, she's perfect and I'm...well...not. Mom and Dad say to cut her some slack. They say she's "going through changes" and "very hormonal". I don't see why being perfect makes her so grumpy.

Maybe now is a good time to introduce myself. My name is Kelsie

Carter. Claire calls me Kelsie-Can't-Do-Anything-Right-Carter. But other names I'm known by are:

- How-Many-Times-Do-I Have-To-Tell-You-Kelsie
- Not-Again-Kelsie
- Don't-Touch-That-Kelsie
- What-Are-We-Going-To-Do-With-You-Kelsie

And my favorite:

- Too-Cool-Kelsie (My best friend, Jason, calls me this.)

The day it all started was a What-Are-We-Going-To-Do-With-You-Kelsie day. Claire was putting candles on her birthday cake. While she was giggling about boys with her friends, I slipped out and hopped the backyard hedge to Jason's house.

I held up a Teleportation Pellet, my parents' newest creation. "The pellets will zap us anywhere we want to go. Where to?" I asked Jason. "Disneyworld? Hawaii? Hong Kong?"

"Let me think..." Jason took it and rolled it between his fingers. "Is it hard to do?"

"Nah," I said, even though I hadn't tried them yet. I tapped the pellet in his hand. "It's a piece of cake."

WHOOSH! BAM! All of a sudden, both Jason and I were standing on my dining room table, our feet in what used to be a Danish Layer cake. Claire and her friends sat, mouths open, eyes wide, covered in birthday treat. A gob of purple frosting and a still-lit candle sat in Claire's brown hair.

"AWESOME!" Jason yelled. He wiped cake from his pant leg and stuffed it into his mouth.

"You ruin everything!" Claire said, her face nearly the color of the frosting in her hair. Her friends started howling as cake dripped from the ceiling.

Mom and Dad hurried into the room. Mom took one look at the dessert covering the walls and turned to me. "What are we going to do with you, Kelsie?"

Dad shook his head. “I need to find a new hiding place for the Teleportation Pellets.”

Some people think my parents are mad scientists because they always (and I mean ALWAYS) wear their lab coats. Dad might look like one because, like me, he’s got unruly auburn hair and his clothes are usually rumpled or stained. Mom, though, wears her hair in a tight braid and her shirts are starched stiff. Like Claire, she’s always sleek and put-together. Except now Claire wasn’t looking so put-together with cake in her hair.

“Time to open gifts.” Mom began shooing everyone into the living room.

“I don’t want Kelsie there,” said Claire.

“We’ll keep an eye on her.” Dad blew out the candle on Claire’s head and put an arm around my shoulders. “Besides, how much trouble can one girl get into?”

Turns out quite a lot.

## **Chapter Two**

Claire’s gift opening was a snore-fest. She got bubble bath, a cell phone case, stinky perfume and a purse. Her friends oohed and aahed. Jason and I could barely stay awake.

But then she opened the gift from Mom and Dad.

There was a little tuxedo and top hat, a tiny striped top and felt beret, and a miniscule astronaut outfit. Claire squealed. I sat up straighter.

The clothes weren’t for Claire, they were for Peaches.

Peaches is her chihuahua. Claire got him two years ago from Mom and Dad, as a reward for coming first place in a national chemistry challenge. Claire got a chihuahua then because she wanted to dress him up in little sparkly outfits and paint his nails and carry him in her bag.

She’s thirteen now and *still* treats Peaches like her personal baby doll.

But Peaches isn’t a doll. He’s a real, living, breathing being. I can tell by the way his spindly legs shake and his big ears tremble when Claire dresses him that he doesn’t like playing fashionista.

I was waiting for the day that Peaches bit her or pooped on her bed or peed in her shoes. But he never has. He is too sweet for that – even though he is always being criticized by Claire for not sitting when told, for not

playing dead properly, or for rolling over the wrong way. He's always and forever trying to get it right but keeps getting it wrong.

He's a lot like me. And, like me, he doesn't give up. Even when maybe he should.

Peaches was next to me, his pink tongue hanging out of his mouth like a limp sock, his brown eyes taking in his surroundings. I crouched down and rubbed his sides. He licked my face, then ran in little circles, then licked my face some more. He may be Claire's, but he likes me best. Peaches is always by the door when I come home from school. He bumps his nose against my hand to be petted while I'm doing homework. He also sits and listens to me when I need to talk. He watches me with those big eyes and whimpers or yips at just the right moments.

Peaches doesn't care how much I mess up. All he cares about is how much I love him.

And I don't care how much he messes up. I just love him for him.

"These are perfect!" Claire held up the outfits. She'd signed Peaches up to be part of the Chic and Sassy, Bold and Brassy Chihuahua in Costume Contest. It's a beauty contest for chihuahuas. Each one prances down the runway in three different outfits, and judges rate them on how adorable they are.

Claire loves competitions. She's entered and won a zillion of them. Yet every time she gets frazzled and anxious, worrying like mad she won't win.

"You can't make Peaches compete," I said. "You get all crazy about contests. It's not fair to him."

"That's ridiculous," sniffed Claire.

"No it's not." And I told her why I hate contests:

- Competition stress. It's like taking a test times ten.
- Everybody seems nice but they are all secretly hoping that you'll lose.
- The winner acts like a smarty-pants.
- If there is a winner, there's a loser.
- What gives anyone the right to tell someone they are a loser?

"Imagine the poor dog who's told he's the ugliest one of the bunch!"

I added. “I don’t even want to think of how devastating that would be.”

Claire and her friends burst out laughing. “They’re *dogs*, Kelsie. Really!”

But Peaches is more than a dog. He’s a friend.

If he didn’t win, Claire would be impossible to live with for weeks. And poor Peaches would pay the price.

Jason and I decided we were going to protest the contest. We spent the rest of the day making posters that read: “All Dogs Are Cute” and “Don’t Judge a Dog by Its Outfit”. Tomorrow we would walk up and down the sidewalk with our signs. The competition organizers would slap their foreheads saying, “Oh, my goodness. What were we thinking?” and cancel the whole thing.

We’d save Peaches and the other chihuahuas from undue stress and humiliation.

If it all went according to plan.

Why wouldn’t it?

### **Chapter Three**

The cuckoo flung out of the cuckoo clock, chirping 6 pm. Jason headed home with the posters and I headed to the kitchen. It was my turn to prepare dinner.

In the cupboard was a row of shiny silver packets labelled “Super Speedy Sustenance” – another one of Mom and Dad’s inventions. I chose one with instant beef, noodles and green beans. I twisted off the cap, dumped a tablespoon of water into the pack, closed it back up and shook it. One minute later, the bag was piping hot and had doubled in size.

I saw the used birthday candles on the counter and decided to add Mom and Dad’s best addition to the Super Speedy Sustenance line: Instant Roasted Marshmallow Dessert. I poked a candle into a browned marshmallow and put it by Claire’s spot. It might make up for ruining her cake.

Peaches whined and I snuck him some gooey dessert as the family sat down. He loved those things more than I did.

Claire looked at the marshmallow. “Too little too late, Kelsie.”

“It’s a nice gesture,” said Mom.

Claire took a bite of the beef and wrinkled her nose at me. “Ugh. It’s all stringy. You didn’t shake the packet long enough.”

She pulled bits of meat from her teeth. Peaches pawed at her legs but Claire wouldn’t give him anything. “With how Kelsie prepared this, you’ll get gas. And tomorrow you have to be *perfect* for the chihuahua competition.”

“That’s enough now,” said Dad.

“You could give Peaches a serum,” Claire suggested. “That way he’d be sure to win.”

“No, Claire,” said Mom.

“Why not?” Claire crossed her arms. “You already have a Beauty Booster.”

“Ah, but we’re still working on both the Beauty and Brain Boosters,” Dad said, accentuating his words by shaking the noodles on his fork. “The Beauty Booster *seems* to be okay – in test rats it gave them glossy fur and brighter eyes. But its ingredients are very similar to those in the Brain Booster, and there is an unfortunate side effect with the Brain Booster. While the subject gets smarter, a factor of the personality is also affected: the one that contributes to moral reasoning and judgement—”

“Dad,” I interrupted. “English, please.”

Claire rolled her eyes. “He is speaking English. He means that the Brain Booster not only makes one smart but also evil.”

“Right, Claire. Then you realize it’s too risky to use a serum,” said Mom. “So none for Peaches. He’s just going to have to win on his own merit.”

“But what if he can’t?” Claire sounded ready to cry.

Later, when we were getting ready for bed, Claire popped the toothbrush out of her mouth and said, “I hope Peaches listens for once,” then added, “Is there a way we can hide that weird little bump on his head?”

I spat in the sink and told Peaches, “Too bad for Claire that we can’t hide the weird bump that *is* her head.”

Peaches likes me best, but sleeps in Claire’s room. She has a doggie bed with a canopy and pillow and everything for him. And she shuts the door so he’s forced to stay all night.

In my own room, I tossed and turned, unable to sleep. I took my phone from my nightstand and messaged Jason.

*Can’t wait until our protest tomorrow.*

Just then I heard a floorboard in the hallway creak and the scratching

of little doggy nails on the wood. I threw off my covers and opened my door a crack.

Claire and Peaches were heading downstairs. Claire never got up during the night.

*Claire sneaking about*, I wrote to Jason. *Going to go see what she's up to.*

I hurried down to the kitchen, but she wasn't there. I glanced out the window and saw the door to the garden shed open. Claire shooed Peaches ahead of her and slipped inside.

Our family laboratory is in the garden shed. It's too dangerous to have the lab connected to the house. Things blow up sometimes. Okay. Lots of times.

Mom and Dad have strict rules against us going into the lab without permission. If I told them what I just saw, Claire would be in HUGE trouble. But then again, if I told on her I wouldn't know what she was up to. And knowing that would be worth much more in the long run. The *threat* of telling on her could get me all sorts of things. *Actually* telling on her would only get her grounded once.

So I sprinted across the lawn and snuck into the shed.

## Chapter Four

The garden shed looks totally normal from the outside. A little weather-beaten. Tiny. But inside, the laboratory is modern and shiny and BIG, like REALLY big. Mom and Dad say it's not magic, but "forced perspective". They say that they've created an optical illusion on the outside to make the shed seem smaller than it is. Whatever it's called, it's pretty cool.

I tiptoed into the lab. Three long counters took up the middle of the room. Potions and serums fizzed and popped. Glass beakers and cylinders and flasks glinted underneath the bright florescent lighting.

Claire was at the counter near the far wall with her back to me. She was pouring something into a bowl on the ground in front of Peaches.

Peaches looked up at her, his eyes unblinking. He let out a tiny whimper. "It's okay, boy. You'll see. You're going to win," she said.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" I screamed. Both she and Peaches jumped.



“None of your business.” Claire’s face turned bright pink. She grabbed the beaker she’d had on the counter. It was now empty. She filled it with water from the sink and put it into the refrigerator.

I heard Peaches lapping up the liquid with his tongue. “Peaches! Don’t drink that.” I crossed the room to get to him, but Claire blocked me, her arms and legs spread apart.

I shoved at Claire. She shoved back. I blew a raspberry in her face. “Ugh!” she cried, wiping at it with her pajama sleeves. I slipped past and crouched down next to Peaches, taking the bowl away. But whatever had been in there was now gone.

“You gave him the Beauty Booster, didn’t you?” I accused.

She shrugged. “Maybe.”

“How could you? Mom and Dad told us it was dangerous!”

Claire shook her head. “They said the Brain Booster was dangerous. Not the Beauty Booster. The Beauty Booster works. I just want Peaches to have an edge over the competition tomorrow.”

“That’s cheating!”

“You’re only ten. You don’t understand anything..”

BAM! The door to the lab whipped open. My stomach knotted up, imagining my dad’s angry face. Instead, Jason stuck his head in. “What’s going on?”

Claire and I exhaled.

“Come on, tell me. I came all the way over here to find out.” Jason ran a hand over the dark mass of tight curls on his head.

“Claire gave Peaches a serum to make him beautiful,” I said. “So he’ll win the contest tomorrow.”

Jason eyed the chihuahua. “He doesn’t look any different to me.”

Claire lifted her chin. “It takes a couple of hours.”

So she’d planned this out. I said to her, “I’m telling Mom and Dad.”

“You do, and I won’t tell you where Dad hid the Teleportation Pellets.”

“I already know.”

“When he moves them, then.” Claire tilted her head to study my reaction. When I acted like I didn’t care, she continued, “Fine. I’ll say I followed you down here and found you stuffing formulas in your pockets. That the Beauty Booster spilled because we fought. Who do you

think they'll believe? The perfect daughter or the one they have to hide things from?"

"They'll believe me. They know I'm not a liar."

"Oh? Mom and Dad tell you not to touch the formulas but you do anyway. That's like lying. But hey, go ahead. Squeal on me. See who they believe."

I wasn't ready to chance it. "You can't do this."

She grabbed Peaches and the empty bowl and strutted up the stairs. "Watch me," she said.

## **Chapter Five**

I waited until Claire was out of earshot. "We can't let her get away with this."

"No, we can't," Jason said. "We're still going to protest. Get the contest cancelled."

I nodded, but suddenly wasn't convinced. "What if...what if our protests don't get the contest cancelled? What if the police throw us out?"

"We're only kids! They can't do that."

"What if no one cares about our signs?"

"They have to care!"

I shrugged. "Maybe."

Jason poked a finger into my shoulder and said, "You need to believe in yourself!"

His mom is a psychiatrist. She makes Jason repeat, "I am strong, I am handsome, I am smart," in the mirror ten times every night before he goes to bed. It must work for him because he is strong and handsome and smart.

I tried it last year. I stood in front of the bathroom mirror and said the line over and over. But Claire caught me at it and called me "Handsome Kelsie" in a sickly sweet voice until Mom and Dad threatened to take away her phone if she continued.

Thank goodness she loves her phone.

I didn't like thinking our signs and shouts wouldn't make a difference at all. And I really didn't like thinking about Claire winning by cheating... by changing poor Peaches into something he's not. I looked around the lab, trying to come up with an idea that would help.

And then it hit me: we could beat her at her own game. “We’re going to even out the odds. We’re going to give *all* the dogs the Beauty Booster. That way no one’s cheating. Or everyone is...doesn’t matter. Same thing.”

I went to the refrigerator and pulled out the beaker Claire had put in there, shaking it. “Wait. Claire used all of the formula and just replaced it with water so Mom and Dad won’t notice it’s gone.”

Jason peered into the fridge. “Where’s more?”

“There isn’t any more.” Disappointment made my stomach drop. How could we teach Claire a lesson now? I supposed I could tell on her, but I still was worried Mom and Dad would believe her over me.

“If only you could *make* some Beauty Booster,” said Jason.

“That’s it!”

“Don’t you remember?” Jason shook his head and pointed to the scorched ceiling. “Your parents forbid you to experiment.”

“But this formula already exists. I wouldn’t be *experimenting*. I’d be, well, following instructions,” I insisted.

Jason pointed again at the black soot above us.

I crossed my arms. “Plus, there’s no boiling or burning involved in this serum.”

Jason smiled and gave me a thumbs up.

Mom and Dad keep the notebooks with their works-in-progress in the safe behind the picture of Marie Curie. For genius scientists, they have a surprising lack of ingenuity when it comes to passwords and combination locks. I punched in Claire’s and then my birthdate and the safe popped open.

First try. I probably need to tell them to up security.

“Whoa,” Jason breathed. He slid the leather-bound notebook out and held it in his hands like it was made of glass. I grabbed it from him and thumbed through it.

“Here!” Scribbled over two pages were the formulas for both the Beauty Booster and the Brain Booster. Lines were crossed out and rewritten. Question marks dotted the margins. But the list of ingredients was there.

I took a pair of safety glasses and gloves from Dad’s work area and put them on. Sometimes things sparked or bubbled. Glasses and gloves were the first rules of the lab.

The names of the chemicals were impossible to pronounce. It didn't matter. I knew them all by sight – the fine green powder, the thick orange liquid, the sharp white crystals. Jason handed them to me as I asked for them. I mixed them together while glancing at the instructions. The mixture foamed and sizzled. The odor of pineapple filled the air.

The final product was pink and cloudy.

Jason's eyes got big. "Too cool, Kelsie."

## Chapter Six

I beamed down at my batch of Beauty Booster. Since Peaches had eaten all of the previous lot, I couldn't be sure it looked *exactly* the same as the old batch. But I was sure it was close enough. I'm really good at following directions.

Most of the time.

Usually.

Well, when they count, anyway.

I poured the Booster into a thermos. "All set. Between this and our protest, that contest is toast."

Jason bit his lip. "What if the police *do* try to arrest us for protesting?"

"We'll be prepared to make a getaway. No matter what." I scoured the lab and we packed a bag with:

- a Teleportation Pellet
- some Jellitonic Jellifier
- a bottle of Effluvium Floater
- several sticks of Metal Melter

and

- a boatload of Instant Roasted Marshmallows, so we wouldn't starve.

In the morning, I ate my Speedy Sustenance Instant Bacon and Egg Omelette while Claire packed up Peaches' outfits into a little suitcase. Peaches was wearing the beret and the long-sleeved striped shirt. The outfit

was too warm for the weather, but it hid the fact that his fur was fuller and shinier than usual, and that his normally bumpy head had smoothed into the shape of an apple. Mom and Dad had a special project to work on today, so they were too distracted to notice a thing.

“We’ll drop you off,” said Mom. “And pick you up at three. We’re doing testing in the underground bunker at work today. That means we’ll be out of reach. If there’s an emergency, call Grandma.”

“Claire, you’ll do just fine,” said Dad, giving her a hug. He turned to me and ruffled my hair. “Kelsie, you stick close to your sister. Don’t touch anything you’re not supposed to.”

What he was meant was *don’t mess anything up*.

Behind Dad’s back, Claire made a face and stuck out her tongue.

I looked at my watch: 9:30. The competition started at noon. We had to get the Beauty Booster to the dogs by ten, or they wouldn’t be pretty on time. But Mom and Dad were taking longer than usual to leave.

Mom stuffed a bunch of papers into a leather case. “I guess we’d better get to work,” she said.

“Yes!” I yelled. Both Mom and Dad raised their eyebrows at me. To cover up I added, “Because, well, you know, ‘the early bird gets the worm’ and all that.”

The competition was being held in the ballroom at the Liberty Hotel. When we got to the hotel, Jason was outside, already walking up and down the sidewalk carrying the “All Dogs Are Cute” sign.

“Good,” Claire whispered so Mom and Dad couldn’t hear. “You two stay outside with your signs. Leave me and Peaches alone.”

Chihuahuas were everywhere – in purses, on shoulders, in baskets and bags, and even some prancing on their own four paws.

“Good luck!” cheered Mom and Dad as we shut the car doors.

Claire turned to me. “I don’t need luck. Peaches has the Beauty Booster.”

I grinned. Soon so would all the other dogs.

## KELSIE CARTER AND THE EVIL CHIHUAHUA ARMY by Katie Hayoz

### SYNOPSIS

Ten-year-old Kelsie Carter has a flair for spectacular mess-ups. It's easy to do when your parents are specialists in Super Science and you know where they hide their formulas. But Kelsie really didn't mean to create an evil chihuahua army. She only wanted to even out the competition at the local dog show. But instead, she created chaos. It's up to Kelsie and friends to fix her mistake before chihuahuas take over the town...and world.

### BIOGRAPHY

Katie Hayoz was born in Racine, Wisconsin, but ended up in Geneva, Switzerland, where she lives with her husband, two daughters, and two fuzzy cats. She devours YA and children's books like she does popcorn and black licorice: quickly and in large quantities.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

*'Kelsie Carter and the Evil Chihuahua Army* has an immediately appealing voice and a strong commercial concept. Good chapter ends keep the reader hooked, and there's a nice relationship between Kelsie and Peaches. I can already imagine lots of lovely chihuahua illustrations!'

*'Lovely humour and warmth of characterisation. Love the idea of Kelsie's parents being super scientists – i.e. scientists with a touch of magic. The author clearly had fun naming the parents' magical inventions, and this joy transmits to the reader.'*

*'Great first line – this summer I blew up my birthday cake and created an evil chihuahua army – you're right into it! A fun, wacky concept with lots of child appeal.'*

**Contact:** hayozkatie@gmail.com

**Website:** www.katiehayoz.com

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# SHADOWSCENT

By Peta Freestone

## Chapter 1 – Rahil

Home smells of cooking fires, the first water for miles around, and desert roses that only release their perfume after sunset. Leaning out of my bedroom window, I draw a deep breath of night. When you fear you could soon lose something, you take every chance to savour it.

With a sigh, I close the shutters and creep into the next room.

This is the place my father adopted after my mother died. An oasis on the road to nowhere, shaped like two cupped palms holding a pool of water safe from the greedy sand. He left the Apharan army behind to give me the chance of a carefree childhood.

He might have succeeded if it weren't for the Rot.

Fish swim in our oasis's blue-green pools. Tortoises, too. Palm trees ring the shore, providing all the fresh dates we can eat in season, and enough to dry for the remainder of the year. But there are no leftovers, no luxury. Everyone must labour to sustain the village. And apart from concocting the odd salve to soothe sand-stinger bites, or mixing herbal teas to settle queasy stomachs, I've got nothing anyone here needs.

I'm a liability.

Like father, like daughter.

With one skill to my name, I've got one chance. I've *got* to make the most of it. At least that's what I tell myself as I quietly close the wooden trunk at the foot of my father's bed, ensuring the lock clicks back into place as if I'd never gone near it. I pack my prize – my father's signature seal – in my satchel.

Everyone in the village has long gone to bed. Everyone except my father. He sits on a stool against our mud-brick house, wooden crutch within arm's reach, face lit by the last coals in the fire pit. Bergamot incense curls around him. The insects of dusk have long dissipated but he likes the clean scent. I can't bear to tell him it's a waste. I'd go mad if I had to live with the stench of my own flesh decaying.

'Couldn't sleep?' I ask, keeping my voice light despite the guilt of breathing as shallowly as possible.

My father draws me into a quick hug, careful to only let me touch his good side. 'Ran out of willow root.'

'I thought we had a quarter moon's worth.'

He shrugs.

This is bad. Really bad. But it only strengthens my resolve and makes my plan easier to justify, easier to conceal.

'I'll pick up some supplies in Aphara.' At least that part's true.

He shakes his head. 'It's fine. Don't worry yourself.'

'In the sixth hell it's fine.'

'Watch your tongue.'

I stick my tongue out and go cross-eyed looking down at it.

My father chuckles. 'I couldn't stop you from going if I tried, could I?'

'Not likely. Anyway, I already said I'd give Bahman a ride. His leave is up.' I shoulder my satchel and stand on tiptoes to kiss my father's cheek. 'Try to get some rest, will you?'

He nods.

'Promise?'

'Promise.'

Telltale footsteps scuff in the sand behind me. Right on time.

Bahman's sword-belt and kilt are so new they still smell of the thyme used to cover the pigeon-piss of the tanner's vats. Behind that there's familiar sweat, drowned out by the amber oil required to show off the strength of the Apharan palace guards. In the few short months since he was accepted into service, his daily training has filled out his chest, though it had already been broad enough to turn every girl's head in our village as if he were Ashurdoniah descended.

I never really liked that myth.



‘Bahman.’ My father greets my oldest friend. ‘How’s life in the service of our illustrious Eraz?’ There’s a faint note of bitterness in his voice as he struggles to his feet.

Bahman moves to offer my father his arm. ‘It’s good work for a third son.’ He looks to me. ‘But returning home is always better.’

Thankfully it’s too dark for anyone to see me blush.

Once upright, my father leans heavily on his crutch, the remains of his left leg – now barely reaching past his knee – hanging useless. I squint in the moonlight. Are his bandages wrapped higher than they were yesterday?

He avoids my scrutiny and limps towards the door. ‘I’ll see you tomorrow night, yes?’

I nod.

He dips his chin in salute to Bahman. ‘Give my best to your parents, would you? I’d visit, but the walk is getting to be a challenge.’ The real reason my father doesn’t visit his old comrade’s family is more for their sake than his own – nobody wants to spread disease among those they care about. Still, it’s heart-breaking to watch him deteriorate in isolation.

‘Of course.’

When my father has retreated inside, I turn to Bahman. ‘Ready?’

‘As I’ll ever be.’

Bahman follows me behind the house to where a mare and gelding wait beyond a post-and-rail fence, not asleep but heads lolling, each with a hind leg bent to rest its weight on the tip of a hoof.

Lil is the biggest horse my father has bred, bigger even than her older brother beside her. Father gifted her to me on my twelfth birthday, and we’ve been together for the five turns since. I named her after a demon, for she was blacker than the shadows of which the lilitu were made, twice as fast, and with a temper to match.

Father said the name was bad luck. But by that stage I didn’t give much care to luck, or its cousin fortune, both of whom had turned the other cheek to me. Lil was a demon, and we were going to suit each other just fine.

Think of the demon, the demon wakes. Lil’s ears flick back as she moves toward us.

Bahman’s steps slow as he eyes my horse with uncertainty. ‘She doesn’t like me.’

‘How many times have I told you it’s not personal? She doesn’t like anyone.’ It’s at that moment that Lil chooses to swing her head over the rail and nuzzle my shoulder.

‘Riiight.’

Bahman hands me his gear bag, packed to bursting. ‘You’re still going through with this?’

I nod, not trusting myself to speak as I strap our things to Lil’s saddle.

‘It’s not too late to settle for an incense grinder post, you know. It wouldn’t make the moons collide.’

Here we go again. Bahman thinks things are as they are for a reason, and that everyone has their destined place. That it’s written in the star wheel long before anyone is even old enough to know about the stinkin’ star wheel. It’s one of the few things we’ve never agreed on. I run a hand over Lil’s mane and press my cheek to her neck, breathing warm horsiness as if hiding under a blanket.

‘Powder rat wages are barely enough for one person.’ I look towards the house. ‘One *healthy* person. It’s perfumer or bust for me. And it’s *got* be now. I don’t have another year. My *father* doesn’t have another year.’

Bahman winces at the truth of it, then takes me by the shoulders. ‘There are other ways, Rahil. I’m not planning on wasting any time moving up the ranks. And I’ve made it plain how I feel about our future.’

He steps closer and wraps his arms around me. I tense for a moment but then I let myself take comfort from his warmth, his familiar solidness. I press my cheek to his chest so that when he speaks his voice seems to come from within my own head.

‘If you won’t promise me *that*, promise me something else?’

I know bravado won’t fool him at this point, even if I did have the strength spare to muster it. I tilt my face up but Bahman’s just a shadow against the stars, expression hidden.

‘Promise me you’ll be careful,’ he says, voice husky. He lowers his chin and leans almost imperceptibly closer.

I duck away. ‘It’s late, Bahm. We should get going.’ I gather Lil’s reins and set my foot in a stirrup.

With a sigh, Bahman settles behind me. ‘Here.’ His voice is soft in my ear. ‘Lean back.’

Despite what I feel about this – whatever this thing is – between us, he’s still my best friend. My *only* friend. And he’s always kept my secrets.

I let myself relax back against him. It’s a day’s ride to the city. May as well get some shut-eye.

‘Lil,’ I murmur, closing my eyes. ‘Keep Bahman in his seat, would you?’

\*

At times like this I wish I were as nose-blind as the next person.

Aphara isn’t yet in sight when a breeze threads through the dunes, carrying the perfume of the city’s streets. One moment the desert is calm – there’s just Bahman, my horse, and the lingering tang of the camel-thorn bush she crushed beneath her hooves some ways back. The next, I’m hit with a barrage of dried dates, sour armpits and everything ripe and rancid in between.

I swallow down the urge to gag and give Lil a light tap of booted heels. No time for a weak stomach. I’ve got a meeting to keep.

The first building to appear above the dunes is the temple. The stepped pyramid hulks over Aphara like a crouched beast. From this distance, the priestesses climbing the main ramp really do seem like their namesake – firebirds in crimson-feathered skirts and headdresses. As they reach the top, a tendril of blue smoke snakes from the great altar and into the sky. It’s followed by another, white and rare as a summer cloud. Then a spiral of orange, one of dusty green. My breath catches in my throat as the final plume, unmistakably tinged with imperial purple, reaches for the heavens.

It’s only when Lil whickers and tosses her head that I realise I’ve tensed from shoulder to thigh, my hand straying to the silver locket tucked beneath my linen robe. I lean forward to stroke her neck. ‘Sorry, girl.’

The firebirds would say my sensitivity is a gift. But they’d also say your first memory must be of the votive offering at your naming ceremony. Superstitious nonsense about burning specific ingredients in the temple braziers to proclaim to the heavens the spokes of the star wheel between which you were born, so that the gods can hear your prayers until death.

I don’t remember a single scent from my naming. I didn’t have one.

Mint, leather, rosemary, sweat. Those were my firsts.

Mint soap, leather armour, and rosemary beard oil made from the plants that still grow in fired clay urns at our door. My father's unmistakable uniform. All mixed with the work he'd done that day in the garrison's training yards. Those four drifted around me as he carried me on his shoulders through the markets when we visited Aphara. Even so young, it was easy for me to single them out, my own personal fortress against an onslaught of cumin and camels, lion-berry stew and the cheap incense of a back-alley salon.

But that was before the tiny blister appeared on the arch of his foot. Before the scab that cracked open day after day to reveal a slightly larger wound beneath. Before the pain became too much for him to bear his own weight, let alone mine.

Now, as we near the city, a flock of swallows twirls and dips above us. Their chatter interrupts my brooding as they prepare to roost in the archers' holes along Aphara's walls. *The only fortifications unbreached during the Shadow Wars*, my father used to say. Today, the walls defend against a single enemy – the sun glows hot as a forge as it melts towards the horizon, gilding the surrounding desert in molten metal.

When we reach the fifteenth gate, Bahman slides from Lil's back. A group of ragged children instantly appear from the stonework, crowding around us. Bahman laughs good-naturedly and opens his gear bag, handing out chunks of flatbread. So *that's* why he had it overstuffed.

He reaches out and gives my knee a squeeze. 'See you at the trials, then?'

I nod.

'And Rahil?'

'Yes?'

'Stars keep you.'

'And you,' I say, riding on.

I leave Lil beside a fountain in a small square. She'd be less incongruous if I'd taken her to one of the caravanserais outside the walls, but that takes coin. No matter. If this neighbourhood is rich enough to keep a water feature in public, nobody will bother stealing a horse most people think more valuable in spit-roasted chunks sandwiched between flatbread than she's worth alive.

Lil snorts in indignation at being tethered and abandoned.

‘What?’ I ask, giving her flank a rub. ‘You hate the night market.’

She refuses to look at me.

I rummage in my pockets for a servant-yellow headscarf, wrapping it over the dust and tangles in my hair. Then I turn up the cuffs of my robe, rolling each to the shoulder in city style – nobody from inside these shaded walls dresses for the desert. My locket serves as a mirror for a quick application of kohl that brings tears to my eyes. Then I dab a smear of the locket’s contents at my temples, behind my ears, along my wrists. Hyacinth and lily, with a hint of clove. It’s far more flowery and over-the-top than I’d normally choose, but it will help me blend in as much as rolled sleeves and make-up.

I give Lil one last scratch behind the ear, then shoulder my satchel – carefully, so as not to jostle its contents. With my starved coin purse tucked well inside, I set out.

My route takes me at first along broad, palm-lined avenues. Servants in saffron robes pay me no heed as they run late errands. A tiny cat watches me from atop a wall, the scent of ripe figs floating from the garden beyond. Overhead, the sky bruises to dusk, the last eddies of temple smoke tattered and fraying to nothing.

Here’s to small mercies.

Closer to the markets, the streets narrow. Spices mingle along them like old friends, undertones of effluent seeping beneath. I keep my breathing shallow as I weave through the stalls, swerving wide of chicken sellers and squeezing between tables mounded with dunes of sumac and constellations of star anise.

Then I’m back under open sky. Stalls line the plaza, the wares more decorative than useful, the air thick with dragon’s blood incense. I take a deep gulp of the sanctioned scent of Aphara – produced only by the Eraz’s own perfumery. In this part of town, it smells more ambitious than aristocratic.

My destination is aglow with copper braziers. A row of servants lines the threshold; their features smooth and fine, bodies lithe beneath kirtles of gauzy silk. Each bears a fan of woven palm fronds, wafting sweet red-tinged smoke into the street, beckoning buyers to come and indulge. The line of guards behind them says you need to be the right kind of buyer to be welcome.

I am *not* the right kind of buyer.

Good thing I've no interest in taking the front entrance.

At the rear of the building, a concealed stone staircase leads down to the basement.

The guard on the door, dressed less garishly than those at the front, gives me a curt nod. I make my way along the servant's corridor into the main chamber.

Four men and a woman gather around a waist-high marble pillar near the centre of the room. A servant brings them tiny glasses arranged around the edge of a silver tray, at the five points of the star wheel. The cups could have been filled from the end of a rainbow; the liquid in each gleams a different jewel in the flickering light.

Ah, this game. Death in Paradise. The cups contain a cocktail of poppy milk and stiff spirit – each flavour sure to give the drinker a night-long love of the entire world and everyone they meet. The risk? One glass may or may not be laced with night jasmine, virtually undetectable beneath the honeyed liquor and lethal within heartbeats. A test of skill. Lacking skill, a test of nerve.

'Bottoms up!' The first player – a curl-headed youth wearing a robe in a shade dangerously close to purple – raises his glass and empties it in a single swallow. As one, his companions gasp, their expressions intent. But after a minute he upends the glass onto the tray with a flourish and a grin. 'I'll drink with the gods another night.'

Onlookers whoop and clap him on the back. I don't bother masking my derision as I make my way to the bar. If they did look in my direction, their gaze will slide over me. Nobody sees the help.

The bartender and I have never played at friends. And today there's no attempt at niceties when she eyes my satchel. 'Leave that in the store. The boys have a shekel in coin waiting for you. Next order is due in a half moon.'

'I want to speak to Zakkur this time.'

'No chance.'

I pat my satchel. 'You want me to take this over to Rokad's instead, then?'

She sighs and reaches behind the bar. Half a minute of telltale clinking later, five glasses are arranged in front of me. 'Choose.'

'I'm not some spoilt rich kid seeking a thrill on the dark side of town.'

‘And Zakkur isn’t a charitable benefactor willing to waste his time on whatever the cat dragged in. You want an audience with him? Choose.’

Stink on a stick. I didn’t bargain on this. But what choice do I have? If it’s not now, the apprenticeship trials will come and go for another year. Call it the Affliction if you want to be posh, but the Rot waits for no man. Or girl.

And with the gods and the stars and that lack of, well, *deference* my life has shown them, there’s no other way. I need to know what perfume the Eraz’s daughter, Lady Tanith, will favour in the next turn of the star wheel – the scent that anyone who is anyone or *wants* to be anyone will be clamouring to douse themselves in. The scent that will be the final test in the perfume trials.

Willing my hand not to shake, I take my time waving each vessel of vibrant liquid under my nose, letting the bouquet envelope my senses. The third gives me pause. It’s the only one with a hint of bitterness, no doubt meant to deter. It’s also the only cup that seems to lack a telltale cloying sweetness – the only one that’s clean. I’d bet my life on it. I’m *about* to bet my life on it.

‘Four?’ I raise an eyebrow. ‘Stacking the odds in the house’s favour, eh?’

The bartender shrugs.

Meeting her stare, I bring the bitter liquid to my lips. Then I tilt my head back, and drink.

For a moment or two, I feel fine.

Until the floor rushes up to greet me.

## SHADOWSCENT by Peta Freestone

### SYNOPSIS

An alchemy prodigy from a desert village. An elite bodyguard from the imperial capitol. Rahil and Ash have nothing in common until they're fugitives racing to cure a poisoned prince. Now the empire's future depends on them working together to decipher clues, defy dangers and defeat their demons. *Shadowscent* is YA fantasy with base notes of *An Ember in the Ashes*, heart notes of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* and top notes of *Perfume*.

### BIOGRAPHY

Peta Freestone is a Clarion Writers' Workshop (UCSD) graduate with YA short stories published in anthologies from Penguin Books. An Edinburgh resident, in 2016 she received a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award. For fun, she reads, travels and collects university degrees, including the archaeology major that infiltrated *Shadowscent*.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'*Shadowscent* has a strong fantasy world with a feisty heroine and some lovely, evocative phrasing.'

'There's great sensory world-building here and polished, pacy writing – the reader is right there with Rahil. The synopsis is snappy and reads like a movie pitch – super!'

'The writing is strong and evocative. The author gives a clear sense of the world in which the book is set, and the characters are immediately interesting and intriguing. The opening pages tease the reader. I definitely wanted to read more!'

Contact: [peta@pmfreestone.com](mailto:peta@pmfreestone.com)

Website: [www.pmfreestone.com](http://www.pmfreestone.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)



# THE SPY WHO GROUNDED ME

By Matthew Olson-Roy

*The people, places, and events in this story may or may not be real.*

*Don't try to figure it out.*

*No, really, don't do it.*

*Just take my advice.*

*If scary dudes in black suits show up at your front door,  
don't say I didn't warn you.*

## **Chapter One**

“I am Ian Barker, eleven years old, of Alki Elementary School in Seattle, Washington, and this is test one in Operation Overblanket.”

I hit the pause button on my iPhone and looked up and down the alley to make sure I was alone. Trying to do anything secret outdoors this time of year was risky. When the sun came out in Seattle after a dreary, wet winter, so did the people. They flocked to the cafés with outdoor seating. They stretched into their spandex and invaded the circular path around Green Lake. And they drove to Alki, where I lived, to occupy a long sliver of sandy beach with sweeping views of Puget Sound and the Olympic Mountains. Luckily, today the sun was still in winter stealth mode. That meant the streets were empty, the coast was clear, and Operation Overblanket was a go.

With our garage door open, and the back of the car visible from my position at a safe distance further down the alley, I held out the key with one hand and started the camera with the other.

“The remote key for the test vehicle will not operate any further from this spot, so I am taking cover behind this telephone pole. If anything goes wrong, just know that I love you, Mom. I am mildly fond of you, Kara. And I’m watching you, Dad.”

“Why are you filming your garage, Ian?”

I jerked my head to see who was lurking in the alley behind me and lost my grip on the phone. If my life had been a TV show, this would have been one of those times when everything switched to slow motion. I would yell, “NOOOOOOOOOOO!” in a drawn out, low-pitched voice. The camera would zoom in on my helpless face. My fingers would stretch for the falling phone as it tumbled just out of reach. But this was real life. Nothing ever happened in real life like it did in the movies. Time didn’t slow to a crawl. I couldn’t even get the word “NO!” out in the split second before it was all over. The phone just slipped through my fingers and fell into a patch of moss behind the telephone pole. Pathetic. Even the sound the phone made as it hit the moss was pathetic. It was something like *pshtd* – like a miniscule moss fart.

Real life was a series of miniscule moss farts...and best friends who showed up unannounced.

“Geez, Elliott!” I yelled. “You scared me!”

“No *Schäiss*, Sherlock,” Elliott smirked. “So what are you doing?”

I had no idea how I was going to explain my way out of this. I wasn’t quite ready to spill the beans. This investigation had to be conducted in secret. If I was going to tell anyone, though, my best friend Elliott was a good candidate. He had just moved to West Seattle last year from a tiny country called Luxembourg. Who was he going to tell?

“Funny you should ask, Elliott,” I said as I stooped to pick up my phone. “You and my dad get along pretty well. Have you ever noticed anything weird about him?”

“You mean like how he still wears hoodies even though he’s old enough to have a bald spot?”

“No.”

“Or how he orders pizza with anchovies but takes them off before he eats it because he likes the smell but not the taste?”

“No.”

“Maybe you need to ask me a more specific question.”

“OK.” I thought about how much I wanted to reveal at this point, and opted to test Elliott’s level of skepticism. “Do you think my dad might do something other than write during the day?”

“Of course,” Elliott said. “He’s not a robot.”

I nodded. This might just work.

“So you think he might fill his time with other activities? Other secret activities?” I asked.

“What does all this have to do with your garage?”

I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans and swiped the phone screen to check the time. Everyone else in my family would start strolling back into the house soon. Time to pick up the pace. I grabbed Elliott by the wrist and dragged him into the garage, where I stuffed him into the backseat of our Volvo. I leapt in after him, shut the door, and took a deep breath.

“Listen,” I said as I turned to face him. “I need your help.”

“With what?”

I surveyed the garage one more time through the windows of the car to make sure we were alone and finally just blurted it out.

“I think my dad is a spy.”

There was a moment of silence. Then Elliott burst out laughing.

“It’s not funny. I’m serious! Think about it for a second. You’ve read his books. What does he write about?”

“Come on. Your dad’s a world-famous author! Everyone knows what he writes about.” Elliott lowered his voice. “Super Spy Guy Manson – every man’s toughest competition. Every woman’s greatest desire. Every criminal’s worst nightmare.”

“Exactly. Do you know what ‘plausible deniability’ is?” I asked.

“Of course I do,” Elliott sneered. “*I’ve* read your dad’s books.”

“I know, I know. I should read my dad’s books,” I said. “Just answer the question.”

“Basically, plausible deniability is when a person can deny knowledge of something because they have a believable reason for not knowing it, even if in fact they were involved in some way.”

“And doesn’t writing about a spy make for the greatest plausible deniability for a real spy ever?” I exclaimed. Then I imitated my dad’s

voice. “No, I’m not a spy. I only write about one. How do I know how Guy Manson does all those amazing stunts? I make it up, of course!”

“Every author makes stuff up,” Elliott protested. “Do you think J.K. Rowling is a witch who’s using Harry Potter to cover her tracks?”

I hadn’t thought about that, but now that he mentioned it...

I shook that image out of my head and stared at Elliott with my serious face, the one I saved for important situations like getting out of trouble and convincing my best friend that my dad is a spy.

“OK. There’s something about my dad you don’t know. We’re not really supposed to talk about it, but I don’t have a choice.”

My heart raced at the thought of sharing my secret intel. Once I let the cat out of the bag, there was no turning back. Elliott would have to commit to helping me with the investigation or he would know too much. It was a risk I was willing to take.

“My dad interviewed for the CIA once. Actually, he went through three interviews. He made it all the way to the headquarters in Langley before he turned them down. He told us that he couldn’t go through with it because he’d have to lie to everyone in his life. But here’s the thing.” I paused for a moment to make sure Elliott had time to prepare himself for the big reveal. “I think *that* was the lie.”

Elliott had taken a bag of popcorn out of his backpack and was shoving fistfuls into his mouth like he was watching the most entertaining movie ever. Crumbs and kernels and salt and greasy fingerprints were getting all over the backseat. So much for not leaving any evidence at the scene of the crime. A few half-eaten kernels fell out of his mouth when he finally spoke.

“Why now?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve known your entire life that your dad writes spy novels. What happened to make you believe that he might be a spy all of a sudden?”

“First, he told me about his history with the CIA.”

“OK,” Elliott nodded. “What else?”

“He knows like a gazillion languages. Can you think of any normal person who knows a whole bunch of foreign languages?”

“I don’t know,” Elliott said. “Hmm. Let’s see. Can you think of anyone? Anyone at all?”

Elliott crossed his arms, tapped his right foot, and stared at me as he waited for me to respond.

“You don’t count,” I protested. “You said yourself everyone from Luxembourg knows at least four languages, and you know five! When I say normal, I mean American.”

“Billions of people would disagree with you.”

“Well they can read my American lips. You’re welcome for McDonalds, Xbox, and good music. And don’t blame us for Justin Bieber. He’s Canadian.”

“Anything else?” Elliott still wasn’t convinced.

“Then I started watching all sorts of spy movies, and you know what I found out?”

“You lead an incredibly boring life?”

“No, come on. I learned that if someone is a spy, they never tell anyone – not their fake friends, not their colleagues at their fake jobs, not even their fake families.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Hold up!” Elliott threw up both hands in protest. “You think you have a fake family?”

“Who can say?”

“Your birth certificate?” Elliott suggested.

“Could be fake.”

“A DNA test?”

“The lab could be working for the government.”

“So with that logic, it would be impossible for you to figure out if you were raised by your real family.”

“I can only think of one way.”

Elliott shoved another handful of popcorn into his mouth and stared at me with eyes wide open while he chewed.

“Well?” The popcorn exploded out of his mouth. “What is it?”

“I have to get my dad to admit that he is a spy all on his own, and once he does, he’ll have to tell me everything.”

“And how are you going to do that?”

“I haven’t figured that part out yet.”

Elliott sighed and shook his head. He didn’t even need to speak for me to know what he was thinking. It would be something like, *You Americans*

*always fly by the seat of your trousers.* (He couldn't bring himself to say pants yet, which, he informed me, means underwear in British English.)

"I don't know," he said at last as he pulled his glasses down to the tip of his nose. "Doesn't sound like you have much of a case here."

It was time to lay all of my cards on the table. There was no reason to hold anything back at this point. He already knew too much. Luckily, I had come up with a whole list of reasons why the outcome of this investigation was so important. I kept it locked up behind the super secure password protection of my iPhone so no one could read it, but to gain Elliott's trust, I'd have to let him in.

"Here," I said as I entered my password and handed Elliott my phone. "Read this."

My list would never stand up in court. It wasn't about the facts as I knew them. It was about the things I might never know if I didn't conduct this investigation. For example, if my family was nothing more than a lifelong cover story for my lying, spying dad, I might never find out if I was adopted, or stolen, or grown in a CIA test tube in some hidden lab in Washington D.C. I'd never know if my sister Kara was a reject from some pile of unwanted sisters, as I'd suspected all along. I'd never know if my biological parents had passed along some rare genetic mutation that would cause me to sprout a tail at the age of sixteen. I'd never have the chance to find out if I had a wealthy grandfather who'd been searching his whole life for an heir to his billion-dollar fortune.

"A tail?" Elliott scoffed.

"Come on," I sighed. "It's just an example. Would you take me more seriously if I had written cancer?"

"Yes."

"Then change it to cancer," I said.

"Make it testicular cancer," he suggested.

"Why?"

"Because then I'd feel really sorry for you."

"Fine." I snatched my iPhone out of his hands and replaced "a tail" with "testicular cancer". "Happy now?"

"It feels like I shouldn't be," he said. "I mean, I did just suggest you might have cancer in your balls."

“Let me rephrase the question,” I said. “Will you help me or not?”

“I guess. As long as it doesn’t get me deported, or added to the No Fly List. I’d have a hard time explaining to my parents why the CIA won’t let me board the plane to Luxembourg for our holidays next summer.”

“Deal,” I said, and we shook on it.

“So what’s up with the car?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” I asked.

“Um...”

“I figured that if my dad is a spy, he must have spy things. You know, like camera pens and truth serums and...”

“Super secret spymobiles with built-in missiles and rear-facing oil cannons?” Elliott asked.

“Yes!” I knew Elliott would make a good asset. “What better way to hide a super secret spymobile than to pimp out a family sedan? No one would ever suspect it. And look!”

I held out the remote control key in the palm of my hand. It was a little black rectangle no bigger than a domino with five buttons on it: a closed lock, an open lock, a light bulb, an open trunk, and two red triangles.

“If I were a government engineer in charge of super secret spyware,” I explained, “I’d have to figure out how to embed some sort of hidden function inside this tiny key. It couldn’t be the lock and unlock buttons because the spy would still have to be able to lock the car. But this one...” I pointed toward the light bulb. “This one looks suspicious.”

“It looks like a light bulb,” Elliott said, not impressed.

“Of course it *looks* like a light bulb, but use your imagination. See anything else?”

Elliott scratched his head and offered up the only idea that came to mind. “A closed toilet seat with some obnoxious odor seeping out of it?”

“Really? That’s the first thing you see?” I might have needed to re-evaluate Elliott’s usefulness. “Just film me with my phone, and it’ll all be clear.”

Elliott took my phone again and proceeded to cover the entire screen in salt and popcorn grease. He would make a horrible spy. Unless being a spy meant doing things that made you look like a horrible spy so that nobody suspected you of being a spy. Then he would make an excellent spy.

We left the car in the garage and headed back down the alley. Safely tucked away behind the telephone pole once more, we resumed the test.

“This is Ian Barker initiating test one of Operation Overblanket.”

“Why Overblanket?”

“Cut!” I yelled with my hands in the air. “Elliott! You can’t talk while we’re filming. It ruins the whole thing.”

“Fine, but since we’re not filming right now anyway, why is it called Operation Overblanket?”

“Think about it. If something is *undercover*, what is the opposite?” I paused, waiting for him to catch up, but the perplexed look on his face told me I would have to wait too long and my patience was running thin. “If it’s not *undercover*, it’s *overblanket*, obviously! We’ve brought something secret out from under the covers and put it over the blanket. We’re exposing an undercover spy. Get it?”

“You Americans are unnecessarily complex,” he said.

“Could we focus please? And we’re rolling in five, four, three, two, one...” I pointed to Elliott, who scrambled to start recording again with his greasy fingers. “This is Ian Barker initiating test one of Operation Overblanket. The target is the midnight blue Volvo XC90 located in that garage.”

I pointed, dropped the remote, and screamed as I leapt for cover. Elliott burst out laughing and pointed toward the phone to indicate that he was still recording. Great.

“Ahem. Sorry. We will test to see if this button...” I pointed at the button that looked like a light bulb... “is in fact a remotely controlled explosive device implanted in a family sedan that seats seven. Here we go.”

I squeezed behind the telephone pole, extended my right arm, closed my eyes, and clicked.

There was no sound. No boom. No shower of auto parts. Nothing. Just a flash as all the lights inside and outside the car turned on all at once.

*Plausible deniability*, I thought.

If it looked like a light bulb and worked like a light bulb, no one would suspect that the button on that remote key fob would have any other function. Smart.

Elliott shrugged his shoulders and pointed at the phone again to let me know he was still recording.



“OK,” I said, staring straight into the camera. “Test two.”

This time I pressed the button twice in rapid succession. Still nothing happened. No explosion. No proof of my theory. I was still at square one. Or maybe...

I looked at the remote control again, and my eyes were drawn to the two red triangles at the bottom. One of the triangles was tucked inside the other – almost like something had forced it to expand outward – like there was some explosive new proof just waiting for me if I pushed that button.

“This is Ian Barker initiating the third and final test of the suspect Volvo XC90 in Operation Overblanket.”

I pointed the key toward the car for the final test, double-clicked on the red triangles, and my secret plan that no one was supposed to know about exploded in my face.

## Chapter Two

“Shut it off. Shut it off!” I yelled.

“I can’t, you dimwit,” Elliott scoffed. “You have the remote.”

In the split second of chaos that followed the nonstop honking of the car alarm, I had forgotten that I was holding the key. The car horn, amplified by the echo chamber of our nearly empty garage, blasted on and off in a cycle of repeated embarrassment that bounced off every home along the alley, out into the streets of Alki, and over the open waters of Puget Sound. A passenger on the Bainbridge Island ferry could have heard the results of my undercover operation. So much for secrecy.

Elliott and I rushed into the garage as I pressed every button I could find on the remote. The doors locked. The hatch popped open. The lights turned on. Then, finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the alarm shut off.

“I guess that test was a bust,” I admitted as I shut the kitchen door behind me and breathed a sigh of relief.

“Ya think?”

“I should still review the video to see if anything happened we didn’t notice. Where’s my phone?”

“Oh, I left it in the garage,” Elliott said. “Just a sec. I’ll run out and—”

Elliott froze in front of the back door. Without turning to look at me he

raised his right hand and waved frantically for me to come and look with one finger pressed urgently to his lips.

“Shhhhhh!” he whispered.

I followed Elliott’s finger as he pointed up the alley. Someone wearing a gray and purple Washington Huskies hoodie was walking straight toward our garage. Every few steps he swiveled his head to look behind him, but there was no doubt about where he was going. He checked his phone briefly before he raised his head and looked right at our back door. I nearly pulled Elliott’s pants off as I dragged him to the floor.

“Oh my God!” I exclaimed. “My dad’s coming home!”

“Why is that a big deal?” Elliott whispered. “He lives here.”

“Because he probably heard the car alarm,” I explained. “And if he heard the car alarm, and he knows I was here, he’s going to want to know what was going on.”

We huddled behind the door listening for the creaky sound of the back gate that would announce my approaching doom, but there was no sound at all.

“He’s probably checking the mailbox,” I guessed.

“What should we do?” Elliott asked. “We can’t just sit here. It’ll look pretty suspicious if he opens the back door and finds us hiding on the kitchen floor.”

“Let me check again. Just a sec.”

I raised my head slowly to peer through the window just in time to see the door from the garage open into the backyard. In a panic, I yanked Elliott and we crawled as fast as our hands and knees would carry us out of the kitchen. We made a beeline for my bedroom and dove under the tangled vines of dirty laundry that had converted my floor into its own developing ecosystem. It was the perfect camouflage. I threw a handful of clothes on top of Elliott’s head before I buried my hands and face and lay flat on the floor. We were practically invisible. It was perfect. Well, mostly perfect.

“Ewwww!” Elliott protested. “What is that smell?”

“Shhhhhh! My dad’s in the kitchen.”

There was a moment of tense silence. The overpowering odor of socks and damp swimsuits made the stale air nearly unbreathable. It would make for good torture. I’d have to remember this experience if I ever needed to coax information out of my sister.

“Ian!” my dad yelled.

“This is a problem,” I said through the cover of my pajama bottoms.

“It’s not the only problem,” Elliott whispered. “What if your dad found your phone in the garage?”

“IAN!!!” my dad roared.

I gulped.

“Do not make me count!” my dad called out from the kitchen.

“We have three seconds,” I said. “He always counts to three when he’s mad. What should we do?”

“*Yksi!*” my dad yelled.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “What language is that?”

Elliott listened.

“*Kaksi!*”

“I don’t know.” Elliott shrugged. “Finnish I think.”

“See! I didn’t even know he knew Finnish! What normal person knows Finnish?”

“*Kaksi ja puoli!*”

“Was that three?” Elliott asked.

“Probably not. He usually adds fractions to stretch out the time.”

“So how do you know when he’s gonna get to three?”

I shrugged my shoulders and sent a pair of last week’s underwear tumbling into Elliott’s face. He sniffed twice and stifled a dry heave.

“*Kaksi ja kolme neljäsosa!*”

“I shouldn’t risk it,” I said as I stood up and shook off a week’s worth of laundry. “Wait here a few minutes and then come into the kitchen.”

“Shouldn’t we have a code word so I know when to come?” Elliott asked.

“Good idea! When I say ‘pickle juice’, you come into the kitchen. Got it?”

“Got it.”

I threw open the door and tiptoed through the hall into the kitchen just as my dad yelled, “*Kolme!*”

“Hi, Dad!” I announced as I slid socks first onto the tile floor in the kitchen. “What’s up?”

“Ian, we have a problem.”

## THE SPY WHO GROUNDED ME by Matthew Olson-Roy

### SYNOPSIS

Eleven-year-old Ian can't access repressed memories through hypnosis by frosted doughnut, so he takes a more drastic approach and gets in trouble to prove his dad's a spy. But someone at Seattle's Alki Elementary thwarts his investigation. Is it Ian's nemesis, Fiona Fairweather? Or is the betrayal closer to home? When his dad attends the all-school assembly, Ian has a plan to blow the case wide open, if he doesn't blow up the school first!

### BIOGRAPHY

Matthew Olson-Roy is a graduate student in Creative Writing at the University of Oxford. His fiction debut, the Pushcart-nominated short story 'Our Monstrous Family', appeared in *The 3288 Review*. He lives in Luxembourg with his husband and their two children.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Great title! The writing is smart and polished and I'm a fan of the dialogue, particularly between Ian and Elliott, which is snappy and funny'

'I love the way the author sets this up so initially we think Ian has an overactive imagination and is making things up and by the end of the extract we think he might be on to something. The humour is well done and the writing is engaging and entertaining.'

'There is attractive energy to the writing. The relationship between the two protagonists is nicely drawn, and their dialogue is good.'

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

**Website:** [www.matthewolsonroy.com](http://www.matthewolsonroy.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# THE CURSE OF THE WEIRD WOLF

By Dale Hannah

## **Hungry Like the Wolf**

My name is Stanley Wilde. I'm nine years old. And my parents are about to eat me...

HELP!

Dad jabs the air with his snout. It's a telltale sign he's caught a whiff of me. Dad's sniffer is a meat-seeking missile. There's nowhere to hide once his hooter locks onto your scent.

I grasp the padlock of my cage with trembling hands and triple-check it's secure. Last month's OPEN-DOOR DISASTER nearly cost me a leg, AND five toes. Dad munched on them like miniature sausage rolls. It was SO close. I still have the bite marks to prove it.

Dad springs from the kitchen table and heads straight for me. He slides to a stop at the bars of my cage and throws me his hungry look – fangs dripping with slobber.

'Hi, Dad,' I say.

He snarls, showing off weapons of MASS DESTRUCTION: teeth sharper than my gran's cut-throat razor – the one she uses to shave her back hair. Drool hangs from his chin like spears. I'm not sure what's worse – being eaten by Dad or drowning in his spit.

'There's a nice dad. Nice daddy—'

Dad snaps his jaws. He tips his head towards the ceiling and howls.

HOOOOOOOOOOOWWWWLLLLL!

Mum stirs. She sits up and yawns. Full moons always make her sleepy, but even Mum can't sleep through Dad's howling. Mind you, it's not as loud as her snoring.

'It's me, Dad,' I yell. 'Your son, Stanley! Remember me?'

Dad ignores me. He never recognises me when he's having one of his **BEASTLY TURNS**. To be honest, I don't know why I bother – you'd think after nine years I'd give up trying to get through to him. To Dad, I'm just a bite-sized snack. Something to enjoy between meals without ruining his appetite.

He clamps his powerful jaws to the metal bars of my cage and bites down. Fortunately, even Dad's gnashers aren't strong enough to chomp their way through my fortress of steel.

It's the same routine every full moon. If it wasn't for the safety of my cage tucked away in the corner of our kitchen, I'd be halfway down Dad's throat by now, heading for the vat of acid in his stomach. He'd be picking shards of splintered ribcage from his teeth in no time, and burping to his favourite tune from the golden olden days: 'Hungry Like the Wolf'.

Mum catches my scent and sniffs the air. She pounces to her furry feet, suddenly wide awake, and bounds towards me on all fours...

My heart notches up a gear...

**BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!**

Full moons have a habit of making Mum **MEGA** grouchy. Her spine stiffens and her hackles rise. She lets out a low growl, and like Dad, shows me her razor-sharp teeth. **AS IF I NEED REMINDING!**

I gulp. 'There's a good mum,' I say, hoping she might recognise me. 'Good mummy.'

Mum gives me proper evils. Right now, she hasn't a clue who I am, even though she gave birth to me. She scratches at the base of my cage with a furry paw and starts digging for bones...

**MINE!**

I am **SO** pleased our kitchen floor is made of stone.

It's not long before Jack, my older brother, joins the party. He hates missing out. He leaps off the sofa and lands on top of my cage with a thud.

'Don't you start,' I say. This is **SO** unfair. It's bad enough when your parents want to eat you. Three against one is **TOTALLY** unreasonable.

I'm sure there must be laws against eating family members. I've a good mind to call Will De Beest, the Animal Warden. He's responsible for law and order around here – or should that be *dis*order.

Jack jumps up and down on the metal struts of my cage and makes it judder.

I shriek. 'Get lost, Jack!' I poke him with my latest copy of *Wolf Boy*.

He ignores me. He squeezes a shaggy paw between the bars of my cage and claws at my comic.

'Get off!' I slap his wolfy foot away. 'Go and bother someone else.'

Jack bristles. His ears prick. He tips his head down and jerks it from side to side as if trying to compute my words. Dribble, hanging from his fuzzy snout, reaches towards me and licks my neck. **GROSS!**

Mum edges even closer. Her tail whips back and forth like a windscreen wiper in a rainstorm. She sticks the tip of her muzzle up close and personal and licks her lips. Her toxic wolf breath catches at the back of my throat.

I splutter.

Dad nuzzles Mum's neck. I think he's upset he can't make mincemeat out of me. Stanley burgers would go down a treat right now.

Jack jumps off my cage and joins Mum and Dad. I snatch glances at each of them in turn.

Six eyes the colour of amber scan my fleshy body...

Three tongues dripping with spittle slurp their whiskered lips...

Three stiffened tails quiver on high alert...

And **ONE** thing plays on their mind...**EATING ME!**

'What?' I say.

Mum, Dad and Jack whimper in unison.

'It's no use whimpering,' I say. 'If you're hungry, go and catch a squirrel...you're not eating me...not today. Stanley is off the menu!'

### **The Moon Morphers**

Jack snarls. He body-slams the bars of my cage and then cocks his leg and pees...

**ON. MY. FOOT!**

'You're gross!' I reach inside my rucksack and pull out my bumper pack

of wet wipes. I mop **DISGUSTING** brother wee from between my toes. Why didn't I wear my wellies?

I cram the packet of wet wipes back inside my rucksack that's stuffed to bursting with emergency supplies. Then, carefully, I pull out my Chronos IV, avoiding any sudden movements, and scan the silver dials. It's a state of the art watch Mum and Dad gave me for my birthday to help me survive their **MOON MORPHING**. They try their best to make sure I survive – they don't mean to hunt me down, they can't help it – it's the **BEAST** within them that's to blame. I try not to take it too personally. And besides, I'm used to it.

My Chronos IV is a top-of-the-range timekeeper, but even more importantly, it has a lunar alarm which lets me know when there's a full moon. According to my Chronos IV there are still another six hours left. Six more hours to fend off my greedy family.

Jack whines. He bounces up and down on his front paws. It's as if he's trying to tell me it's supper time.

'Why can't you—'

**SNAP!**

A sound from outside interrupts me. The noise sends Dad in a frenzy. It's probably a deer minding its own business on the forest path that runs by the side of our cave house.

**BIG** mistake, Bambi!

Dad claws at our front door until it creaks open. He bounds outside, yipping and yapping. Mum howls and then pounces after him. Jack follows close behind, his tail pointing at the ceiling.

The minute Jack's hairy bottom leaves the house, I unlock the padlock to my cage and scramble towards the front door. I slam it closed and slide the bolt on.

**Result!**

I was beginning to think they'd never leave.

I plop onto the sofa and heave a **GINORMOUS** sigh of relief. That's the last I'll see of my family until morning. Another moon morph bites the dust and I've survived to tell the tale. That's over a hundred now. But I'm sure it's only a matter of time before my luck runs out.

I hate full moons. They are officially the **WORST. THING. EVER**. Full moons steal my family and make me lonely. I'm **SO** glad when they're over.



It's not easy being related to a bunch of moon morphers – or werewolves – as they're more commonly known. For some reason, I'm the only one in our family who's not a werewolf.

I bite my bottom lip to stop it from trembling. Life would be SO much easier if I was a werewolf. For one, I wouldn't need to lock myself inside a cage every month. Even when I was a baby, Mum had to hide me in a cage. And no matter how much I cried she could never let me out. Not because she didn't want to, she would have loved to munch on me, it's more because furry paws are useless at opening locks.

I push thoughts of not being a werewolf to the back of my mind. They have a habit of making my eyes leak. The truth is, I'd give anything to be a werewolf, to be a part of my family's pack. I hate being different.

Dad is SO proud of Jack. If I was a werewolf cub too, then Dad would be proud of me.

Dad says I've got the curse of the Weird Wolf.

Apparently, it's MEGA rare. It's where members of a werewolf pack are unable to moon morph. They somehow resist the pull of the full moon. Dad promised he'd find a cure, but he's not had much luck so far.

I just hope he finds one BEFORE he eats me.

### **The Wolf in Sheep's Clothing**

'Stanley!' Mum rushes into the kitchen.

'M-m-morning,' I say, spluttering on Wolfibix, the breakfast cereal with EXTRA BITE. 'You took your time.'

Mum grabs me by the werewolf onesie – the one she made so I wouldn't feel left out – and hauls me to my feet. She plucks at my fake wolf ears and SNAPS the hood from my head. 'You survived,' she says, holding me tight. 'I'm so glad we didn't eat you for supper.'

'Me too!'

Mum clamps me to her chest even tighter and kisses the top of my head. Mum is SO clingy after a full moon. She's a different person once the wolf has left her. 'I...can't...breathe...'

Mum sniffs my scalp. I think she's trying to inhale me. If she's not careful I'll end up wedged inside her nose like a MASSIVE bogey.

‘Clothes...on...’ I try to speak but my voice box is being crushed under Mum’s vice-like grip.

Fortunately, Jack saves the day. ‘MUM!’ he yells. ‘You’re throttling him!’ ‘Sorry, Stanley love,’ Mum says, finally letting go.

I gasp. ‘Clothes...’

Mum almost squeezed the life from me. I’m not sure when Mum is more dangerous: during or after a full moon. During a full moon, she wants to smother me with gravy, after a full moon she wants to smother me with kisses.

‘What was that about clothes?’ Mum looks at me with teary eyes. She’s always a bit teary after a moon morph.

‘Er...put some on!’

‘OH MY DAYS!’ Jack grabs his dressing gown. ‘Forgot I was still naked.’

I close my eyes and listen to my family grapple with dressing gowns. Mum makes Dad and Jack wear them when there’s a full moon. She gets sick and tired of repairing shredded clothes. Apparently dressing gowns slide off werewolves much easier than normal clothes.

‘I don’t believe this!’ Jack grabs the empty Snaffles carton from the sideboard and lobs it at me.

I duck.

The empty crisp tube whistles past my head and smacks Dad on his temple.

CRACK!

I snigger. Jack’s got a worse throw than Mum.

‘Ouch!’ Dad says, rubbing his head. ‘Who threw that?’

‘Stan’s wolfed all the Snaffles down again.’ Jack sounds like he’s about to cry.

‘I was hungry,’ I say. ‘A boy’s got to eat.’

‘Never mind, Jack,’ Mum says. ‘Stanley was alone last night. He needs comfort food.’

‘So do I,’ Jack says, whining. ‘I’m starving.’

‘Starving,’ I say. ‘It looks like you’ve already eaten a flock of sheep.’

‘It was one sheep!’ Jack says, scowling at me. ‘And that was hours ago.’

‘Looks like you’re wearing it.’ I laugh out loud. ‘Always said you were a wolf in sheep’s clothing.’

Jack's face reddens.

At least, I think it does, it could be sheep blood. He brushes away clumps of wool stuck to his head and chest. 'It was only a baby one,' he says, tugging at the strings of wool caught between his teeth. 'Hardly enough to fill a goblin.'

'So, it was a lamb then?' I say.

Jack shakes his head. 'No, it was definitely a sheep.'

I roll my eyes. 'Same thing, doofus!' It's official: my brother is a LAMEBRAIN. I think it's the MEATY diet.

'Well done, son,' Dad says, patting me on the back and changing the subject. 'You're a survivor, I'll give you that.'

'I'll be needing a bigger cage soon,' I say, trying to put on a brave face at the thought of yet another cage.

'You're definitely growing,' Dad grabs the handle of my cage and drags it across the kitchen floor. It's off to Dad's cave shed, where it will stay until the next full moon. I'm glad to see the back of it. I know it keeps me safe, but I really wish I didn't need to use it. To be a free-range werewolf is my NUMBER ONE dream.

I smile at Dad. 'I'll be as big as Jack soon,' I say.

'Whatever!' Jack says, making a point of looking DOWN at me. 'You'll always look up to me,' he adds.

I ignore him. One day, I'll show him, it won't be long before I'm beating him at arm wrestling. I pull at Dad's sleeve. 'Should I design a new cage? I could do with a toilet—'

Dad grips my shoulder. 'You won't be needing a new cage, son,' he says, shaking his head. 'Or toilets!'

'W-w-what do you mean?' I say.

Dad ruffles my fake wolf fur. 'No more cages,' he says, running a finger along my ribcage. He presses the squidgy strips of flesh covering my ribs.

I throw Dad my confused look.

'You're a *big* boy now.' Dad eyes me up and down. 'It's *time*...' He squeezes my bicep.

'Time...' I say. 'Time for what?'

Jack steps up close and sniffs my Wolfibix breath. 'Fancy a barbecue tonight, Dad?'

‘What a good idea,’ he says, thumping Jack on the back.

‘B-b-barbecue...?’ Is that why Dad’s feeling my muscles? AND my ribs! He thinks I’m ready...to EAT! He LOVES barbecued ribs! There’s NOTHING he wouldn’t do for them. ‘Y-y-you’re going to e-e-eat me?’

Dad chuckles.

Jack licks slaver from his lips. It’s probably the thought of barbecued ribs.

I don’t believe it! When Dad promised to rid me of my curse...I didn’t think he was going to *barbecue* it out of me. ‘YOU’RE ANIMALS!’

### **Rowena Ragwort: the Mother of All Witches**

‘D-d-dad, please,’ I say, jumping to my feet. My cereal bowl clatters to the floor. ‘I-I-I know you’re sick of building new cages, b-b-but be reasonable—’

Dad sniggers. ‘We’re teasing you, son.’

‘Teasing me!’

Jack laughs out loud. He punches me on the arm. ‘Got you!’

‘NOT. FUNNY!’

‘Ignore them,’ Mum says, running her fingers through my grizzled fringe. ‘Your dad’s a bit skittish today. He’s excited.’

Dad beams at Mum. He looks SO pleased with himself. The last time Dad looked so happy was when Gran told him she was emigrating to Wolverhampton and wouldn’t be able to visit as often. ‘You don’t need a new cage, son...because I’ve...’

Mum hoops her arm around Dad. She’s gone all teary-eyed again.

‘Sheesh!’ Jack rolls his eyes. ‘It’s not *that* exciting.’

‘Tell me!’ I tug at Dad’s dressing gown belt. ‘What is it?’

‘I’ve found the cure, son. The cure to your curse.’ Dad’s voice cracks.

‘You’ve what...?’ Did I hear Dad right? Did he say he’d found the cure? I knew I should have had a shower last night – I think I might need to wash my ears out.

Dad’s lips tremble. ‘I’ve found the cure, son,’ he repeats, squeezing my shoulder.

‘R-r-really?’ I say, not quite believing it. Those are the words I’ve been waiting to hear since FOREVER.

Mum blinks. ‘Your dad’s right.’ A tear rolls down her cheek.

If Dad's found the cure to my curse it means that...I'll...I'll be a moon morpher. A real-life ACTUAL werewolf. 'Where is it?' I reach inside Dad's pockets. This is the BEST. PRESENT. EVER.

'Steady on, son, the cure's not here.' Dad wriggles and giggles. He's always been a bit ticklish.

'But...I don't understand.'

'You need to see Rowena Ragwort. She'll tell you what to do.'

'ROWENA RAGWORT!' I shriek. My mouth drops open and my jaw clatters to the floor.

Mum nods. 'She's the mother of all witches.'

'I-I-I know who she is,' I say.

Jack laughs out loud. 'Good luck with that.'

'Problem?' Mum exchanges glances between me and Jack.

Dad tries to calm the situation. He holds his hands out. 'I know you don't like going into Witch World, but it's for the—'

I shake my head. 'It's nothing to do with Witch World.' I slap trembling hands to my face. 'Rowena Ragwort might be the mother of all witches...but worse than that...much worse...she's the *mother* of Martha Ragwort!'

Dad shrugs. 'So?'

'SO!' I screech. 'Martha Ragwort is the most annoying witch-girl EVER. She's in my class. Miss *Mona* Lott makes me sit next to her!'

'She can't be that bad,' Mum says.

'Actually, she is,' Jack says, sniggering. 'Her spells always end in disaster – there was this one time...'

I ignore Jack. His reminders are NOT helping. I shake my head. 'I can't go to Martha's house. Please don't make me...'

Dad puts his arm around me. He pulls me up close and gives me a bear hug. Or should that be a wolf hug? 'You do want to be *one of us*...don't you...Stan?' He narrows his eyes at me.

'C-c-course I do,' I say.

'That's settled then.' Dad pincer grips me by the arms. 'Not long now – we'll soon have you howling at the moon and crunching on hedgehogs...'

## **Welcome to Weirdsville**

I stare open-mouthed at the cat's GIANT bum hole. I can't believe entering Witch World involves crawling through a cat's bottom...

**YUCK!**

Fortunately, it's not an actual real-life LIVING cat. It's a GIGANTIC plastic one that guards the entrance to Witch World: home to the Ragwort Clan. The only way to enter Witch World is by climbing the rope ladder, crawling through cat guts, and then projectile vomiting from its mouth. Why are witches SO weird?

I lean against one of the visitor maps dotted around WOW! to gather my strength – I'm going to need it where I'm going. A great big, blue arrow and the words 'YOU ARE HERE' scream out from the map to remind me of where I am – as if I didn't know.

It's now or never. I grip the twisted rope, which has been designed to look like entrails hanging from the cat's bottom, and start my climb.

I've lived in WOW! all my life. Before it was abandoned, it used to be a safari park for fantastical creatures run by humans. They called it: the World of Weird! Gran told me it's been here for donkey's years – I'm not sure how long a donkey year is, but it's a VERY long time. Apparently, in the good old days, humans paid good money to stare at weird creatures and poke them with sticks.

I raise a wibbly foot and try to balance it on a wobbly step that's been covered in slime.

**GROSS!**

WOW! is designed like a wheel. At the centre is Weirdsville: the village hub, where creatures gather for special occasions, do their weekly shop and play hook-a-duck (or hook-a-human if they happen to catch one). From the central hub, boundaries stretch out like the spokes of a wheel and divide the different worlds that the humans created into ZONES.

I live in Land of Beasts. It's a zone JAM-PACKED with werewolves, ogres, trolls and cyclopes. There's even a yeti! Dad says he's abominable, but I think he's quite friendly.

On reaching the bum hole entrance, I grip plastic rivets that have been fashioned into bottom warts and pull my body inside.

Eventually humans stopped coming to WOW! That's when Gran

said it all went a bit pear-shaped. Funny, but it still looks wheel-shaped to me. No one's quite sure what happened, but while the human population took a nose dive, there was a MASSIVE explosion in the frog population. Witches were the prime suspects, though the humans could never prove it. Gran said most of them were hopping mad.

I weave my way through the cat's innards on tippy-toes and stumble towards the circle of light directly ahead.

There aren't many humans left now. The few that remain like to keep a low profile in their own zone: Pay & Display. It's a car park that once marked the entrance to WOW!

I clamber through the cat's stomach, climb rickety stairs that have been moulded into the cat's food pipe, and then crawl out of its open mouth, carefully avoiding serrated teeth that are as big as MOUNTAIN peaks.

I jump bottom first onto the giant pink tongue and then hurtle to the ground like a giant furball.

SLAM!

Springing to my feet, I leap towards the forest path that dissects Witch World in two. I follow clumps of witch hazel until the road forks, and then try to recall Dad's instructions.

Left.

It was definitely left at the fork.

Or was it right?

I can't even remember which way left is. I lift my feet and check the soles of my trainers. Mum wrote a BIG L and a BIG R on the bottom of them, so I wouldn't forget. I follow the BIG L.

It is MOST definitely left.

Five minutes later, I return to the fork in the road. I remember now, it's right. It's MOST definitely right.

Emerging from a clutch of willow trees, I spot a clearing that looks familiar. I remember coming here with Gran once. She wanted a spell to try to cure her excessive hair growth. I know my gran's a werewolf, but she's very hairy even BEFORE the wolf visits her.

On reaching the picket fence that surrounds the Ragwort cottage, I drop to the floor and squeeze through a gap. Creeping towards the bottom of Martha's garden, I find a bush and take cover...

### **Witch in Training**

‘STANLEY WOLFGANG WILDE!’

I watch Martha Ragwort through the gaps in the bush as she HOLLERS at me. She can’t possibly know I’m hiding in here. It’s the BUSHIEST bush I could find at the bottom of her BUSHY garden.

Martha zooms towards me. ‘Get out of Mum’s foliage!’ she snaps.

‘B-b-but...how...?’ I crawl from beneath the Ragwort’s bushy borders on all fours.

‘Hardly miss those scabby legs of yours!’ Martha looks down her hooked nose at me. She pouts, reminding me of the cat’s bottom I’ve just crawled through. Her arms are folded tightly against her chest. ‘You look like roadkill. Get up, before the crows eat you!’

I stagger to my feet.

‘Who’s been biting you?’ Martha points to my shins.

‘Er...Mum and Dad mistook me for a lamb chop,’ I say, trying to conceal my gnarled legs behind a leafy branch. Why did I wear my shorts?

Martha snorts. ‘Werewolves are SOOOOO dumb!’ She does a one-eighty and flies off. She’s wearing BROOMSTICK SNEAKERS. They’re like jet-propelled shoes. Unfortunately, only witches can wear them – it’s SO unfair. On reaching her front door, she spins round to face me. ‘Come on! Mum’s waiting for you. There’s not much time left...’



## THE CURSE OF THE WEIRD WOLF by Dale Hannah

### SYNOPSIS

Stanley Wilde hates being different. He'd give anything to be a werewolf like the rest of his family. Unable to transform, Stanley spends full moons locked inside a cage, avoiding parents with one thing on their mind: EATING HIM! Determined to break his curse, Stanley leaves home and embarks on a treacherous journey around the World of Weird, an abandoned safari park for fantastical creatures. But has Stanley bitten off more than he can chew?

### BIOGRAPHY

Dale Hannah has a passion for writing funny middle grade fiction; he is especially fond of puns. Dale has previously won a Northern Writers' Award and the Commonword Diversity Prize, along with longlistings for both the *Times* Chicken House Prize and the Bath Children's Novel Award. He's partial to Maltesers.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Brilliant first line – "My parents are about to eat me". Attention snagged!

'*The Curse of the Weird Wolf* has a good commercial premise and Stanley Wilde has a great funny voice. The world is set up well for lots of adventures, and there's a lot of series potential. It'll have readers howling with laughter, whether it's a full moon or not!

'These moon morphing high jinks are light and fun and the tech (the Chronos IV) is good. The writing has bags of personality – this would be a good read for boys.'

Contact: [dalehannah007@gmail.com](mailto:dalehannah007@gmail.com)

Website: [www.dalehannah.com](http://www.dalehannah.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# THE BOY I AM

By Kathryn Kettle

## **The House of Boys**

We blind ourselves to beauty.  
Our speech is sacred.  
To love is illusion.

### **1**

*My name is Jude Grant, and I am alive.*

Centre stage, I face the deafening crowd.

And I smile.

‘Tonight’s final lot!’ Mr Walker, Head of the House of Boys, introduces me over the theatre’s loudspeakers. ‘Number one hundred and fifty.’

Pinned in the spotlight, I squint, shade my eyes with one hand and wave with the other. Cheers from the audience ahead smack into my chest, hard, skewering skin through to stomach, stomach through to spine, spine through to sparkling scenery. Can’t tell if it’s the floor or my knees that are shaking more.

Smile number one is *gracious without being smarmy*. That’s what I’m aiming for, at least, to hide my locked jaw. Sweat crawls from my hairline. As I adjust my collar, cold dread snakes down my spine.

Pose. Wave.

Offstage, Walker reads out my stats. ‘Age sixteen,’ his disembodied voice hums.

*Too old*, drones the voice in my head. It always sounds like *your*

voice, Vik, these days. Trying to make me laugh. *Still, you've lasted longer than I did.*

'Five foot nine,' Walker says.

*Too short, your voice. I was taller.*

'One hundred and forty pounds.'

*Too fat.*

Shut up, I want to say. Laughing for a second, like it's a for-real thing, like the ghost of you is right there thinking you're so funny, and proud you got me to react even if it was just in my head. My performance slips; for a second I wasn't in the mouth of the Great Theatre. For a second I wasn't selling myself for a night to the highest bidder. For a second it was us, back in the dorms below ground, laughing. For a second you were alive.

Back to smile one. My face hurts but it's easy to hide behind.

Squinting into the darkness, I look for *her*—the Chancellor. Remembering the vast layout of the underground theatre, how it's not so scary with the house lights up: the endless rows of frayed red chairs, ancient worn carpet, dusty chandeliers, and her balcony, now in the dark, in the centre of the dress circle. Dead ahead. Above it all. Is she there yet?

A woman in the audience drops a glass and everything goes awkward quiet. My silk-slipped toes curl, squeaking against the rubbery stage floor. The boards beneath creak.

Walker coughs. 'Yes, so, lot one fifty is a fourth year at the House of Boys. Last year available for Auction. No previous reserves on the books. I'm pleased to announce the House of Merit can offer a discount on request tonight.'

'Oooooooooooooo,' goes the audience.

'A much-improved lot on previous years, I'm sure you'll agree.'

The audience laughs and the spotlight moves forward, a cue for me to follow it. There are bugs that thrive in the dorms below. They fizz and pop in the blue lights they chase.

In the glow of the limelight, low-lit tables in front of the stage swim into focus as I step forward and bow. The women lean forward. Hungry shadows. Every face completely hidden behind blank, white masks. There must be hundreds of women in the stalls, thousands in the seats surrounding them. Rumour is that the richest women, the ones who live

on the top floors of the tower, they get the front tables. They pay the most merits for a spot to judge us best.

Time to deploy smile number two. *A little bit defiant.*

Bad choice. The masks retreat, disappointed, into the darkness.

Another drop of sweat slides between my eyebrows, along the inside of my eye socket. It's salty. Stings like needles.

It's not their merits we need tonight, but doesn't do any harm to get them interested.

*Pull it together,* says the part of me that sounds like you, Vik. And it's strong like you were, brave like you were. It's the voice of the boy I want to be. *You owe me,* it says. *You're still alive.*

Wiping my eye, before I turn to find my place among my brothers upstage, I make sure the women see the kind of smile you said would make them all reach for their wallets. You called it the 'I just need you to fix me' smile.

'Awwwwwwwwwwww,' goes the audience.

*See, you can do this.*

I know.

All I have to do is kill the Chancellor.

## 2

Upstage is stacked high with glittering platforms. With my back turned, music plays me to my mark: the furthest platform, back row. Last in the line-up behind one hundred and forty-nine other boys displayed, choir-like, in matching dark suits. Trying to be graceful is hard while weaving between my brothers. But that's the second I get to turn my back, get to breathe out, stretch my jaw, loosen the knots in my stomach. That second is everything.

Walker's deep voice cuts through. 'Ladies, when Chancellor Hyde asked me to host this year's Auction I did what any sane gentleman would do...'

Clunk! Up go the stage lights, full beams, swinging, sweeping over the boys surrounding me, all grinning and waving and cheering like their lives depend on it.

‘...I said to myself: one hundred and fifty handsome young men?’

It’s either this, or the mines, for all of us. Deep in the pit of the earth, the endless dark, lucky if you last a year down there, that’s what the House Fathers say in our dorms. They call us the lucky ones.

Unless you find another way.

‘...I picked out my outfit, and I said, “Yes please!”’

Slicing my own smile back into place, I wave too.

*All you have to do is?*

Swoosh! Spotlights move from us and into the crowd.

All I have to do... There, ahead, distant silver fabric drapes of the Chancellor’s balcony come gleaming into view.

All I have... Bitter bile jumps into my throat. Before I can even swallow, snap, the view is gone. The spotlights creak back, flooding the stage as the suave silhouette of Walker sashays into view.

Everyone in the audience coos at the sight of him. That’s Walker: always cool, always smart. Perfect smile. Perfect poise. Perfect man. What would the women pay for a night with him? But, he belongs to *her*. He’s the Chancellor’s man.

Next to me is lot one-four-nine. He leans close. ‘Is it true you’ve met him?’

‘No,’ I lie in a whispered snap. Parts of me have started to go numb. I really am going to pass out. *Keep it together.*

‘Let’s give a big hand for this year’s boys,’ Walker leads an applause.

The Chancellor bought Walker to be her ward when he was my age. Perfect as he may be, the House Fathers say she’s been looking for a younger model for years, never settled on one though.

*Till now, you say.*

Shut up.

I can’t do anything to the Chancellor stuck on stage. Have to get her on her own. She has to bid on me. I lose grip on smile number three: *patient, not too bored*. It’s not going to work. I’m the last lot. There are cuter, hotter, taller, thinner, more muscly boys before me with better skin, squarer jaws. Better hair. Better smiles. Better everything.

There’s a powerful need to scratch an itch at my neck, but I’m meant to stay still, so I screw up my fists. Maybe I could run?

Walker’s still going, of course. He never shuts up. ‘Thank you.

So, ladies, you know the drill: tonight you get one night with your personal favourite.’ The women whoop and whistle at his classic *this-one’s-for-the-girl-at-the-back* wink. He points into the audience as if he can see someone he recognises. ‘Generous bids, please. Your merits tonight set our gentlemen’s opening dowry at the Auction.’

That itch is getting worse. Rotating my shoulders, stretching my neck, nothing shakes it.

Walker jokes, ‘I have to say, by the sight of these fellows the rumours are true: the House of Life keeps breeding our boys cuter.’

He stops suddenly. The spotlights catch on something else in the dark. Something in the aisles, lining up in front of the stage between us and the women.

They’re the shadows that the shadows hide...police!

‘Why...’ Walker pauses. Is he trying to be dramatic? ‘They’ll be giving yours truly... a rub – I mean, I run for his money soon enough.’ He has a habit of odd pauses, but he never ever fluffs his lines.

Lice. That’s what you called the police. You said they made you itch.

The audience laughs again, but not as much as before as Walker draws the light around the stage, tidying the corners of his slender moustache as he goes. He does that when he’s thinking.

‘Let’s start with a show of hands – how many new young debutants do we have tonight?’ he asks.

The house lights go up. Clunk.

Surrounding the hundreds of women are swarms of Lice. They’re at every single exit. Wrapped in black fabric and strapped into scales of armour. The fog-mask air filters they never take off hang like snouts.

No way out.

Walker coughs. ‘Well, aren’t you just gorgeous,’ he says as the house lights go down.

Clank.

I think maybe I get a flash of his eyeline.

‘So, what are we waiting for?’ Walker coughs again. He’s stalling because of the Lice. I could run? There’s a metallic ache in my throat. If I run, they’ll catch me, like you. They’ll catch me, like they caught you. *No way out*, you say.

There are Lice in the wings now too. I can feel them, watching me. Hear their filtered air, sucking in, pushing out.

Even the women aren't cheering now. They all know. They all see.

'Oh, yes!' Walker says, full of confidence, as if he'd forgotten the most important thing ever and just remembered.

He cups his hand to his ear to encourage the audience. 'You want me to announce this year's programme,' he says suddenly, as if one out of a thousand of our potential Guardians had asked him personally. 'Well, after tonight's reserves, there's your favourite talent show...' Pause for effect, a drum roll. 'Swimwear!' No one cheers. Someone coughs. Inside my chest my lungs are going to explode as Walker continues, full tilt. The stage screens light up with pictures of past events – words I've never been taught to read.

I imagine myself fighting the Lice dead, standing on top piles of them, triumphant. And the women all cheer. And I bow. And I run. Into the desert like we always planned, Vik. And fight monsters. And survive on my wits. And the Chancellor finds me in the sands and apologises and offers me anything I want. And I take all the other boys into the desert. And we start a new world. And—

'Next week, we've the Un-Masked Ball, for those gentlemen lucky enough to get reserved tonight.' Walker spreads it thick, as if any of this is a surprise, as if it's not the same schedule. Every. Single. Year. Reserves, Talent, Ball, Auction. I've never made it to the Talent show, let alone the rest of it. I never will.

Truth is I *have* met Walker. Today is the only day for months I've not had to spend hours in his company, preparing.

While the audience applauds dutifully at the display, Walker turns towards us, tidies his suit, his silver-sided dark hair – Saints' preserve him from having anything out of place – and now he really does catch my eye, checking I can do this.

I don't blink.

He nods, slight and deft, before cranking up his speciality smile, number ten, his *this-is-the-best-thing-ever-and-it's-even-better-because-I'm-pure-charm-doesn't-it-make-you-squirm* smile and spins back to his audience.

If you were still here, Vik, I wouldn't have agreed to hurt anyone,

let alone the Chancellor. But she had you hung, Vik. That's what I have to hold onto. She's a murderer.

There's a flicker of light in the silver-swagged balcony ahead. Movement, I think.

She's here.

The Chancellor. Top Floor, they say, the Single Most Important, Most Rich, Most-Most at Everything EVER. But what makes her so special? We all live, we all die. Sure, she didn't grow up in the tunnels. Sure, she's seen the sky. Sure, she's a woman, she's in charge, and I'm just a boy. Bet she bleeds the same as us.

Despite the heat, every bone in my body shivers with cold. Not knives, Walker and I decided. A fall. It's the cleanest. She has to fall, which means I have to push.

### 3

'APPLAUSE' flickers the sign above as lot one-twenty is led off stage. Some kid from B-dorm. We all shuffle forward.

Despite the ache prickling behind my eyes, I maintain smile eleven, my best. Walker calls it my *butter-wouldn't-melt* smile. He gave them names too, like you did, Vik. The reserve bidding is almost done, boys led one by one from the stage for their 'interviews'. We all know what that really means.

With each bid my guts tighten. What if the Chancellor wants someone else? What if the Lice arrest me before she decides?

Walker reaches the back row in record time. Less than twenty of us left winding our way to the spotlight.

Nineteen, eighteen, seventeen...

One of Vik's old gang gets to the spotlight on stage. In all his muscled glory, Toll says, 'My name is Hector Dent,' and slicks his hand through his golden hair. Side-smiling and winking like a pro. Roids brush up okay for Auction. 'Roids', that's what your old friends have taken to calling themselves, since you left, on account of the pills they get slipped by the women who favourite them.

Walker leans away from the stink of Toll's cologne.



‘I want to say, this is the best day of my life,’ Toll oozes. ‘I’ve been training hard, very hard, really hard. It’ll be an honour, an honour, to be with any one of you. Nobody wants this more than me.’

Bet you the Chancellor can tell I’m distracted. She’ll buy Toll, or Aye-Aye, one of the beefcakes. Whatever he promised, there’s no way Walker could fix that she’d buy me. No way. I told him he should’ve put me on roids too. He said he needed my mind perky, not my pecks.

Half the Top-Floor women in the pit raise their hands before Toll finishes speaking. There are bids from the madams in the balconies too. The reserve settles at three hundred merits, to Madam Van Gelder, Chief of Entertainment. Toll’s purring at that as he winks at Aye-Aye, next in the queue, and strolls backstage grabbing his crotch in the dark to make Aye-Aye laugh.

The candlelight in the Chancellor’s balcony doesn’t even flicker. Did she leave?

Only ten left. If it wasn’t for Walker there wouldn’t be a sound between bids. Even the Lice are waiting for something.

Nine...

Revenge, that was what Walker called killing the Chancellor, taking her out on one of the balconies of the skyscraper tower above us, saying I’d like to look over the edge, getting scared to make her feel like I’m vulnerable, need her help. *It’s okay*, she’ll say, *let me show you, it’s not so scary*, and she’ll look over the edge and that’s when I’ll do it. Just one job. Just one push. All the way down.

Eight...

We move closer. Walker gets to interview the boys near to me. I can hear his rasping breath, smell the oil in his hair. There’s heat coming from his skin.

Seven...

Imagine the Chancellor up close: her skin, and her bones, and her breath and her blood. I may have never seen a woman up close, but she’ll be real. Like Walker, like my brothers, like me. Could I push *Walker*?

Three...

No. Walker didn’t have my best friend murdered.

Two...

No, that was the Chancellor. Her and that girl, of course, the one with the blood-red hair. The one who made you run. Miss Romali Vor.

One...

Lot one-four-nine, who says his name is Paul, gets bid to Madam Cramp, Chief of Expression, for the night.

An ache spreads up my spine as Walker gets to me. My skeleton wants to tear itself separate and run away.

We've practised this. Don't look him in the eye. Focus on the balconies. Keep smiling. Don't panic.

'And now, our final gentleman this evening,' Walker says.

I'd swear the Lice all took a step forward. Can't hear them breathe any more.

Clearing my throat, I bite my lip and peer into the crowd. My brain's actually died. Right here. Right now. Pure Pinhead.

'I... My...'

Walker gave me a speech! I have to use the exact words. What were they?

Shit.

In the pit, a scratch echoes across the floor as a chair moves. I flinch back, expecting a surge of police. And yes, they're moving, but not towards me. They're moving towards the middle of the pit of women below. There's whispering, movement, getting closer, closer. Walker peers through the glare of the lights. Has the Chancellor been in the pit all along?

'Get off,' a young voice says.

Not the Chancellor, but a Top-Floor voice, brittle. A girl. The police push towards her. Other women try to pull the girl back to her seat. Plates and glasses clatter. Women snap and tell her to sit down, but she keeps moving. Closer.

'Leaving so soon?' Walker says to the girl as a drop of sweat appears on his perfect forehead. In one whole year I have *never*, not once, not ever seen him sweat.

When the girl stops, the police stop.

Walker presses, 'Were the gentlemen on offer tonight not good enough for you, Miss Vor?'

I already knew who she was, I knew from the blood-red colour of

her hair. The Chief of Peace's daughter. That's why they had you hung. No one runs away from Madam Vor's daughter.

Her answer is muffled behind her mask. The muscles in her neck tense angrily, string pulled tight. What right does she have to be angry? Shuffling in my spot, heat crawls up to my ears.

'Do you want to bid?' says Walker, slow, as if each word could push her back to her seat.

She's right at the edge of the lime-lit stage. Behind her bright, white mask her pupils are large, green as broken bottle glass. The spit in my mouth is sticky, so I swallow. She's staring at me and I know she knows. She knows I want to kill the Chancellor.

The Lice try to move closer. She puts out her hand, and again they stop.

She reaches behind her head, pulling at the knotted ropes of her hair, fiddling with the strands of it as if trying to tame some creature.

Her skin is darker than I remember.

In a flash I remember my speech, lean into the mic, and let the garble begin, 'My name is Jude Grant, and I...'

The last words of my speech are lost. There is a ladder of bones in her chest. Last year there was a roundness to her. Stop it. Pull it together.

'And I?'

*Swallow. Breathe. Start again.*

'My name is—'

I swerve out of the light as something comes hurtling through the dark towards me. Whatever it was slices through the light. The flats behind shake as it hits them, bounding back, it smashes on the stage. Shattered porcelain pieces fly in every direction.

After the silence, I stand. Find my light. Try not to let them see me shake.

Romali Vor stares up at me. The shattered thing on the ground was her mask. And the whole audience, thousands of women, gasp.

Miss Vor's green eyes blink. Beneath her stare is a blunt nose. Beneath that, her smile. Smile twelve: the look of a person who just won a fight. *Relaxed. Satisfied. A hint of pride.*

I can't look away.

I've broken the first law. Right then, hers is the first female face I've ever

seen. I should be afraid. I should be worried about the Chancellor, about the Lice, about Walker, about a million things. I reach for the fear I've felt all year, the ratcheting ache in the pit of me. It's not there. I search for the heat of anger instead. I should hate Madam Vor's daughter, shouldn't I? But the only thing I can think is: if the owner of that face bought *me*, I wouldn't run.

'Now you've *got* to arrest him,' Miss Vor tells the Lice.

Anger and the fear flood back in a wave, hitting me in the face. Walker steps between us, blocking the audience from my view. I peer round him to *keep looking at her*. Am I stupid! Unblinking, her wild eyes wide, she points at me, her voice shakes. She looks up to the balconies and shouts, towards where Madam Vor must be. 'Go on! Arrest him then!'

The swarms of Lice in the wings move closer to me. The Lice surrounding Miss Vor turn and begin to climb the stage.

'Wait—' I begin, and bite my tongue. No need to break *another* law. *Speak when spoken to, Jude.*

The girl shouts her order over and over and Walker's trying to calm them down, talking fast, but I can't hear as the Lice move towards me, kicking the broken pieces of Miss Vor's mask from the stage.

A soft voice from above sighs.

The sound slices through the terror running up my spine. The unmistakable tap of a finger on a microphone.

Even Walker goes quiet. No breath. No coughs. No creaks in seats or shuffles of feet. The silence makes my jaw clamp tight.

The sigh swims over the speakers again. Long and round and tired.

Bumps prickle at my arms under my suit when the audience of faceless women stand, as if shot through with electricity. They drop crumbs, knock at glasses and cutlery. Tables shift on the ground. The whole theatre shakes as if the ancient tower above us has pulled itself upright from a slump.

A third sigh, and the women all sit, with a thunderous thud. The spotlight moves fast, juddering in the rafters. The light traces the heads of the crowd, up, and up, until its glow floods the Chancellor's box.

She's too far away to see clearly. A curving shape that shifts and curls, swimming smoke in the light.

Walker steps aside, catches my eye with his burning blue glare before snapping back into the showman they know. By then I've remembered his instructions on what to do when the Chancellor stands.

I want her to want me. I want this, I remind myself, trying not to look at Miss Vor; and how she keeps staring, and how she is the most interesting thing I think I have ever seen. I bow, full charm turned up, squeezing the fear in my gut.

The Chancellor's slow tones order Walker, 'One merit,' she says. No one is going to outbid her.

I think the woman I'm meant to kill may have just saved my life.

## THE BOY I AM by Kathryn Kettle

### SYNOPSIS

In the House of Boys, men are auctioned into marriage, but Jude, sixteen, wants more. Escape and adventure, free in the nuclear desert, has been promised if he can assassinate the all-powerful Chancellor. Between avenging his best friend's death, competing in pageants against steroidal bullies, and trying not to fall in love with the rebellious Romali Vor, Jude must decide what kind of boy he wants to be: killer or concubine. Is there another way?

### BIOGRAPHY

By day Kathryn is a global business person and general nerd wrangler; by night she writes novels, short stories and flash fiction. She has been longlisted as part of the 2017 Bath Flash Fiction Award. She is also a member of the Golden Egg Academy.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'*The Boy I Am* has an instantly intriguing, compelling premise and the commercial writing captures the reader's attention. The description of the Chancellor is brilliantly done and the ending is great – I think everything is set up for an exciting adventure!'

'This is well done – I like the way the author plays with expectations. The auction feels familiar but then there's a darker undercurrent and the author layers that well until everything feels a whole lot less familiar.'

'This put me in mind of a gender flipped *Only Ever Yours* – an interesting idea! The writing is assured and tight, there's good tension – I want to read on.'

Contact: [kathryn@klkettle.com](mailto:kathryn@klkettle.com)

Website: [www.klkettle.com](http://www.klkettle.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# THE KNIGHT SHIFT

By Emma Mason

## Chapter One

In a time gone by when beards were short and tales were tall, the final participants in the Hogswallop Knights Trials stood on a hill eagerly awaiting glory.

Or immediate splatterfication. Whichever happened to come first.

They were also waiting for the last squire who was weaving his way miserably through the lush grass to join them. Merik the Valiant couldn't move any quicker even if he wanted to (which he didn't). His leather vest and trousers were covered from head to toe in the remains of the last trial, 'The Grizzlehorn Gizzard Guzzling Challenge', and he was being chafed in places that made his eyes water. He wasn't even sure what a gizzard was or why he'd had to eat bucketfuls of them to become a knight, but he was absolutely, very, *very* definite that he never wanted to see one again. Ever.

Somewhere deep inside of him (further down even than the churning gizzards trying to make their way back up), Merik couldn't help feeling that becoming a knight should be different somehow.

He thought knights were supposed to be as brave as Sir Boris the Hairsnatcher who had plucked the wee chinny hairs from the seven-headed sea worm.

As courageous as Sir Hectum the Toescratcher who had stolen the toenails of a fungus rockogre.

As adventurous as Sir Lionel the Bogeycatcher who had picked the nose of a sleeping firepuffer.

So...

Well, you get the picture. They were meant to be jolly brave.

That was certainly not the case nowadays. Thanks to the Circle of Magicians, Hogswallop was safer than a cotton wool ball covered in bubble wrap stuffed inside a giant marshmallow. In fact, it was so safe that the youngest knights couldn't even find a courageous deed to name themselves after.

Merik took his place in the line between Squire Sed'Bootoagoose and Squire Notwearingavest. Further along stood his own twin brother, Abel the even more Valianter (he was entitled to the 'er' because he had been born second), who was, as usual, ignoring him. For some reason, his brother looked uncharacteristically excited, which surprised Merik. Abel usually hated any sporting activity that involved talking to people and actually moving.

"STAND UP STRAIGHT, SQUIRES!" roared Sir Humfray the Valiantest, Grand Knight of the Realm of Hogswallop, First Advisor to the King and (if the name hadn't given it away already) Merik and Abel's father. He nearly always did his roaring in capitals. And *always*, always with a lot of spit.

"So pleased you could finally join us, Knight-in-Waiting Merik." Merik didn't think Sir Humfray *looked* pleased to see him. Instead, he looked like a knight forced to share his thermal underpants with someone who ate nothing but baked beans for breakfast. *Refried*.

"*Lady-in-Waiting Merik more like,*" sniggered Snoderick the Precious, shiniest Squire and all-round snot head. "Merik-the-Dog has got as much chance of becoming a knight of Hogswallop as Foolish Frank."

The others laughed. Foolish Frank was the court jester who had shaken his hat bells so hard he had lost one up his nose and now jingled every time he sneezed.

"Unless they need another hunting hound!"

It was true that Merik could usually be found in the court stables playing with the dogs. It was one of the many reasons he stunk and accounted for at least half of the fleas on him.

"Even that's more chance than Un-Abel's got," pointed out Squire Sed'Bootoagoose, looking rather pleased with his imaginative name-calling.



Merik felt a familiar pang of guilt as he shot a quick look at his brother to see if he had heard.

Abel's jaw tightened ever so slightly but he continued staring straight ahead. The boy had a lame arm and leg, both of which he blamed on Merik's disruptive arrival into the world two minutes before him. The same stormy entrance had eventually resulted in the death of their mother, Lady Valiant, for which Abel also blamed Merik.

"SILENCE!" yelled Sir Humfray. Ten backs instantly straightened.

"It's time for the final challenge in the Knight Trials. Following on in the brave tradition of Hogswallop knights who, in the past, were sent off for years at a time, you will now hunt your own Questing Beast."

"Oooooohhhh..." quivered the line of boys. Merik's ears had pricked up and he felt a stirring of excitement. Stories about the fearsome, magical creatures and their colossal physical strength were used to scare every naughty child in Hogswallop into being good.

"As a group you will enter the lair of the beasts and...and...and...what *is it*, Squire Neverwasheshishands?"

"My mummy told me to ask if there will be any ticks in the forest?"

"TICKS?!"

"Yes, only I'm allergic to them you see. I come out in a spotty rash on my unmentionables."

"On your...?? GOOD GRIEF, BOY. Do you think Sir Tigran the Mountainous stopped just before he dealt the final blow to the Argent Dragon and ASKED IF THE BEAST HAD ANY TICKS ON HIM?!"

Because he was an idiot, Squire Neverwasheshishands actually thought about this for a moment. "Well, I daresay he didn't have sensitive privates."

*Probably not with a name like that*, thought Merik.

Sir Humfray's Adam's apple bobbed up and down like a yo-yo as he struggled to control himself. "For the sake of time and because you are all clearly morons who can't be trusted to tie your own trousers up let alone a magical creature, the Questing Beasts for this trial are kept in that field below us." He held up a finger in front of Squire Neverwasheshishands, who had opened his mouth again. "A field that will cause ABSOLUTELY NO PROBLEMS WITH YOUR UNMENTIONABLES." There was a pause. "ALTHOUGH I MIGHT, IF YOU DON'T SHUT UP!"



Second Advisor to the King, had joined them. The mage didn't so much walk as ripple. Although always pleasant, there was something about him that made Merik's hair rise on his neck. This was a lengthy process because Merik was really very hairy.

"Which reminds me," continued the mage, "what is the first rule of the Code of Chivalry by which all knights are bound?"

"Stay away from danger!" rattled off Squire Snoderick, never one to miss a sucking-up opportunity.

"Precisely!" beamed Mage Gilmore.

All of the other squires thought about hitting Snoderick while Sir Humfray started talking again.

"When you first enter the field, you may choose one item of equipment from the pile to capture the beast. You will then lead the creature into the coral and secure it to the tying post."

"What equipment is it exactly?" piped up Abel. It was the first time he had spoken.

As usual, Humfray's eyes flickered over his son's crooked arm but he was interrupted from replying by Mage Gilmore.

"Ah, Abel! I didn't realise you were competing. I had hoped you would be following in your mother's footsteps and joining us at the Circle of Magicians instead?"

"No son of mine will ever be a magician!" snarled Valiant. A shadow passed over Abel's face unnoticed by anyone apart from his brother.

"Tell us about the equipment?" repeated Merik, hoping to change the subject back.

Valiant drew in a breath before continuing with some effort, "You will choose from a net, pole, rope and..."

Merik looked at the ginormous scaled animals below them causing great billowy tendrils of steam to rise up into the valley as they snorted.

*What idiot would use a net to catch something that size?* he thought.

"Dibs on the net!" squealed Snoderick the Precious.

"You can't call 'dibs', we haven't even started," whined Sed'Bootoagoose.

"That's *exactly when you can* call dibs. What's the point in calling it at the end?"

"But that's not fair, is it, Sir Humfray?"

Sir Humfray sighed – he hadn't become First Knight by “discussing stuff”. Instead, he had become First Knight by bashing things on the head. To illustrate this point, he walloped the nearest, unfortunate squire on the bonce and immediately felt better.

“Right. This is it, young squires. Some of you may not make it back.”

This thought seemed to cheer Sir Humfray up almost as much as the bonce-bashing.

The squires stood ready to charge down into the valley as Sir Humfray walked up and down the line behind them.

“Remember, this is your one and only chance to become a knight.”

For a second, Humfray hesitated next to Abel and Merik almost as if he was going to wish them luck. Instead, he hissed in a low voice, “Absolutely NO magic, Abel, understand?” Abel gave the slightest of nods. “And Merik...” Here Sir Humfray appeared to look up at the sky. “Just try not to be so Merik-like, will you?”

With a shove, the twins were propelled forward by their father just as the questing horn rang out across the hills.

“King, Realm and the Code!” yelled Merik, surging forward with the others, excitement pounding through his chest and, the truth be told, just the tiniest bit of regurgitated gizzard in his mouth.

## **Chapter Two**

You may well be wondering what being ‘Merik-like’ actually involved.

If you're thinking of muscles like knots of string, and body hair that poofs up like a pom-pom in thunderstorms, mixed in with eyes that always watch things other people can't see, well, then you're not too far off the mark.

Fortunately, it was precisely because he was so Merik-like that, halfway down the hill, Merik realised that perhaps the best way to approach an ancient, magical ferocious creature was not by charging at it whilst screaming at the top of his lungs and shoving people out of the way to claim dibs on a net.

It also meant that he was the first person to notice that there was something a little bit odd about the questing beasts.

In the past, it had been said that questing beasts could turn an unworthy knight's heart to stone with just one look. However, there had never been anything said about long trunks.

Or big horns.

Or udders.

Definitely, definitely not anything about udders.

Merik groaned in frustration as he crept nearer to the paddock where the other squires were already thumping each other over the equipment pile. He should have known. These weren't real questing beasts. They were grizzlehorns that the Circle of Magicians had dressed up with paper spikes on their backs.

The grizzlehorn nearest to Merik gave him an embarrassed moo.

"Grizzlehorns!" snorted Abel, who had finally made his way down the hill, his bad leg meaning he was last as usual. "I should have known."

That said, it wasn't as if tethering an oversized cow didn't come with its own problems.

Over in the corner of the paddock, Squire Snoderick was already finding it very difficult to get his net over the head of one obstinate grizzlehorn, whose trunk kept slipping out.

With a sigh, Merik pointed at the pile. There was only a stick left.

"Do you want it?" asked Merik.

"Yes please," answered Abel. "Pass it over."

Merik did just that as he kept an eye on Snoderick who had flung his torn net down in frustration.

"Owwwwwwchhhh!" cried Merik, rubbing his leg as Abel swiftly deadlegged him with one end of the stick. "What did you do that for?"

"Dad's right. It does make you feel better. Thank you." Abel tossed the stick aside and limped off to the far side of the herd. Merik didn't know why he had bothered. His brother was always like that if he tried to help him.

Suddenly, the sky darkened and all of the grizzlehorns began to bellow in fright. The one nearest Merik was rolling its eyes and pawing at the ground.

Kiyyyyaaaaaackkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkkk!

A large shadow swept over the field, causing the herd to scatter

in all directions, narrowly missing trampling several terrified squires in their path.

A giant snufferhawk was soaring above the valley, searching for its master.

Unfortunately for everyone involved, that master was Snoderick.

The sneaky squire had moved to his plan B. He whistled his instructions to the giant bird of prey as it hovered menacingly above them in the sky. Everyone held their breath. Even the grizzlehorns stopped huffing.

There was a screech and then the bird rose high up into the air, its talons glinting in the sunlight.

Suddenly, the bird twisted around and dive-bombed towards the herd. As it cartwheeled down it pecked at the terrified grizzlehorns, tearing at their skin with its talons before soaring up and round and doing it all over again. Snoderick whistled and called, all the while instructing the bird to herd the animals towards the open corral.

“Cheat!” yelled Merik angrily, trying desperately to get Sir Humfray’s attention, but his father and Mage Gilmore were too far up the hill to be able to see what was going on. Suddenly, out of the corner of his eye, he could see Abel walking towards him. His hands were twisting in a way that Merik instantly recognised. Sure enough, Abel’s lips began moving as he started to cast a spell.

“Abel!” he hissed. “No magic! Dad told you.” But Abel’s eyes were focused on Snoderick and the snufferhawk in front of him.

“Abel!” he hissed again.

It was too late, Abel gave a sudden flick of his fingers and the air changed around Merik as if everything had suddenly turned inside out. The snufferhawk shrieked in anger.

A flash of lightning jumped between the bird of prey and the group of grizzlehorns below it.

Merik gasped – the shaggy grizzlehorn that had been standing closest to him now had a pair of feathered wings sticking out from its back.

And it was floating above the ground.

One by one, the rest of the astonished beasts began to rise into the air. Soon, the sun was blotted from the sky as the swirling cloud of startled grizzlehorns tumbled and tossed their way above the field.

It’s a little known fact that grizzlehorns suffer from vertigo. Obviously,

it's little known because no one has actually tried shoving a grizzlehorn up a ladder.

Or making them fly.

Until now.

But the one thing that *is* well known about grizzlehorns is what they do when they are scared. And right at that particular moment in time, floating above the tallest forest trees – with sudden vertigo – they were all *very*, very scared.

There was a splat.

Then another splat.

Like machine-gun fire. But with the smell of rotten eggs afterwards.

Hot, steaming, stinky pats were hailing down from the sky with the accuracy of a heatseeking missile and almost as much fire power. There was nowhere to hide.

A terrible wail echoed around the valley.

Snoderick was covered head to toe in grizzlehorn pats.

Soon his cries were joined from all over the field as terrified squires were caught up in the poo carnage. In what was later to become known as Patter-geddon, the squires ran screaming into the woods to find shelter, tumbling over each other as they slipped in the mess, dazed and dizzy from the bombardment of pats beating their heads.

“What are you doing?” yelled Merik to his brother who was standing with his arms folded and smirking. “Oh come on!” said Abel. “You’ve got to admit they deserve it.”

“No magic, Abel! You promised.”

Abel turned to face him, his eyes flashing hotly. “I didn’t promise anything.”

Before he could argue with him, Merik felt a prickling on the back of his neck and looked upwards. The magic was beginning to wear off. One of the grizzlehorns, eyes rolling in fright, suddenly found itself up in the air without any wings. Unable to control its flight, the beast was tumbling downwards towards Abel who was so busy laughing at Snoderick and the others that he hadn’t seen the danger he was in.

Without thinking, Merik bowled straight into Abel and tumbled them both out of the way just as the somersaulting grizzlehorn plummeted

down and landed with a thud that shook the valley, right where Abel had been standing.

If Merik had been expecting any thanks whilst he lay panting on the floor, squashing his alive but ungrateful brother, he was going to be sadly disappointed.

“Gerrof me, you idiot!” yelled Abel, shoving at his twin with his one good arm.

“MERIK, ABEL?!” Humfray’s voice came roaring down the hillside.

“Remember, I didn’t ask you to get involved,” hissed Abel.

*Involved? What exactly have I got involved in?* wondered Merik, but he was soon distracted by Sir Humfray making his way towards them. Merik rolled to the side and jumped up as his father squelched closer, shoving past weeping, poo-soaked squires hanging by their gussets from the tree branches.

“Oh crikey. Dad’s going to kill us,” he whispered.

### Chapter Three

It turned out that Sir Humfray had something far worse in mind for his sons than simply killing them.

He was standing in the boys’ shared bedroom telling the twins that they were going to be sent to Eustace’s Keep.

But what was even stranger was that Abel actually looked pleased at the news, almost as if he had been expecting it.

“I thought you said that the Knight Trials were our only chance of becoming a knight,” pointed out Merik.

Sir Humfray’s face went a strange colour at the mere mention of the trials. The First Advisor had spent the last hour trying to coax down twenty grizzlehorns from trees. He was not in the best of moods.

“No. There’s another way isn’t there, Dad? Every person in the land of Hogswallop is given the chance to become a knight once a year by crossing over into the Dreadlands. Any person, even those that aren’t the children of knights, who returns with the head of a real questing beast will automatically become a Sir.”

*How does Abel know so much about it?* thought Merik.

“But you said that only the most useless squires ended up at the Keep!”



“Yes.”

There was an uncomfortable pause.

“Along with all the other failures in the kingdom. The toilet hole of all squire talent, you called it.”

“Yes.”

“The bog brush of Hogswallop.”

“Yes.”

“Pathetic wannabes clinging to the bog brush bristles like stains of...”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

Merik was silent for a moment. “Why only once a year? What happens at the Keep for the rest of the time?”

“The Circle of Magicians’ magic is only strong enough to get into the Dreadlands once a year. Until that time, you will join the Knight Shift at the Keep and train for your quest.”

Merik swallowed. “Couldn’t I just eat some more gizzards?”

Sir Humfray looked as if he wanted to say something, but changed his mind.

“Mage Gilmore will travel with you up to Eustace’s Keep along with some other...recruits.”

“Mage Gilmore?” Merik blinked at his father.

“Yes, he will be spending some time with the Circle which, as you know, is based at the Keep.”

For some reason, Abel didn’t seem surprised to hear that Mage Gilmore would be joining them.

CLANGGGGGGGGGGG!

Sir Humfray was holding up a shiny, metal suit that Merik had never seen before.

“What on earth is that?” he gasped.

Humfray sighed and shook his head. “This, son, is armour. It’s what every good knight used to wear back in the day.” He tapped it with his knuckle, and there was a strange tinny sound that made Merik’s eardrums jiggle. “Hundred per cent maiden’s breath and dragon kisses proof, this. Ah, the adventures I had in it...” Humfray tailed off with a faraway look in his eyes.

“You wore it?” Merik and Abel looked at the slim armour in surprise.  
“Well yes, obviously it’s shrunk a bit being stuck inside a hot wardrobe.”  
Sir Humfray patted his stomach.

“I thought metal expanded in heat?” muttered Abel.

Sir Humfray glared at him. “You’ll have to share it because I’ve only got the one suit. One of you can have the top and the other the bottom.”

Merik and Abel stared at the rusted metal trousers.

“Bagsy the top!” they both said.

“Now listen to me, boys.” Humfray leaned in and raised his finger.  
“Understand this. You will join the Knight Shift and you will bring back the head of a questing beast from the depths of the Dreadlands or you will die trying, is that clear?”

Merik was already pretty sure which one of those outcomes was the most likely.

\*

And that had been that. Two days later Merik was swaying up and down, rocked with sea sickness as he and his brother sailed up the Great Wallop River towards the Dreadlands and the small fortress that stood between it and the rest of Hogswallop.

On the journey to Eustace’s Keep, their new cabin mate and fellow ‘Kreeper’, Tiswald, had filled them in on all of the previously successful Dreadland knights.

“None?!”

“You mean to say nobody has ever made it back?” gasped Merik.

Tiswald shook his head, smiling in delight at their dismay.

Tiswald the Unfunny.

They had been sharing a cabin with him for the last few days. A cheerful-looking short boy with floppy hair that kept getting into his eyes. He was the fifth generation of court jesters but, to the great dismay of his family, he had woken up one day and decided he didn’t want to go into the family business. What he really wanted, he said, was to become a knight and get some respect.

“You try rolling around doing cartwheels all day with people patting

you on the head saying, 'Go on, make me laugh,' even when something really *really* awful has happened to you."

After four days of sharing a cabin with Tiswald, Merik was quite ready to make something really awful happen to him.

## THE KNIGHT SHIFT by Emma Mason

### SYNOPSIS

Once a year, every citizen of Hogswallop can become a knight by taking part in the suicidal journey into the Dreadlands to hunt the magical questing beast. Caught up in his twin's plans to join the Circle of Magicians, Merik trains with the Knight Shift and enters the Dreadlands. The questing beasts are expelled magicians and Merik enlists the help of the other 'useless recruits' to restore Hogswallop to the land it once was.

### BIOGRAPHY

Emma Mason is a former Detective Constable with Oxford CID but left after several unsuccessful years of trying to find Inspector Morse's office. She moved to Dorset to enjoy a more peaceful life where she was promptly burgled and hospitalised by a drink-driver.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

*'The Knight Shift* is a funny, silly adventure romp.'

'This extract is bursting with energy and humour. I get a real sense that the author had great fun writing this – and that fun is infectious for the reader. The inventiveness is wonderful too, right down to the names of the squires.'

'This is funny, imaginative and pleasingly silly. Great imagination at play here – grizzlehorns, snufferhawks, etc. Lovely.'

Contact: [emmagreen\\_74@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:emmagreen_74@yahoo.co.uk)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# THE DARLINGTON MIRACLES

By Sarah Merrett

## Chapter One

It was meant to be an exciting new life, an escape from the hardship of their past. But now, looking up at his father from the kerb, Mason could tell they were in big trouble. His father was slumped against the ice cream cart as if the blistering heat had melted away his last scrap of hope.

A twinge of sadness stabbed at Mason's heart. He looked down at the wooden carving in his lap. With his penknife he scratched a swirl into the creature's tail. It would be a dragon one day, with majestic wings to soar off on adventures, to have all the fun Mason wished he could have. He sighed and glanced up at his father again.

'Don't worry, Father. We're going to be all right.' Mason pocketed the penknife and stood up from the shade of the cart's canopy. He squinted. The sun pressed down as fierce as a furnace.

His father rummaged in his apron pocket and pulled out two grimy pennies. He stared at them in his palm, his shoulders hunched. A carriage rumbled past, the clomping horse hooves drowning out the bustle of passing shoppers.

'Things will get better,' Mason said as he perched his wooden dragon on the cart's edge. 'We'll work harder.'

'Harder?' His father laughed bitterly. 'Not possible, Mason.'

'We just need more customers,' Mason said. He turned to watch the shoppers flow along the street in their long swishing skirts, their heads bobbing beneath lacy parasols and top hats.

'Maybe we could invent a new flavour.' He flashed his father an excited

smile. ‘I had an idea the other day about toffee. Imagine toffee-flavoured ice cream!’ Mason opened the cart’s wooden lid and leaned over. The crushed ice glistened like diamonds. He exhaled with pleasure as the coolness soothed his sunburnt arms.

‘You’ll have to manage on your own this afternoon, Mason.’ His father swept the back of his hand over his sweaty forehead, knocking his straw boater askew. ‘I need to go to the ice warehouse. They had a shipment in this morning. I’ll need your takings, too.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Mason closed the cart lid and delved into his apron. He handed over his four ha’pennies.

A lump moved in his father’s throat as he stared at the meagre takings.

‘Right then. Watch out for pilfering, Mason. Wykesgate’s a very different place to what we’re used to. We can’t afford any losses.’ He pulled his shoulders back and stood tall, a towering six-and-a-half feet with his head skimming the cart’s beige canopy. He touched the side of Mason’s arm and attempted a smile before walking off down the street.

Mason shuffled close to the canopy’s shade.

‘Just you and me then, Storm,’ he said to his wooden dragon. He untucked his shirt, peeling it from his clammy skin, and flapped it up and down.

Two boys flitted past, shrieking with delight. Mason stood on tiptoes to peer over the crowd’s heads. He watched the boys slalom along the street all the way to the tiered stone fountain in Harrington Square. The boys jumped into the fountain’s pool, sending up sparkling plumes of water. Mason’s mouth dropped open. The water looked so tantalising he could taste it. As he watched the boys splash about and have fun, he slipped into a daydream and imagined he was there with them.

A shadow slid over his face, stirring him from his thoughts. A man halted in front of him.

‘Good morning to you, sir. How may I help?’ Mason recited his usual cheery welcome, before realising the man hadn’t stopped for ice cream. He was looking up at the sky, his eyes wide.

And then a woman came to a stop and tipped back her parasol to look up.

Like a rash spreading along the street, everyone came to a standstill.

All faces lifted skywards, hands shielding their eyes from the sun, mouths hanging open in amazement. Silence descended. For the first time ever, there was no rumble of passing omnibuses and handcarts. No footsteps pounding the cobbles. Everyone along the High Street stared upwards in silent awe.

Mason stepped out from beneath the canopy's shade and looked up into the dazzling sunshine. A dozen huge gas balloons were floating over the town, their vibrant colours aglow against the bright blue sky. His breath faltered. The balloons were every imaginable colour, and each had a large basket hanging beneath it carrying a gentleman in a top hat. They were floating so high it sent Mason's head spinning.

'It's the miracle man!' someone said.

'Darlington the Miraculous!' another gasped, triggering a ripple of voices down the street.

A tingle of excitement chased over Mason's skin. He had heard stories of the famous wish maker and how he captured people's wishes in huge bubbles and sent them to the stars. He knew that Darlington the Miraculous had been travelling the world for years, but now it seemed he was back in his hometown. The air was alive with hope.

'Look, Storm!' Mason glanced at his wooden dragon before gazing upwards again. He looked from balloon to balloon, hoping to glimpse the great man himself. One of the balloons had a large black and gold sceptre motif painted on it and the tall pilot wore the grandest of top hats. Was he Darlington the Miraculous, Mason wondered?

And then hundreds of tiny bubbles began to spill from the basket like a shimmering waterfall. Thousands poured down, each a swirl of iridescent colours, of bright pink, gold and turquoise. The bubbles kept coming until they swamped the sky. The street buzzed with gasps of delight and whispers of thrill. Mason smiled until his cheeks hurt.

The bubbles twirled down and down until they were twenty feet from the ground. Mason's entire vision was filled with bubbles that blotted out the gas balloons high above. The bubbles began to burst, a few at first, then rapidly spreading until the sky was awash with tiny explosions of spray. The cool mist fluttered down like drizzle gleaming in the sunshine.

Mason grabbed his dragon and held it up to feel the cool moisture.

It was so deliciously refreshing on his hot skin that he laughed.

All around him there was joyous laughter. Everyone danced and whirled around in the vapour. Mason outstretched his arms and spun round and round, beaming with pleasure.

When the air had cleared, the sweltering heat returned like a thick blanket had been thrown over the town. With a sigh, Mason watched the gas balloons drift away until they were tiny dots on the horizon.

The High Street returned to normality. Everyone went about their business with smiles on their faces as if they had been touched by magic. Passing conversations turned to the topic of Darlington the Miraculous and the wishes he might make come true.

Mason leaned against the ice cream cart and held his dragon to his chest. The bustle of the town returned. Omnibuses and carts rattled past and sellers called out their wares. Then came a different sound, the deep growl of heavy wheels over the cobbles. Mason turned to see a striking white clarence carriage gliding along the street, its glossy paintwork glinting in the sun. It was much grander than any he'd ever seen and was pulled by four majestic white horses. As the carriage neared, the coachman glanced at Mason, then at the ice cream cart, his gaze seeking out the name painted on the side. He pulled on the reins, bringing his horses to an elegant stop.

Mason's lips parted as he stared at the striking carriage. It seemed starkly out of place on the High Street parked beside a rickety cart selling hot eels. He figured the coachman must have taken a wrong turning to end up here. His eye was drawn to the carriage door with its black and gold sceptre motif. It was the same as on the gas balloon, an intricate design made up of tiny stars, cogs and flourishes. He gazed at the luxurious interior of the carriage through the windows. The seats were padded in cream velvet and the ceiling in silk. He smiled as he imagined what it would be like to ride in such grandeur.

'Excuse me, young man. How fresh is your ice cream?' a man asked.

Mason turned to see a handsome young gentleman looking down on him with deep blue eyes that matched the banding on his top hat.

'Very fresh, sir,' Mason said. 'Made only last night with cream straight from the dairy. We have vanilla, strawberry and raspberry. All real fruit



guaranteed.’ He set his dragon on the cart’s edge and opened the lid to show the metal pails nestled in the melting ice.

While the customer surveyed the pails, Mason listened for the sound of the clarence carriage moving on behind him. Instead came the deafening clatter of horse hooves as an omnibus passed, its top deck crowded with noisy passengers. A few people along the street stopped to gawp at the impressive clarence carriage.

‘I’ll have strawberry, if you please,’ the man said.

‘Certainly, sir.’ Mason opened the metal pail, spooned out some half-melted strawberry ice cream and slopped it into one of the biscuit cups. He glanced over his shoulder. The carriage was still there, but the coachman was now standing on the pavement in the finest top hat and tails. And he was watching Mason. The man took a step closer. Mason turned back to his customer, his pulse quickening.

‘That’ll be a penny please, sir.’ Mason held out the ice cream. In a flash of movement, a girl whipped past, swiping it from him. Mason fell backwards into the cart, drawing a breath. The girl raced off down the street with her blonde hair streaming out behind her. The soles of her tatty boots flicked up and down, revealing holes on the undersides.

Mason felt a jolt a panic. His father’s words played over in his mind. *We can’t afford any losses.*

‘Stop!’ he yelled and shot off after the girl, his straw boater flying from his head.

The girl darted behind a couple strolling along beneath a peach parasol. Mason ran faster, weaving round a handcart selling spice cakes. He caught a tempting waft of cinnamon and nutmeg. He ran under the cool shade of the tobacconist’s canopy, then spotted her again as she dashed behind a carriage and took the corner.

‘Wait! Come back!’ Mason ran after her. He skidded into Barrow Lane, a shady road lined with overhanging buildings. As he closed in on the girl he noticed she had a limp. She stumbled to her knees in the gutter, still clutching the ice cream to her chest. As she scrambled to her feet again, Mason snatched the back of her brown pinafore dress, jerking her to a stop.

‘Get your hands off me!’ She wheeled round, knocking his hand away. He grabbed her wrist before she could flee.

‘That’ll be a penny for the ice cream, please, miss.’ He heaved a few exhausted breaths. ‘Can’t afford to give them away.’

The girl struggled to escape, and nearly dropped the ice cream. She gasped, cradling it to her chest, and looked at Mason with emerald green eyes. Her cheek was smeared with dirt, her forehead glittering with sweat. She was only about twelve, Mason guessed, the same as himself. He realised he was staring, still holding her wrist. He let go and cleared his throat.

‘Haven’t got a penny,’ she said, taking a step back.

‘In that case, I’ll have to, um...’ He searched for something to say. He wasn’t used to the ways of the city and had never apprehended a thief before. He was glad when a horse and cart clopped past, giving him a moment to think. ‘I’m afraid I’ll have to summon a policeman.’

‘No need for that. I was just hungry.’ The girl’s eyes warmed with a smile.

Mason knew there was no way he could get her into such terrible trouble.

‘No harm done,’ he said.

The girl dragged her sleeve over her forehead, leaving another dirty streak. She smiled and her cheeks dimpled.

Mason looked at the ice cream clasped at her front, the biscuit cup broken and the ice cream dribbling through her fingers.

‘Then you keep it, but please don’t tell my father.’

‘Honest? That’s real kind.’ She walked off, licking the ice cream from her fingers. She had only taken a few steps before stopping and looking back, her nose crinkled. ‘Don’t I know you?’

‘No, I don’t think so,’ Mason said. ‘Father and I are new to Wykesgate. Only arrived a month back.’

‘I never forget a face.’ She tapped her cheek, deep in thought. ‘I remember now. I’ve seen your photograph.’

‘That’s impossible,’ Mason said. ‘I should be getting back. Enjoy the ice cream.’ He jogged off around the corner into the blazing sunshine on the High Street. As he made his way back, the girl’s face remained imprinted on his mind: those piercing green eyes; that unnerving look of recognition. What photograph had she seen? For Mason had never had his photograph

taken. He tried to imagine what her life was like, running free on the city streets, meeting new people, having adventures. Having fun.

He glanced up at the blue sky and wished the balloons would return. As he retrieved his hat from the gutter in front of the tailor's shop, he remembered he had left the ice cream cart unattended. And his dragon.

'Storm!' he cried and ran all the way back, his heart thrashing in his chest.

The cart was still there with his dragon perched on the corner and his carved wooden ice cream standing aloft on its pole. His attention was drawn to the stately white carriage that was still parked there with its four white horses.

The coachman was waiting beside the ice cream cart. He watched Mason approach and looked him up and down with a finger resting on his neat handlebar moustache. Mason put on his straw boater and straightened his apron. He scooped up his dragon from the cart's edge.

'Good afternoon to you,' the coachman said. 'I'm looking for the proprietor of Kemp's Ices, a Mr Jack Kemp.'

Mason's stomach clenched. 'Father's not here, I'm afraid.'

'You must be Master Mason Kemp,' he said with a glance down at the piece of card in his hand.

Mason went to speak, but his throat seized.

'I've been instructed to deliver this to you both.' The coachman held out the card. 'I'd be much obliged if you would see that your father gets it today.'

Mason wiped a clammy hand down his apron and took the card. The coachman climbed back up onto his seat and took up the reins.

'I understand you live on Grove Street,' he said, looking down on Mason.

'Yes.' Mason tensed. A line of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

'Please inform your father that a carriage will collect you both this evening at 8.30pm sharp. Good day to you, Master Kemp.' The coachman shook the reins and the horses trotted on. The huge wheels roared over the cobblestones as the carriage travelled off down the street.

Mason hooked the dragon's wing into his pocket to free up his hand and read the card:

*The pleasure of the company of Mr Jack Kemp and Master Mason Kemp is respectfully solicited for an evening of wonder and enchantment, followed by dinner. Hosted by Darlington the Miraculous at Darlington Manor, Tuesday 25th of July, 1899, at 9 o'clock P.M.*

Mason whistled through his teeth and leaned on the cart to steady himself as his head went into a spin. As he watched the carriage disappear down the street, a thought startled him.

'Wait!' he called out, waving the invitation over his head. He grabbed the cart handles, tucking the invitation inside his hand, and heaved up the cart, balancing it on its two large wooden wheels. He pushed it along the road.

'WAIT, sir!' Mason yelled, building up to a jog. The clarence carriage neared the end of the street. 'Stop! I don't understand. Why would he invite us?'

He ran faster, the ice cream cart juddering over the cobbles. The melted ice sloshed about inside and the metal pails clashed together.

The ice cream cart gave a sudden jolt. The left wheel slipped, scraping against stone. It dropped down six inches and the ice cream pails fell over, clanging together. He gasped. The cart tipped to one side. He glanced left into the entrance to Knights Passage. The long, steep flight of stone steps ran down through the alleyway deep into the shade between two tall buildings.

He tightened his grip on the handles and peered round the side of the cart. The front wheel had dropped over the top step, tipping the cart precariously. His heart slammed against his ribs. He held the handles so tightly his hands shook. The cart tried to wrench itself away from him.

'NO!' he screamed. His hands sweated and his hold slipped. His arm muscles seared with pain. He couldn't hold it much longer.

And then the cart tore itself from his grip. It crashed down the steps, tumbling over and over, picking up speed as it went. His breath deserted him. The cart thundered down and down, the wood cracking and splintering. The canopy was torn to shreds. Pieces of wood flew off and a wheel hurtled through the air. By the time it reached the bottom, there was nothing left of the cart but a trail of devastation.

Mason stared in horror. The ground swayed beneath him. His insides turned over.

The cart was ruined, their future destroyed.

And the invitation was gone.

## THE DARLINGTON MIRACLES by Sarah Merrett

### SYNOPSIS

Famous wish-maker, Darlington, opens his mysterious manor for the first time. Luckless ice cream seller, Mason, is stunned to be invited to the performance. He dreams of being chosen to have his wish sent to the stars in a bubble. The evening ends disastrously. Mason goes on a quest to find the bubble sceptre and escape twisted Nazworth and his sinister plan. MG mystery adventure with a magical twist, set in the 1899 heatwave.

### BIOGRAPHY

Sarah has been writing children's books all her adult life. She's worked in various children's libraries and bookshops and has three degrees, including an MA in Writing for Children. She now writes stories while her two children are at school, taking time out for walks, puzzles, films and reading.

### JUDGES' COMMENTS

'Shades of Willy Wonka and his chocolate factory in the mysterious manor set-up – appealing! The author has an assured, well-paced writing style and I like the magical/historical angle – I haven't read enough yet to see what colour the author's imagination brings to the story, but more is more for this age group in terms of original, magical detail.'

'Great tension when Mason runs after the thief – I was so sure he was going to come back to a disaster with the cart and then, even though he didn't, the disaster followed, which was nicely done and I really shared Mason's horror.'

'Lovely imagery when the balloons arrive and the bubbles spill out – feels very filmic, like a classic children's movie.'

**Contact:** [sjmerrett@googlemail.com](mailto:sjmerrett@googlemail.com)

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# HONORARY MENTIONS

## Illustrators

Although not appearing in this anthology, the following illustrators received honorary mentions:

DIONYSUS AND THE PIRATES by Joe Callanan

MONKEY KING by Jessica Chuan Ping Lai

MOLE VENTURES INTO THE WILD WOOD by Suzanne Dore

KITSUNE by Natasha Ellis

SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS by Imogen Foxell

JANE AND THE ARGONAUTS by Daniel Greaves

MOLE IN THE URBAN WILD WOOD by Esther Harvey

MAUD VISITS HER DRAGON IN THE FOREST by Morgan Jackson

OEDIPUS AND THE RIDDLE OF THE SPHINX by Mireille Lachausse

COW ON ROOF by Catherine Lindow

JACK STARTED THE WATER FIGHT by Hazel Murrell

HEADING HOME by Claire Rollinson

TIP TOP DOG by Zoe Saunders

RATTY AND MOLE GO BOATING by Alice Stallard

[▶ BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)

# HONORARY MENTIONS

## Writers

Although not appearing in this anthology, the following writers received honorary mentions:

THE ELECTRIC SKY by Stephen Burgess

WILLIAM AND THE MAGIC LOOK by Lorraine Cooke

THE FAR SIDE OF THE GALAXY by Glen Deakin

SAVING JOSHUA GALLINGTON by Annette Edge

FROST SPELL by Andrea Fautley

PROFESSOR YUK AND THE HAIRWOLF by Louisa Glancy

SEASON OF THE TORCH by Lily Grigorova

BRING ON THE MOODZ! by Becky Hamilton

IS THAT A DINOSAUR UNDER YOUR BED? by Susan Harris

JUDE'S GUIDE TO FAME, SHAME AND SELF-IMPROVEMENT

by Jennifer Hicks

HIGH SCHOOL NOIR by Elizabeth Joseph-Brahy

THE TIME TOILET by Georgina Kirk

EVIE ZIMMER, ROBOT KILLER by Tera Pruitt

ANGEL CHILD by Charlotte Reid

FREDDIE AND MABEL by Helen Simmons

THE GIRL WHOSE MOTHER ROBBED A BANK by Wendy Storer

STAINED GLASS TREES by Ashley Taylor

THE FROZEN by Julia Tuffs

▶ [BACK TO CONTENTS PAGE](#)





For more inspirational ways  
to meet children's book writers  
and illustrators, please visit

[www.britishisles.scbwi.org](http://www.britishisles.scbwi.org)