

PROLOGUE



WILL RAN. HE RAN AND RAN.

The island seemed bigger than usual, and he'd been running for so long his chest hurt. Across the moor, through the fields, down to the beach, past the graveyard and Lennox House, into the village, up to the stone circle, through the library, back to his cottage, and in and out of the last wisps of fog that hung over Macalister Castle.

Nothing.

The dog ran beside him. Its black ears streamed in the wind and its huge paws left prints on the moor. Why weren't there any other footprints? Why couldn't they find him? He would never have left the dog behind. So he must be here somewhere. What had he said just before he'd stepped outside? He'd only been going out for a walk, hadn't he?

They ran on, up the narrow path to the clifftop. The dog ahead,

Will behind. But there was nobody up here either. Of course not. Not in this weather. A storm had blown up and it had started to rain. They came to a stop at the end of the earth. Though, of course, it wasn't really the end of the earth, just the end of the island. The world carried on beyond this precipice—the water below stretched away to the horizon and beyond that to other islands. Was that where he was, somewhere out there? Beyond the horizon?

For a while the two of them gazed out to sea. With one hand Will scratched the dog behind the ears, and with the other he shielded his eyes the better to see through the rain. To no avail.

Sherlock Holmes had vanished without trace.



*The monster had slept for many, many years.
Deep, deep in the darkest corner of its cave.
On and on it had slept, as time rolled over it in waves.
And it had dreamed of its awakening. It had slept for so long that
the people of the kingdom no longer knew it existed.
At first, perhaps, they had dimly remembered the terrible creature.
But over the years it had faded to a dark foreboding. Now, however,
as the fog of forgetting engulfed the people entirely—
now the time had come for the monster
to open its eyes once more.*



ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS AN ISLAND

ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WE STOOD, Alexis and me, chucking things into suitcases. Socks, sweaters, pants. I tugged handfuls of clothes from my wardrobe and flung them into the wheeled suitcase that lay open behind me, and Alexis did the same in the next room. We barely even registered what we were packing, whether we'd included our favorite clothes or not. The main thing was to get it done quickly. That's what we'd agreed. Because if we'd taken our time over the packing and made a list, the way we usually did, we would surely have realized that what we were doing was completely and utterly crazy.

Everyone in my family was crazy. That's what my mum, Alexis, always said anyway, when I asked her why she'd run away from her home in Scotland at the age of seventeen with nothing but a suitcase in her hand and me in her belly. She'd upped sticks and left for Germany—pregnant and not even legally an adult yet—and ended

up in Bochum. I think she felt too young to be a mum, so she wanted me to call her by her first name instead, which I always had and still did. And now I was nearly seventeen myself (well, in fourteen months I would be) and it was starting to look like I'd inherited the "crazy" gene. That morning at breakfast—an hour ago now—I, too, had spontaneously decided to leave the country. We'd gone online and booked ourselves flights on a budget airline, departing that same afternoon. All we had to do now was pack. I rooted around in a drawer and hurriedly dug out a few bras and pairs of underwear.

"Bring your warm jacket with you, Amy," said Alexis as she wheeled her suitcase (stuffed to bursting with clothes) into my bedroom and tried to squish my pillow in on top. Inside the case I could see her organic cotton corduroys and a shirt from Etsy decorated with a brightly colored apple print.

"I don't really think I need a parka in July," I muttered. My suitcase was pretty full by now, too—although mainly with books. Clotheswise I'd packed only what was strictly necessary. The way I saw it, it was better to take one less cardigan than have to do without one of my favorite books.

"I think you're underestimating the weather over there," said Alexis, eyeing the contents of my suitcase and shaking her mahogany-brown locks. Her eyes were red and swollen; she'd been up all night crying. "Just take your e-reader. Won't that do?"

"But I don't have *Momo* or *Pride and Prejudice* as e-books."

"You've read both those books about a hundred times each."

"And what if I want to read them for the hundred-and-first time while I'm there?"

“They’ve got more than enough books on that blessed island, Amy, believe me. You have no idea.”

I ran my fingertips over the cover of my well-thumbed copy of *Momo*. I’d often wished I had an enchanted tortoise like the one in *Momo* to guide me on my journey through life. I needed this book. It comforted me when I was sad. I needed it now more than ever.

Alexis sighed. “Well, make sure you fit the jacket in somehow, OKAY? It can get pretty chilly there.” She sat down on the suitcase and tugged at the zipper. “I’m worried this whole thing is a bad idea anyway,” she fretted. “Are you sure that’s the only place you’ll be able to take your mind off things?”

I nodded.

The tiny boat pitched in the swell, tossed back and forth as though the sea were playing ball with it. Lightning flickered across the sky, where dark storm clouds were massing, shrouding the ocean in a cloak of surreal gray pierced by sudden flares of light and ominous rolls of thunder. The water had turned the color of slate and the rain was coming down in sheets—heavy, biting gray raindrops that hammered down on the waves and sharpened their crests. What with the thunderstorm and the giant waves smashing against the cliffs that loomed on the horizon, Mother Nature was putting on a pretty formidable display. It was terrifying, awe-inspiring, and wonderful all at the same time.

On second thought, “wonderful” was possibly a bit of an overstatement. The problem was that I happened to be sitting in this tiny little boat, in the middle of this thunderstorm, clinging onto my seat

for dear life to keep myself from falling overboard. Spray shot into the air and into our faces. Alexis tried gamely to hold on to our luggage, while the man driving the boat cranked up the engine till it roared.

The rain had come down quite suddenly and within seconds I'd been soaked through. I was also freezing cold, and all I could think about was arriving—I didn't care where, as long as it was somewhere warm and dry. During our flight from Dortmund to Edinburgh, the sun had still been shining, in a bright, cloudless sky. And though a few clouds had appeared by the time we'd boarded the little plane to Sumburgh Airport on Mainland (the biggest of the Shetland Islands, off the Scottish coast), I certainly hadn't reckoned with this apocalyptic scene.

I blinked at the burning of the salt water in my eyes as another wave rocked our boat and nearly swallowed up Alexis's handmade felt handbag. It was getting harder and harder to hold on to my seat. The ice-cold wind had long since numbed my fingers to the point where I could barely control them. Reading about a storm like this in a book was a far more pleasurable experience. When I was reading—even when I was scared, when I shuddered in horror, when the story plunged me right into the midst of the most terrible disasters—I never entirely lost that warm, cozy tucked-up-on-the-sofa feeling. There was no trace of that feeling now, and I realized that real-life storms, unlike literary ones, were most definitely not my idea of fun.

The next wave was even more savage than the last, and it washed clean over my head. At the same moment I gulped frantically for breath—not the best idea, as it caused me to choke on a huge mouthful

of water. Coughing and gasping, I tried to empty my lungs of seawater while Alexis landed a few hearty thumps on my sodden back. This sent her bag sailing overboard. Oh, crap! But Alexis seemed to have given up on the idea of bringing all our possessions safely ashore anyway, and didn't even spare a glance for this portion of her worldly goods.

"Nearly there, Amy. Nearly there!" she called—no sooner had the words crossed her lips than they were carried away on the wind. "We did want to come here, remember. I'm sure we're going to have a lovely holiday on Stormsay." It was probably supposed to sound cheerful, but her voice cracked with suppressed panic.

"We're here because we're running away," I replied, although too quietly for Alexis to hear. I didn't want to remind her or myself of the real reasons for our trip. After all, we were running away to forget. To forget that Dominik had broken up with Alexis and gone back to his wife and children. Completely out of the blue. And to forget that those stupid idiots in my year at school . . . No—I'd promised myself not to even think about it anymore.

The boat's outboard motor howled as if trying to drown out the storm, and the rain grew heavier, beating down on my head and shoulders and lashing at my face. It was literally impossible for me to get any wetter. But I was relieved nonetheless to see that the island seemed to be drawing nearer. Stormsay, the home of my ancestors. Through a curtain of wet hair, I squinted at the shoreline and hoped the skipper knew what he was doing and that we were not about to get smashed to smithereens on the rocks.

The cliff face looked immense, jagged, and deadly. It towered nearly a hundred feet above the slate-gray waves and at its summit,

way up high where the raging of the wind was at its most treacherous . . .

. . . there was somebody standing at the cliff's edge.

At first I thought it was a tree. But then I realized it was a human being, leaning into the storm and looking out to sea. A figure with short hair, coat flapping in the wind, watching us from the clifftop. It had one hand raised to shield its eyes, and the other rested on the head of a huge black dog.

I stared back, shivering, as the boat hove to. We left the cliffs behind us and battled on, arcing around toward the eastern shore of the island. The figure receded into the distance, eventually disappearing from view.

And then, finally, we came to a jetty. It was half submerged and wobbled precariously, but our captain managed to moor the boat with a few deft movements and we tumbled out onto dry land. At last.

The embankment was slippery and the rain was still falling hard, but we'd reached our destination. Stormsay. The word tasted of secrets. It sounded somehow full of promise and slightly eerie at the same time. This was the first time I'd ever been to the island. For a long time Alexis had never even mentioned it to me—until at some point during primary school I'd realized that not all children learned both German and English from their parents, and that my name sounded different from everyone else's. Amy Lennox. And even then Alexis had been reluctant to admit that we came from Scotland. When she'd left, in fact, aged seventeen, she'd vowed never to go back. And now . . .

We trudged along a muddy street, the wheels of our suitcases sinking into the sludge. On either side of us, scattered at intervals

along the road, were little houses—no more than a handful of cottages, really, with crooked roofs and cob walls and windows of bulging glass, some of which flickered with yellow light. I wondered which one my grandmother lived in, and hoped that the little houses were more weatherproof on the inside than they looked from the outside.

The man who'd ferried us across to the island mumbled something about the pub and beer and disappeared through a doorway. Alexis, however, plowed straight on past the last of the cottages. She seemed determined to leave even these meager remnants of civilization behind us, and it was all I could do just to keep up with her. My suitcase had gotten stuck in yet another muddy puddle and I had to tug at the handle with all my strength to get it out.

"Your mum does live in an actual, like . . . house, right?" I grumbled, wondering why I hadn't questioned Alexis more closely as to what exactly it was that was so crazy about my grandmother. After all, "crazy" might mean she ate tree bark and wore clothes made of pinecones and lived out in the wild with the creatures of the forest. . . .

Alexis didn't answer but simply gestured toward something in the darkness ahead of us and beckoned to me to follow her. At that moment my suitcase suddenly came unstuck with unexpected force. I was splattered from head to toe with mud. Brilliant!

While Alexis still looked gorgeous, even with her wet hair (as if she'd stepped straight out of a shampoo ad), I was starting to feel more and more like a drowned rat. I muttered away to myself crossly as I trudged on.

The road soon narrowed into a track and grew even muddier.

The lights were far behind us now. We could barely see the little village at all anymore, though the icy wind still blew alongside us like a faithful friend and wormed its way through all the little gaps in the knit of my woolly sweater. Raindrops whipped into my face as I caught up with Alexis. We really were heading out into the wilderness.

“There was somebody up on the clifftop. Did you see?” I said breathlessly, trying to distract myself from the feeling that any minute now I was going to freeze to death.

“On Shakespeare’s Seat? In this weather? I’d be very surprised,” murmured Alexis, so quietly I could barely hear her. Then, from the top of a steep little slope she’d just clambered up, she offered, “Here—let me take your suitcase.”

I heaved the case into her arms and scrambled up after it. When I reached the top, I realized we were standing on a sort of plateau. In the distance I could see another cluster of lights, and towers that looked like the turrets of a castle etched against the night sky. And there were lights close by, too, in some of the windows of a huge mansion to our right. We were standing at a fork in the path. Straight ahead, the track carried on across the moor.

But Alexis took the right-hand fork and marched up to a wrought-iron gate between two hedges, behind which I glimpsed something like a park or a gravel drive with a fountain in the middle. These big houses (in the movies, at least) almost always had gravel paths flanked by crisply clipped shrubs, statues, climbing roses, and often a classic convertible for good measure. You had to have an imposing backdrop for the lovers’ kiss, or the tracking down of the murderer. . . . The house behind the gate looked pretty grand, at any rate, even from this distance. The walls were studded with countless bay windows,

and a whole host of little towers and chimneys jutted into the sky, grazing the storm clouds. Behind the windowpanes hung heavy curtains, with flickering candlelight shining through the gaps between them.

The rain grew heavier again now and the individual raindrops merged to form a veil as if trying, at the last moment, to hide the mansion from view. But it was far too late for that. We'd landed on the island, and there was no going back now.

Alexis laid her fingertips on the ornate handle of the gate and took a deep breath. "*All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way,*" she murmured at last, pushing open the gate.

"What?" I said.

"Oh—it's just the first line of a novel I often used to . . . read here." She sighed.

"I see," I said, though I didn't really. My teeth were chattering so loudly by this time that I could hardly think straight.

We hefted and hauled our luggage across a small park made up of gravel paths and crisply clipped shrubs, past a fountain and several climbing roses, and up a flight of marble steps. The only thing missing was the classic convertible. Without further ado, Alexis rang the doorbell.

A gong sounded loudly inside the house.

But it was still a long time before the oak door swung open and a large wrinkly nose emerged from behind it. The nose belonged to an old man in a suit, who eyed us keenly over the top of his glasses.

"Good evening, Mr. Stevens. It's me, Alexis."

Mr. Stevens gave a curt nod. "Of course, ma'am. I can see that," he said, stepping aside. "Were we expecting you?"

“No. But I’d like to speak to my mother,” said Alexis. Mr. Stevens nodded again and helped her heave her battered suitcase over the threshold. When he reached for my case with his liver-spotted hands, I quickly sidestepped him. I’d lugged the thing this far, I could carry it the last few feet without dumping it on an old man who must surely be even more of a weakling than I was! But Mr. Stevens gave me such a stern and un-old-mannish look that in the end I let him take the suitcase and stuffed my hands in my jacket pockets instead. And indeed, the weight of our luggage seemed to give him no trouble at all.

“Wow,” I gasped the moment we stepped in out of the rain.

The entrance hall to the mansion was bigger than our entire flat. When you stepped into our hallway at home, you found yourself in a dark, narrow tunnel with ancient daisy-patterned wallpaper peeling off the walls. Alexis had tried to spruce it up a bit with a beaded curtain and an indoor palm tree but the tower block apartment remained stubbornly unglamorous. The living room, which also served as Alexis’s bedroom, the kitchen with its ’70s tiles, the bathroom, and my bedroom, where the carpet had bunched up with age—they all felt like boxes. Concrete boxes with tiny windows, in which even bookshelves and colorful polka-dot teapots couldn’t counteract the gray.

My grandmother’s hallway, on the other hand, was incredible. The ceiling arched so high above our heads that looking up at the paintings on it almost made me dizzy. Instead of fat naked angels on clouds and other such popular motifs, the artist had painted pictures of people with books. Some of them were reading, some were pointing toward bulging bookcases, and others had placed open books

across their faces. Interspersed with the pictures of people, the same coat of arms appeared again and again: a green stag with huge antlers, perched proudly atop a pile of books against a wine-red background. A chandelier hung at the center of the entrance hall, its arms made up of strings of golden letters. Matching lamps were mounted at regular intervals along the wood-paneled walls, and between them were more stag coats of arms. The floor was spread with brightly colored Oriental rugs, with letters woven into them that I'd never seen before, and on the opposite wall a staircase swept upward, its oak banister fashioned from carved books. It was just possible I'd inherited my love of reading from my grandmother, I reflected.

"Follow me, if you please. I shall attend to your luggage shortly," said Mr. Stevens. For a man of his age, his back was remarkably straight, and his polished shoes made not the slightest sound on the opulent rugs.

We, on the other hand, left a squelching trail of muddy footsteps in our wake. "Um," I whispered to Alexis, "do you think maybe we should take off our . . . ?" But she shook her head distractedly. Only now did I notice that her fists were clenched around the fabric of her woolen coat. She was chewing at her bottom lip and her eyes flicked nervously back and forth.

Oh well. We had to get a move on anyway, to keep up with the butler. But I still felt bad about making such a mess in the most beautiful hallway I'd ever set foot in, and I tried to pick my way around the edges of the rugs. At least the glossy wooden floorboards underneath would be easier to clean.

They were certainly a lot more slippery. I'd only gone a few steps when I lost my balance on the sheet of mud and rainwater beneath

the soles of my sneakers and my feet slid out from under me. For a split second I teetered in the air (one flailing arm grazing Mr. Stevens's pomaded coiffure, and ruffling its cement-like surface), before landing heavily on my bum. Oh, *crap!*

The butler turned to inspect me through his now wonky glasses, eyebrows raised, but said nothing. The hair on the back of his head stood up in spikes like the feathers of a cockatoo.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

Alexis, without a word, put out a hand to help me up. She was used to my frequent accidents and liked to console me, at times like this, by calling me her "little giraffe," because it sometimes seemed as though my arms and legs were simply too long for me to control. And I did often feel like a giraffe compared to all the other girls my age, who'd gotten curvier over the past few years instead of taller and thinner like I had. A giraffe with roller skates strapped to its clumsy feet.

I let Alexis pull me to my feet and refrained from rubbing my bruised bum, trying to preserve the last shred of my dignity. Mr. Stevens (whose hair, incredibly, had already regained its former bombproof glory) carried on walking. We'd crossed the entrance hall now and he led us through a door set into the wood paneling, onto a long corridor, up some stairs, along another corridor . . . I was just starting to think that if I ever got lost in this house I'd never be able to find my way out again, when we finally arrived at a sitting room containing a silk-upholstered divan.

"Please." He motioned to us to sit down and busied himself lighting a fire in a large grate. But we didn't sit down because the fire, which was soon crackling merrily, was far more inviting. Alexis

and I stationed ourselves as close as possible to the hot flames, while the butler disappeared from the room. The heat almost sizzled as it met my skin. It sank slowly into my hands and face in what felt like a series of tiny little electric shocks. I closed my eyes and relished the reddish-orange glow that shone through my eyelids. But where the heat of the fire met my wet clothes it bounced off as if from a suit of armor. Only in one or two places did it manage to work its way—slowly—through the fabric.

I don't know how long I stood there willing the heat to filter right through to my bones. Perhaps it was only a few moments. Mr. Stevens returned much too soon, at any rate. "Mairead Lennox, Lady of Stormsay," he announced.

I forced myself to open my eyes and turn away from the fire.

Like all the women in my family, it seemed, my grandmother was tall. She was even taller than Alexis and me. Or did she just look taller because her white hair was drawn up into an imposing knot on the top of her head? She had the same dark eyes as me and Alexis, anyhow, shining in a nest of fine wrinkles. Her nose was a little too long, her lips a little too thin. But she must have been very beautiful once upon a time. In her dark green silk dress, fastened at the neck by a white collar and a brooch, she seemed—like her house—to belong to a different era. On a ribbon around her neck hung a slim pair of reading glasses, the frames set with tiny red stones.

For a while, she and Alexis looked at each other in silence. Alexis, standing there in her very wet, very colorful clothes, kneading the fabric of her coat so hard she wrung little droplets out of it. I'd always thought of Alexis as a sort of vegan reincarnation of Pippi Longstocking. Strong, brave, different from everybody else. A

friend who I called by her first name. A mother who didn't give a crap if people snorted contemptuously to see her walking along the top of a wall, singing loudly, as she took her five-year-old daughter to kindergarten. It wasn't like her to be nervous. But she was now.

Alexis moistened her lips as my grandmother's gaze shifted to me. She looked searchingly at me, and an unspoken question hung in the air between us, although I had no idea what it was. Alexis, too, remained silent. I swallowed, and Lady Mairead raised her eyebrows expectantly. The fire behind us crackled, and outside the rain drummed against the windowpanes. The climbing roses and the manicured shrubs rustled, bracing themselves against the storm that was howling around the house. My grandmother's nostrils flared as she breathed in. The water from our hair and clothes trickled off us and formed puddles at our feet.

Still Alexis didn't say a word.

This was unbearable!

"Um—so—I'm Amy," I ventured finally. "Nice to meet . . . er . . . to make your acquaintance," I stammered, and then, as no response was forthcoming, I added a "Mi . . . lady?" for good measure. Everyone knows aristocrats can sometimes have a bit of a thing about their titles. At the same time, entirely of their own accord, my legs twisted themselves into a kind of mangled curtsy. It wasn't exactly the pinnacle of elegance. I felt the blood rush to my face.

The ghost of a smile played around the corners of my grandmother's mouth. "Is this your . . . ?" she asked Alexis. "Can it really be true?" She took a step toward me and ran her fingertips down my cheek and along the line of my chin.

Beside me, Alexis nodded. "I got pregnant very young."

“Indeed,” said Lady Mairead, and now she smiled in earnest. “Well then, Amy—I suppose I must be your grandmother,” she declared, adding, in a language I assumed was Gaelic, “*Ceud mìle fàilte!*” Luckily she switched straight back to English. “A thousand welcomes to Lennox House, Am—”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” Alexis interrupted her. “That’s not why we came back.”

“No? Why, then?”

Alexis took a deep breath, as if speaking to her mother was a great effort. “We needed to get away for a bit and we didn’t know where to go,” she began. “Perhaps we were being a bit hasty, but . . . Anyway, we just want to stay here for a while and . . . recover, that’s all. It’s Amy’s summer holidays. We have to go back in a few weeks.”

Alexis knew perfectly well, of course, that I hated my school now. I never wanted to see my so-called “friends” again. But when we’d decided to flee abroad we hadn’t talked about how long we should stay. And I supposed we might have to go back to Germany at some point. After all, I was still planning to do my A-Levels there and study medicine afterward. But I didn’t want to think about that right now, and my grandmother too batted away Alexis’s objections with a sweep of her slender hand. “If you want to stay, you know what my condition is. She has to read. As long as you are here, she will read, and when the holidays are over, she can decide for herself.”

“Read? What do you mean?” I asked. “Why do I *have* to read?”

Alexis sighed. “It’s a long story, treasure. It’s to do with our family, but it’s not important. We—”

“She doesn’t know,” said my grandmother flatly. “She doesn’t know.” Her lips tightened as if she’d just bitten into a lemon.

“What don’t I know?”

Lady Mairead was about to explain, but at that moment Alexis finally overcame her uncharacteristic nervousness. “Not tonight, okay?” she told my grandmother. “I’m just not up to it right now. Amy’s soaked and frozen half to death, as am I. Things haven’t been easy for us these past few weeks and getting here in this storm definitely wasn’t. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

At first it looked as though my grandmother was about to object, but she seemed suddenly to realize that I was still shivering. “Very well,” she said. “Mr. Stevens will make up your rooms and run you a bath.”

A little while later, Alexis and I were lying in a bathtub the size of a swimming pool. When I stood up the water reached all the way to my waist, and if I tucked my legs in tight enough, I could even swim one and a half strokes from end to end. But as it was we were far too tired to do anything remotely sporty. Instead we just bobbed about in the hot water, thawing out our numb toes. Fragrant drifts of bubbles floated between us. From the ceiling of the marble bathroom hung another chandelier made of golden letters.

As we’d negotiated the mansion’s intricate web of corridors, I’d asked Alexis why she and Lady Mairead had such an issue about whether I should read or not. It was a no-brainer, after all—I certainly wasn’t going to *not read* for the whole of the holidays. For years now, working my way through the contents of the city library had been my favorite pursuit. But Alexis had only shrugged and said, “This entire family is crazy, Amy—you know that.”

Now we relaxed wearily into the heat of the water, which felt almost painful against my cold skin. Its warmth spread slowly through

my body, right to my core. I let myself sink just below the surface and, without moving a muscle, watched my long, thin hair as it wafted and coiled through the water in slow motion. Its rusty sheen was only a pale echo of Alexis's wild mane; when my hair was wet, you could barely even tell it was red. Still, I did feel a little bit like a sea anemone on a tropical ocean floor. That must be a nice life—nothing to do all day but sit around being caressed by the warm current.

It had just occurred to me that on second thought I was quite glad I wasn't a sea anemone because I'd probably get bored pretty quickly down there on the seabed without any books, when the gentle tilting of the water grew choppy; Alexis was on the move. First she paddled all the way across the bathtub; then she took a deep breath and dived down under the water. She crouched on the bottom of the tub for nearly two minutes, and when she resurfaced her eyes looked as if she was trying hard not to cry. She was probably cursing the day she'd twisted her ankle on the pasture of the organic farm where she worked, and had a splint put on it by a good-looking doctor in A&E. Dominik had found his way into her heart, and our family, far too quickly. The two of them had been together less than a year, but he'd become part of the family straightaway. He'd cooked steaks for himself and me, in our otherwise vegan kitchen; he'd come ice skating with us. . . . I missed him. He was the only one I missed.

"I'm sure we're going to have a lovely holiday on Stormsay," I said, quoting Alexis. And I meant it. Because anything was better than sitting around at home, where everything reminded you of everything. Where Alexis had had her heart broken and where I risked running into kids from school—a school where people were not very forgiving toward a girl with straight As and a flat chest.

Alexis blinked back her tears. “Yes,” she said. “Yes, you’re right.” She looked at me for a few moments. Suddenly she grinned and scooped some of the bubbles toward her. “Hey, Amy, could there be any more perfect start to a holiday than a full-on bubble fight?”

I smiled and started stocking up on soapy ammo.

Later, as I lay in bed cocooned in a warm quilt, I listened to the storm outside my window. Through the howling and raging of the wind, I was sure I heard another sound, like a child sobbing. Was somebody crying out there on the moor? No—it must be my imagination.



*The princess lived in a castle with silver battlements
and stained-glass windows. It stood on a hill
from which the whole of the kingdom could be seen.*

*Every day she climbed to the top of the highest
tower and looked out across the land.*

She knew her kingdom, knew it well.

But only from afar, for she never set foot outside the castle.

*Since her father the king and her mother the queen
had died, she no longer dared venture outside.*

*She thought the meadows and lakes too dangerous,
the forests too impenetrable. An old fairy tale,
which her subjects had long ago ceased to believe,
told of a monster lying in wait somewhere,
hidden deep in a cave.*

The princess feared the monster.



THE SECRET LIBRARY

THE NEXT MORNING I WOKE with a start from a nightmare in which I'd been pursued by photos and laughter. The pictures had shown me in the swimming pool locker room without my bikini top, captured on the camera phone of a so-called friend. Posted on our year's Facebook page. "This is your before picture on *Extreme Makeover!*" Paul had commented on one of the photos, as if I needed a whole load of plastic surgery in front of rolling TV cameras just to be able to lead a normal life. In the dream I'd shut myself in the school bathroom where no one could hear me, and cried.

Just like in real life.

Jolina really had taken the photos, and she really had shared them on Facebook and WhatsApp so that people with nothing better to do could look at me naked and laugh about it. It was stupid and childish.

But it still hurt.

Especially because I'd thought Jolina and I were friends. But now it seemed she preferred to fit in with everyone else than keep hanging out with me—the geek, the bookworm, the nerd. Alexis had told me time and time again how wrong they all were, that it wasn't true what they said about me, that I was pretty and likable and a lovely person. I knew it was mainly because they were jealous of my good grades and my fluent English that they were always looking for something they could use to upset me. But part of me secretly believed them nonetheless. However stupid it was, there was a sore spot in my soul, a tiny hole through which my self-esteem was trickling away.

But I wasn't going to let it—I'd promised myself. I was just going to forget about the photos and the laughter. And Stormsay was going to help me.

Resolutely I blinked back the images of the night and found myself lying in a four-poster bed. A swathe of red-checked fabric was draped above my head, overflowing into four thick walls of curtain. My bed was like its own little room within a room. A cocoon with only me in it—and the e-reader by my pillow, of course. It reminded me of when I was little, when I used to make caves out of old blankets and hole up inside them with my favorite books. I lay there a moment longer gazing at the slivers of light that slipped through the chinks in the fabric here and there, painting patterns on the embroidered quilt. Then I got up.

The guest room Mr. Stevens had put me in wasn't particularly big, but it was magnificently furnished, just like the rest of the house. The wallpaper was made of dark red silk with a shiny floral pattern, and there was an armchair with gilded legs, a chest of drawers with

a mirror mounted above it, and a deep window seat covered with cushions where you could sit and look out over the grounds and the moorland.

My muddy suitcase stood in the middle of the room like a foreign object. I'd been much too tired yesterday to unpack it. And even now it was all I could do to fish out a few pieces of clothing—a pair of jeans, a shirt, and a long cardigan would have to do. My wardrobe wasn't particularly varied at the best of times: unlike Alexis, I wasn't keen on brightly colored, patterned clothes and stripy tights. I preferred earthy colors, khaki, or black.

Directly opposite the four-poster bed was the door to the bathroom, which I was to share with Alexis. Environmentally friendly creams and pots of makeup, hair clips with flowers round the edges, and batik hair bands were already lined up along the edge of the sink and on the shelf above. Alexis had settled in, then. She was probably already having breakfast.

I was pretty hungry by now, too—after all, I hadn't eaten since yesterday morning apart from a couple of sandwiches at Dortmund Airport. I had a quick shower, threw on my clothes, and tied back my wet hair in a ponytail. Then I went out into the corridor in search of something to eat.

I soon struck lucky. I'd only gone a few steps when the raised voices of Alexis and my grandmother showed me which way to go. Unfortunately, they seemed to be yelling at each other. At first it was just unintelligible shouting, but the closer I got the more words I could distinguish.

“. . . can't force her!" cried Alexis. “. . . never have even *come* here if I'd known . . . !”

“ . . . did you think . . . ?” replied my grandmother. “. . . our family’s birthright . . . can’t stop her from . . . !”

“. . . give a shit about our birthright!”

“If you want to stay here . . . !”

“. . . argh!”

I went up a spiral staircase and onto another corridor: the voices grew clearer. They seemed to be coming from a room at the end of the hallway.

“She likes reading, doesn’t she?” asked Lady Mairead. “So why are you so against it? I’m sure she’ll enjoy it.”

“Have you forgotten what happened with me?”

“No, of course not. But you ended up with the wrong book, that’s all.”

“Still. It was horrible. I don’t want that for Amy. She doesn’t need those books.”

By this time I was outside the door of the room where the voices were coming from, and I pushed it open. I found Alexis and Lady Mairead seated in a sort of conservatory. Between them was a table laden with toast, sausages, eggs, bacon, and jam. I also spotted a stack of pancakes. My stomach rumbled audibly. But first I had to find out what Alexis and my grandmother were arguing about.

“What’s going on? What books don’t I need?” I asked.

Alexis gave a start and almost dropped the piece of dry toast she’d been nibbling on. Lady Mairead smiled. “Good morning, Amy. How was your first night at Lennox House?”

“Good,” I said. “I—um—like my canopy bed.”

“I’m glad. Would you like some breakfast?” My grandmother motioned toward an empty chair. “We can’t offer you a German-style

breakfast, I'm afraid. We have ordered supplies in from Lerwick, but they won't be here until tomorrow. How about some toast in the meantime?"

"Thanks," I said, helping myself to some sausages and bacon. "I'm not a vegan." Alexis didn't particularly like it when I ate meat, but she knew my body needed more calories than hers because mine seemed to burn them the instant I swallowed them. That was why I lived my life by a simple motto: never pass up an opportunity to eat anything greasy.

But at the moment Alexis didn't much seem to care what I was eating anyway. She was still glaring at my grandmother. Her jaw tightened.

Lady Mairead, on the other hand, looked on approvingly as I shoveled the food into my mouth. "Your mother hasn't told you this, but we have a very special library here on Stormsay. It's very large and very . . . secret," she began at last. "Some of the texts are over two thousand years old and come from the famous Library of Alexandria. Our ancestors rescued them from the fire there before building the library on Stormsay. Might you like to see it? Some of the volumes are priceless."

I looked inquiringly at Alexis, but she was too busy casting withering looks at her mother to notice. She didn't reply, anyway. And I couldn't see what was so wrong with having a little noncommittal look round a library, especially when it belonged to your own family.

"Um, yeah," I mumbled between mouthfuls. "Definitely."

"Excellent." Lady Mairead nodded. "In that case, Mr. Stevens will take you straight there."

“Okay.” I helped myself to another pancake as Alexis almost burst a blood vessel.

“Fine,” she cried. “She can try it. But only on one condition.”

Lady Mairead raised her eyebrows. “And what would that be?”

Alexis gripped the edge of the table so tightly her knuckles went white. “That you give her a children’s book,” she declared. “Something completely harmless. A story where absolutely nothing can happen to her. I mean it. Give her a children’s book or we leave here right now.”

“Oh, good lord,” muttered my grandmother, and to be honest I was thinking the same thing: good lord, the crazy gene of the Lennoxes strikes again. This time Alexis seemed to be the one feeling its effects.

The library in question was not located at Lennox House—or in a house at all, in fact. When Mr. Stevens (who, to judge by the glossiness of his hair, had applied an extra helping of pomade today as a precaution against further assaults by clumsy houseguests) had led me out onto the moor I’d thought at first that he was taking me to the castle on the other side of the island, which my grandmother had told me was home to a family named Macalister. But in the end he’d stopped at the bottom of a sort of hill. At the top of the hill were a number of enormous stone slabs piled one on top of the other. They formed a circle made up of several gateways, similar to Stonehenge, and their porous gray bodies were covered with moss and lichens. Mr. Stevens pointed not to the ancient monument, however, but to the mouth of a cave at the foot of the hill.

“Here it is,” he said, lifting a flaming torch from a bracket set

into the rock. “We are now entering the *Secret Library*, ma’am,” he declared solemnly.

“O . . . K?” I said skeptically, but Mr. Stevens’s stern face brooked no dissent. Plus, I liked being addressed as ma’am.

At first the stone passageway led uphill for a few yards, but it ended abruptly at the center of the hill and gave way to a flight of steps carved into the rock, leading deeper and deeper underground. I ran my fingertips along the rough walls as I followed Mr. Stevens into the darkness.

The steps were steep.

And there were lots of them.

We went down and down, step by step by step, for what felt like an eternity. The library was not inside the hill where the stone circle was, as I’d assumed. It was *underneath* it. Deep, deep underground. We must be right down inside the bowels of the island by now, maybe even below sea level. From far away I thought I could hear the booming of the waves. Whose idea had it been to build a library in a place like this?

The flight of steps ended as suddenly as it had begun and I was met by the smell of old paper. This was where the bookshelves began. They were made of dark wood and were around ten feet tall. There were narrow ladders at regular intervals that could be slid from side to side. The shelves groaned under the weight of folios and leather-bound books, and in among them I could also make out paperbacks and yellowed scrolls. Aisles branched off everywhere from the rows of shelves. Lady Mairead had been right: this library was both enormous and ancient.

It was full of whispered words, the lure of stories waiting to be

read, a rustle of promise that hung in the air. How many adventures were hidden here in paper and ink, how many great love stories, how many epic battles? I'd fallen in love with the place already. I would have liked to just stand there stroking the books, maybe taking one of them in my hands and leafing through it, perusing the deeds of some tragic hero. My steps began to slow, but Mr. Stevens led me inexorably onward into the heart of the library with its labyrinth of aisles.

Despite the many lamps that glowed between the shelves, it was too dark to make out the full extent of the cave system. And the aisles became more and more tightly interwoven the farther we went. But at last the walls of books opened out onto a space that looked a bit like a classroom. A rather old-fashioned classroom, to be sure, containing worm-eaten wooden desks with lids you could lift up to store books in the compartment beneath. But, yes, it was definitely a classroom, and what worried me most of all was that it wasn't empty.

In the front row sat a boy and a girl of my own age, and at the blackboard stood a bald man in a monk's habit. An invisible fist gripped my stomach and squeezed hard. I had to force my feet to keep walking.

"Good morning, Glenn. I have brought you Amy Lennox. The Lady would like her granddaughter to attend lessons. Had you been informed?" asked Mr. Stevens, and the man at the board nodded. "Ah yes, thank you. We've been waiting for you."

Lessons? The word set off alarm bells in my head. So this really was a school. And I was the new girl. And in the summer holidays too. Fan-fricking-tastic. There was a bitter taste in my mouth.

Stormsay was supposed to help take my mind off school, not . . . the girl in the front row had blond hair just like Jolina's. I swallowed hard.

The teacher beckoned me over to him. His eyebrows were so bushy it was almost as if they were trying to compensate for the lack of hair on his head. On his forehead was a jagged mesh of raised scars that stretched across his bald pate like a spider's web. He wore a patch over his left eye. He pretended not to see the dismayed expression on my face, and shook my hand. "My name is Glenn, and I've been teaching members of the Lennox and Macalister families for many years. It's good to have a Lennox among us once more." He gestured toward his two students. "These are Betsy and William Macalister, the Laird's daughter and nephew. This is Amy Lennox, the Lady's granddaughter."

"Hi," I mumbled.

"Hello." The girl was wearing a satin headband in her perfectly shiny blond hair; her eyelashes were long and thick with black mascara. She looked me up and down. The boy, however, merely nodded and smiled briefly and went on writing in his exercise book. He had dark hair that stuck out in all directions, as if he'd spent the night outdoors in the thick of the storm.

Leaving them both to underline something in a Shakespeare sonnet, Glenn and I withdrew to one of the bookshelves in the far corner of the classroom. At last I was able to get a closer look at some of the books. My gaze ran along the leather spines, embossed with gold lettering. There was *Alice in Wonderland* alongside *Ronia, the Robber's Daughter*; *The Wizard of Oz*; and *The Neverending Story*, and a red leather-bound book, which turned out to be *The Jungle Book*.

“Your two clans have been reading books since time immemorial, but they read in a different way from other people,” Glenn began. “In your families, ever since ancient times, a special gift has been passed down from generation to generation. That is why they share this library.”

“Uh-huh,” I said, and Glenn sighed.

“Yes—I know you have no idea what I’m talking about. The Lady tells me your mother kept all of this a secret from you. So it’s probably best that I show you what I mean. And I shall do so directly; but first, there is one thing you should know. The Macalisters and the Lennoxes have not always lived so peacefully together on this island. Once upon a time they were locked in a bloody feud that lasted from the Middle Ages until about three hundred years ago, when the hostility reached its peak. Their strife led to a fire, and one of the things destroyed in that fire was a particularly valuable manuscript. It was the only written record of a legend that is now lost forever. Ever since then, the families have observed a truce and devoted themselves to protecting literature and preserving the books you see here. That is why we built the library so deep underground and why we tell nobody of its existence unless they belong to one of the two families, or have earned their trust. Everything we do, and everything you will do from now on, must be done for the good of the world of stories. You must make that promise before we begin, because . . .”

The red leather binding of *The Jungle Book* shone out at me enticingly. *Read me!* it cried. *Read me!*

“Amy?”

My hand was drifting toward the books. At the last moment I

managed to stop myself reaching out and grabbing one. I withdrew my arm abruptly, pretending I needed to scratch my cheek, and shifted my weight awkwardly from one foot to the other. As I did so, however, I managed to bump into one of the ladders propped up against the shelves, and it toppled over and fell to the ground with a deafening crash. My face turned red, and a derisive snort could be heard from the direction of the desks.

Glenn's lips twitched as if suppressing a smile, but a moment later he met my eye with the same stern friendliness as before.

He cleared his throat and continued as if nothing had happened. "Well, Amy?"

"Y-yes?"

"Do you vow that whenever you read you will strive to protect stories and to do nothing that might destroy or alter them?"

"Um—of course," I said. How on earth was someone supposed to destroy a story just by reading it anyway?

"Good," said Glenn. "Your mother wants you to choose one of these books here. Have you seen anything you might like to try?"

Half an hour later, Glenn, Betsy, William, and I entered the stone circle at the top of the hill. *The Jungle Book* lay red, smooth, and heavy in my hands. Naturally I'd slipped on the wet grass climbing the hill, but I'd just about managed to keep the book from falling into the mud. The knees of my jeans, on the other hand, now sported a pair of greenish-brown stains, and I felt clumsier still in comparison to Betsy—who went trotting elegantly up the hill—and William, who tagged along at the back of our little group as if he were just out for a casual stroll. I wondered why exactly we had to come out here to read, when the wind had turned so cold again. Betsy and William

were carrying books under their arms, too, and Glenn had brought along a moldy-looking woven beach mat that he spread out in the mud beneath one of the gateways in the stone circle. “Will, would you go first?” he asked.

“Sure,” said the boy. His voice was deeper than I’d expected, his eyes the color of the sky above us. Stormy blue. He was also tall and thin, like me, but his body looked muscular, as if he was strong despite his skinniness. He strode purposefully over to the mat and lay down on it so that his head was positioned directly beneath the stone arch. Then he opened his book and laid it over his face. On the cover I could see a picture of an enormous dog. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* was the title: it was a Sherlock Holmes novel. I knew the story—I’d been given it for Christmas four years ago. But the dog on the front of my book wasn’t quite as scary as this one. As I looked at the cover, the book suddenly dropped through the air and landed on the mat. The pages glowed for a moment.

I blinked. No—it couldn’t be! I blinked again, unable to grasp what I was seeing. But it was true: Will had vanished. Only the book remained in the stone circle. “What?” I exclaimed.

“These stones form the *Porta Litterae*,” Glenn explained. “They are the entrance to the world of stories.”

“But . . .” I still couldn’t get my head around the fact that Will seemed to have disappeared into thin air from one moment to the next.

“He’s inside his book now,” said Betsy, with a condescending smile. “No need to panic—it’s totally normal for us.”

I opened my mouth and then shut it again because I didn’t know how to reply. Glenn placed a hand on my arm. “I know it is hard to

believe. But this is the special gift possessed by your two families. Between your fifth and twenty-fifth birthdays you have the ability to jump inside literature and check that everything is in order. Each of you takes special responsibility for one book in particular until the time you finish school. After that you use your skills to protect the whole of the literary world. Betsy, for example, has been looking after this book of fairy tales since her tenth birthday. She is about to jump into *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.”

Betsy swept her bangs out of her eyes. “One of the dwarfs is causing trouble—he’s taken it into his head to go off on his own and open an ice-cream parlor. I’ve been trying for weeks to make him see sense. *Snow White and the Six Dwarfs* just sounds ridiculous.”

“Um . . .” Was this a joke?

Betsy settled herself serenely on the mat and opened her book. “Well, here we go again,” she said. “Don’t worry, Amy. You might not even be able to do it. No book jumper in history has ever left it till your age to start training. It’s probably too late by now.”

“Well—we’ll see soon enough, won’t we, Amy?” said Glenn, smiling at me encouragingly.

Betsy shrugged and laid the open book of fairy tales across her face. In a heartbeat, she too had disappeared. All that was left was the rustling of the pages as they landed on the mat. My mouth went dry.

“Book jumpers?” I breathed. “Did they really jump *into* the books?” It sounded too absurd. It couldn’t be true.

“Yes,” said Glenn. “And now it’s your turn. Simply open the book at the page where you want to jump in, and do as the others did.”

“I don’t know,” I said. Was this some kind of stupid prank? An initiation ritual? Were Will and Betsy actually lying in the bushes with their camera phones, waiting to film me making a fool of myself?

Glenn interpreted my hesitation differently. “You can do it, I’m certain of it. I think Betsy is mistaken. After all, you are a Lennox. And you can come back straightaway if you’re frightened—all you need to do is return to the page you jumped in at.”

“But how . . . And for how long? And what should I . . .” I stammered helplessly. This was crazy! People couldn’t just vanish from one moment to the next and reappear as a book character!

“I can’t explain it either, Amy,” sighed Glenn as I remained rooted to the spot. “But your families have been doing it for centuries—it just works, somehow. And nobody has ever failed to come back before,” he added with a smile. “You really have no need to be afraid; your mother has even made sure your first jump is into a story which is absolutely safe. Give it a try, have a little look around and come back to the point where you started once you’ve had enough. Then we’ll see what you think of it.”

I looked first at the mat under the arch and then back at Glenn, scanning his good eye for evidence that he was lying. But I found none. Was he really serious about this whole thing? Did the members of my family really have a special gift? Did I have it, too—the ability to jump inside literature? The idea was ridiculous and at the same time . . . tantalizing. Until now I’d only ever visited the world of stories, that world that held such fascination for me, in my imagination. But if there was a way of entering it for real . . . I ran my fingers over the soft red leather in my hands and the delicate depressions formed by the imprint of the title. *The Jungle Book*. I’d never

been in a jungle before. Especially not one that was home to Baloo the bear. A smile stole across my face.

Glenn nodded. “Just give it a try.” He pointed to the mat.

I lay down on it as I’d seen the others do, with my head directly below the stone arch. I could hardly believe I was actually doing this. It was utterly insane, and I caught myself giggling nervously. But I opened the book and laid it across my face. The paper slid smoothly over my cheeks and along the bridge of my nose until it covered my eyes. The letters were far too close up to read. They swam before my eyes, melting into an inky whirlpool. They swirled around one another; they changed shape. Words flexed and twisted apart to form bushes and foliage. And then they came pattering down like raindrops: a shower of words raining down on me.

In the space of a heartbeat, I found myself lying among the roots of a gigantic jungle tree. Around me was an explosion of greens of every shade imaginable. Vines snaked around tree trunks and ferns sprouted between them. The air was warm and humid and filled with the sweet fragrance of exotic flowers. Somewhere close by I heard a child laughing.

I sat up, flicked an oversized ant off my knee, and began to creep through the bushes in the direction of the voices. The vegetation was thick, but I’d only gone a few yards when, through the curtain of ferns, I spied a group of wolves. The group consisted of two adult wolves with silver-gray fur, talking quietly to each other, and a whole heap of cubs at their feet, frolicking happily with a naked human child who couldn’t have been older than two. Mowgli!

This was the beginning of *The Jungle Book*! The wolf family had just found Mowgli alone in the jungle and decided to bring him up

as one of their own—and I was right in the middle of it! I felt dizzy. I'd never read the book, but I knew the Disney version of the story. It had been one of my favorite films as a child. Was Bagheera the panther about to show up? Or Baloo the bear? Would he sing a song, like in the film? Would he take me to the monkeys' lost city? Would I be able to understand the language of the animals and speak to them? Oh, man—I had really and truly jumped into a book! My thoughts tripped over one another as I crawled closer and closer to Mowgli and the wolf family. Unlike the Disney Mowgli, this Mowgli had curly hair and was not wearing red trunks.

But just as I was about to burst from the undergrowth and greet the wolves with a friendly “Hi, how’s it going?” I suddenly felt something settle upon my back. I froze; the something was soft and warm and heavy and felt suspiciously like a paw of some kind. Slowly, very slowly, I turned around . . .

. . . and found myself face-to-face with a predator. It was Shere Khan, the tiger. His yellow cat’s eyes blazed and all of a sudden I remembered that the main storyline in *The Jungle Book* was about this very tiger trying to hunt Mowgli down and eat him. Because he was afraid of men and their guns. And because he was a tiger, and in the wild tigers do have a tendency to eat humans.

Shere Khan bared his teeth. The stink of his breath hit me square in the face. Now I understood why Alexis had insisted on me jumping into a harmless children’s book. Unfortunately, however, even those didn’t seem to be entirely risk-free. If I called for help, would the wolves be able to save me? I drew a deep breath, but before I could make a sound the tiger put a claw to his lips.

Put a claw to his lips?

“You must not interfere with the plot, Reader,” whispered Shere Khan. “If they see you, they will not keep the man’s cub. Then you will be lumbered with the brat, and our entire story will fall apart.”

I stared at the tiger. He could talk. “Herghm,” I said.

The tiger cocked his enormous head to one side. “Not so loud,” he murmured. “I just told you. Come with me.”

The big cat moved off, and after a moment’s hesitation I followed him into the jungle thicket. What was the likelihood that Shere Khan was only luring me away from the tumbling wolf cubs so he could devour me in peace somewhere else in the forest? Was it even possible for me to die inside the story or, as a visitor from the outside world, was I invincible? Powerful bands of muscle rippled beneath the tiger’s striped coat as he prowled noiselessly onward. I, on the other hand, kept treading on snapping branches and rustling leaves, a far cry from the graceful elegance of my companion. If he really was planning to attack me, I didn’t stand a chance.

But with every step I took, my fear dissipated a little beneath the jungle canopy. I was reassured by the thought that Shere Khan could have killed me by now if he’d wanted to, but he hadn’t. And somehow I just couldn’t imagine being eaten by someone I’d been having a conversation with a few minutes earlier.

The tiger led me to a clearing where there was a fallen tree lying on the ground, and I sat down on it. Shere Khan lay down beside me, head on his paws. His tail whisked to and fro among the ferns.

“I am Shere Khan,” he said.

“Amy,” I replied. “I’m sorry. I’ve never been in a book before and I didn’t know . . .”

“It’s all right,” returned the tiger. “I would say it’s the law of the jungle, but it’s the same everywhere in the book world: Readers are not allowed to intervene. Under no circumstances. You must always stay in the margins, between the lines.”

“Kind of like—in the subplot?”

Shere Khan nodded.

“Okay,” I said, and a fresh wave of excitement washed over me now that I was fairly sure the tiger wasn’t going to hurt me. “What should I do, then? I’m very pleased to meet you, by the way. Do you know where I might find Baloo and Bagheera? Which way is the monkey city? Are you really so terrified of fire?”

The tiger sighed and stood up. “You had better ask someone in the outside world. In a few pages they are going to take Mowgli to the Pack Council. Then I will have to sit in the thicket and demand that they hand him over to me,” he explained. “This is the way back to the plot and to the tree that will take you home again.” Even as he spoke the last few words he had disappeared into the tangle of the undergrowth.

I stayed seated on my tree trunk for a moment. Should I go after Shere Khan and return to Stormsay? Or . . .

As if of their own accord, my feet carried me off in the opposite direction. This trip was far too exciting to turn back now. I’d spoken to Shere Khan the tiger. The whole thing was unbelievable. Unbelievably awesome! Perhaps one of these days I really would have Momo’s tortoise *Cassiopeia* as my guide, I thought, as I made my way deeper and deeper into the jungle. There were so many stories I would have liked to jump into and so many characters I was

desperate to meet. But coming face-to-face with a dancing Baloo in the monkey city would do for starters.

There were no footpaths in the jungle, of course, so I clambered over tree roots and boulders and battled my way through ferns and vines until the vegetation gradually began to thin out. But the trees gave way not to a lost city or an indigenous village, as I'd expected, but to a different landscape altogether.

All at once the air was drier and cooler. A sandy road wound its way through fields and meadows. In the distance I could see a windmill and a knight galloping toward it, lance lowered. Before me lay a crossroads with a towering signpost at its center. *The Jungle Book* was written in ornate, squiggly letters on one arrow, pointing in the direction I'd just come from; another pointed to *Shakespeare's tragedies*. Other roads branched off to *Don Quixote*, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*.

Wow! It looked as though I'd reached the edge of *The Jungle Book* and could now decide which story I wanted to travel to next. I'd just resolved to pay a visit to the murderer with a split personality, Dr. Jekyll/Mr. Hyde, when I spotted another arrow. It was smaller than the rest, and somebody had written a single word on it in a spidery hand as if it had been painted on in a great hurry: *Margin*. I'd never heard that title before. Seriously, since when had there been a book called *Margin*?

The sign pointed to what could scarcely be called a road: it was more of a dirt track flanked by craggy rocks. It was littered with rubble, but hey—I had just successfully navigated a jungle thicket, after all, and I was also exceedingly curious. Without further ado I

set off along the track, the strange title going round and round in my head. I made surprisingly good progress. Normally I would've been bound to stub my toe or fall over or trip on a loose stone. But this literary rubble seemed to be on my side.

The rocks on either side of me loomed higher and higher until they formed a ravine, which I was now walking along the bottom of. The sand crunched under my feet and my footsteps echoed off the walls. After a while I thought I heard voices in the distance. Was I getting close to the next story? How long had I been walking? Was it only five minutes ago that I'd been talking to Shere Khan, or an hour?

Eventually I reached a bend in the path. As I turned the corner I saw a man sitting on the ground—though it took me a while to establish that he *was* a man, because he was wearing silk stockings and heeled shoes and had his hair tied back in a ponytail with a velvet ribbon. He'd buried his face in his knees and flung his arms over his head in an attempt to protect himself from three old women who were flying through the air around him, hooded cloaks flapping. They were scratching at his arms with their long fingernails.

“Hail to thee, young Werther,” screeched one.

“Thou shalt find happiness with Lotte,” called the second.

“Thou shalt wed her by and by,” shrieked the third.

The man curled up into an even tighter ball and his shoulders quaked beneath his embroidered waistcoat. A sob could be heard amid the jeers of the old women flitting around Werther's head. “Go away,” he pleaded, a choke in his voice.

But this had no effect whatsoever on his tormentors. “Hail to thee,” repeated the first, flying closer to the man. Her voice rang out

across the ravine and made the crags tremble. Here and there, showers of dust and stones cascaded down the rock face. Her victim made himself even smaller, not even attempting to fight back.

“Hail to thee, young bridegr—” began the first.

I was so fixated on the scene that I forgot to look where I was going, and caught my foot on one of the larger rocks. I almost fell headlong into the midst of the whimpering man and his tormentors but managed to steady myself just in time. The old women immediately fell silent and turned their watery eyes upon me. Their hair snaked out from beneath their ragged cloaks as if it had a life of its own.

I cleared my throat, gurgled something that sounded vaguely like “Hello,” and swallowed hard. The three old women hissed menacingly, and the man sobbed. Now that their attention was turned on me I felt somehow obliged to try to help the poor wretch at the roadside. “C-can’t you see he’s upset? Just leave him alone.”

The old women grinned.

“Thou art brave,” rasped the second.

“Thou art a Reader,” snarled the first.

“Yes,” I said, squaring my shoulders. “And who are you?”

They laughed.

“Thou wouldst know who we are?” screeched the third. “Come, sisters, ’tis time for our potion.”

They were still laughing as they spiraled up into the air and flew away.

The man squinted out from between his elbows. “Thank you,” he mumbled.

“You’re welcome. I hope I haven’t messed up the plot,” I said,

remembering that I had only recently been warned by a massive tiger not to interfere with the progress of any stories. I bit my lip.

But the man waved aside my anxieties. “No, no—this is no-man’s-land. I was on my way to the Margin when you found me. To all intents and purposes they are harmless outside of their own play. But they take pleasure, you see, in reminding me of my sorrows.”

“Why?”

“Oh, because I am easy prey, I suppose.” The man clambered effortfully to his feet, brushed the dust from his silk stockings, and pulled out an embroidered handkerchief. He blew his nose and gazed at me from under his long eyelashes. “Forgive me, but would you happen to be Miss Amy?”

“Er—yes. How do you know my name?”

“Half the fairy-tale forest is looking for you, truth be told. They say your friends in the outside world are afraid you might not have survived your jump.”

“Oh.” I tucked my hair behind my ears. “I’d better set them straight, then.”

Soon afterward, when I jumped back to Stormsay from the giant jungle tree and landed in the stone circle, the first thing I saw was the anxious faces of Betsy and Glenn. Will stood apart from the others on the brow of the hill. He was strikingly pale and his hands gripped *The Hound of the Baskervilles* so tightly that the veins showed blue under his skin. He was staring off into the distance and didn’t even seem to register my arrival.

But the other two came rushing over to me straightaway.

“At last,” Glenn exclaimed. “Did you get stuck? Are you hurt?” His eyes examined me from head to toe.

“Um, no, I—”

“It’s too late, simple as that,” Betsy broke in. “She’s too old to start training. A Macalister might be able to do it, but a Lennox . . .”

“Betsy,” admonished Glenn, but Betsy was undeterred.

“It doesn’t do anyone any good to have her stuck at her jumping point for hours, not even able to move. How is she ever going to learn how to speak to the characters? She should just stay here till the holidays are over and then go back to Germany. You can’t force these things.”

“Um—actually, I didn’t get *stuck*,” I said, picking my book up off the mat. “First of all I talked to Shere Khan the tiger. Then he had to go back to the plot, so I went on by myself and eventually I got to the end of the jungle and I found a signpost and—”

“You left *The Jungle Book*?” cried Glenn.

“Students aren’t allowed to do that.” Betsy wrinkled her nose. In her eyes was a flicker of something I’d seen before on the faces of my classmates in Germany. Jealousy. But she did her best to hide it.

Glenn folded his arms. “Well, you do seem to be very talented. But I have to agree with Betsy in this instance: it is still far too soon, and far too dangerous, for you to explore the book world outside of your practice book.”

Betsy nodded vigorously, and now at last Will did look over at us—and eyed me with interest.



The monster crept out of its cave.

Softly, softly.

Nobody noticed it.



CHEWING GUM FOR OLIVER TWIST

THE COTTAGE ON THE MOOR WAS SMALL. It consisted of a single room, just big enough to hold the sofa with its holey cushions and the cast-iron stove. The thatched roof reached almost to the ground; mold had set in among the stalks and let the rain in the moment it came knocking. In a storm the wind whistled through the cracked windowpanes. But in spite of all this Will liked his home.

Of course, it wasn't really his home—Will was after all the nephew of Reed Macalister, Laird of Stormsay, whose ancestral home was Macalister Castle in the north of the island. But the castle was scarcely less drafty than the cottage and when Betsy and her old nanny launched into one of their frequent tirades about Will's father and what a failure he was, what a disappointment to the clan, Will vastly preferred the bubble and gurgle of his own little stove to the griping by the fire in the great hall of the castle. Not to mention the presence of the Laird, whom he went out of his way to avoid.

Some time ago Will had transported all of his treasures from the castle to the cottage. He now kept his favorite books in a chest sandwiched between the sofa and the wall, along with the album full of photos from his past. His memories were hazy; they felt like the fading fragments of a dream. He'd been five years old when his parents had left. That was twelve years ago now.

But today Will had no desire to recall the distant past. He just wished he could remember more of the details of the previous day. Because yesterday something had happened—possibly even something terrible.

His gaze was riveted to something that had been daubed on the wall above the stove. The color bloomed red, far too red, against the plaster. A few drops had trickled down the wall like tears not wiped away in time. But this liquid wasn't water. Will didn't want to think what it was.

It formed words on the wall, the letters turning brown at the edges.

I HAVE AWOKEN

It had appeared suddenly yesterday afternoon. Will had dozed off on the sofa and when he'd woken up from his nap, there it had been. Was it supposed to be a warning? A threat? Who had painted the words on the wall? Had they already been there before he'd fallen asleep? What did they mean?

Will had run to the stone circle to fetch his best friend.

Holmes.

It was forbidden, but it wasn't the first time he'd done it.

And Holmes seemed to have a hunch. He had stared long and hard at the writing, and at last he'd murmured, "It wasn't Moriarty." Then he'd gone out into the storm, perhaps to organize his thoughts. Will hadn't seen him since. He and the dog had searched for Holmes all evening before eventually giving up. They'd hoped Holmes had gone home to play his violin or experiment with anesthetics or engage in another of his favorite pastimes.

But today during lessons when he'd jumped inside the book, Will had found it empty. He still couldn't believe Holmes hadn't returned to the book world. But the great detective did seem to have vanished into thin air.

And now Will sat here alone, staring at the wall.

"Do help yourself to another, Amy," said Lady Mairead, sliding the plate of biscuits closer to me. "They are a little old, but if you dunk them in your tea they taste almost freshly baked."

We both knew she was lying. The biscuits between us were massive—not dainty little cookies like the ones we had in Germany, but dry, inch-thick slabs as big as the palm of my hand. I took a second biscuit, even though the first was already lying like a stone in my stomach and weighing it down. Ever since my journey into *The Jungle Book*, Lady Mairead had been remarkably kind to me, and I was far too polite to spurn her biscuits. A cloud of dusty crumbs filled my mouth as I took a bite.

My grandmother smiled contentedly and leaned back in her chair. We were having afternoon tea in the conservatory where we'd eaten breakfast. A tabby cat named Macbeth had curled up on Lady Mairead's lap and was purring loudly. "We don't get to the shops as

often as we used to, unfortunately,” my grandmother explained, tickling Macbeth behind the ears. “But the main thing is just to get some proper food into you. Your mother’s fruit and vegetable diet doesn’t seem to agree with you.” She glanced at my wrists.

I was about to reply that my figure was not due to my mum’s vegan cooking but to a cruel freak of nature, when I found that the dust-biscuit had cemented my tongue to the roof of my mouth and was now threatening to block my windpipe as I attempted to swallow it. I eventually managed to wash the thing down with the help of two cups of tea. Then I had a coughing fit that lasted a full minute.

Lady Mairead, meanwhile, was chatting away again about the Secret Library. As I’d discovered on the way back to the classroom, Glenn had two colleagues at the library named Desmond and Clyde, whose job it was to maintain order among the chaos of the books. They, too, wore monk’s habits and had scars on their faces. Clyde catalogued the library’s holdings and Desmond was a bookbinder and only a few years older than me. Twenty at most, I reckoned.

“Ah, those were the days. When I was young, I jumped into hundreds of stories.” Lady Mairead smiled to herself. “Our gift is very precious, Amy. Make the most of it while you can.”

“Was it an accident?” I asked once I was able to speak again.

Lady Mairead raised her eyebrows. “What?”

“The librarians—Glenn’s eye and their injuries, I mean.”

She looked down at her teacup. “Ah, yes. Yes, it was.” Macbeth raised his head and stared at me.

My grandmother seemed to have no intention of revealing anything more, so out of politeness I took another bite of my biscuit. The

volume of biscuit in my mouth seemed to increase the more I chewed, and I felt another choking fit coming on. I was such an idiot! My jaws worked overtime.

As if sensing that I was in urgent need of a refill to wash down the biscuit crumbs, Mr. Stevens entered with a pot of freshly brewed tea. The cat settled back into Lady Mairead's lap.

As I'd made my way from the stone circle back to Lennox House, I'd been in a euphoric mood. I couldn't wait to tell Alexis about the experience I'd had. My feet seemed to fly across the moor. As I arrived at the mansion I ran into Alexis in the entrance hall, muffled up in her coat and scarf. The words came tumbling out of me. "I was inside *The Jungle Book*. I spoke to Shere Khan—"

"I'm going for a walk, Amy," she'd interrupted, stemming my torrent of words. "Let's talk about it later." The next thing I knew she'd disappeared outside. I'd been waiting for her to return ever since.

As Mr. Stevens poured the tea, I glanced at my watch. Alexis had been gone nearly three hours now. The island wasn't *that* big. Perhaps she was doing more than one lap?

"It's not easy for your mother to come to terms with you jumping," said Lady Mairead, noticing the glance.

I shrugged. "She agreed to come here. And anyway, I don't understand why she's so against it. I think the whole thing is absolutely brilliant." Again and again I thought back to my encounters with the tiger, the young man and the three old women, who I now supposed must have been witches. I'd been to a new world. A better world, one where dreams came true. And I was annoyed that I couldn't tell my closest confidante about it. When Lady Mairead had tried to

question me soon after I'd arrived back at the mansion, I'd simply shrugged. Despite my mum giving me the cold shoulder earlier, I still wanted her to be the first to hear about my experiences in the book world.

My grandmother stirred a dash of milk into her tea. "I think that for many years Alexis was in denial about the fact that you might have the gift, too—until she almost came to believe her own self-deception. She is afraid of what might happen to you in the book world."

"Why?"

"Well—her own experiences as a book jumper were not entirely positive," said my grandmother quietly, as if she didn't want anyone else to hear.

"Really?" I leaned forward.

"Do you know the novel *Anna Karenina*?"

"Sort of," I said. "I haven't read it. But I know it's about a woman who jumps in front of a train at the end."

Lady Mairead nodded. "Alexis chose the story as a practice book and—"

At that moment, Alexis entered the conservatory and Lady Mairead fell silent.

"I just wanted to let you know I'm back, and I'm going to go and have a lie-down. I think I've got a migraine coming on," said Alexis. And off she went again.

But I wasn't going to let her get away so easily this time. I stuffed the remainder of the second biscuit into my pocket "for later" and hurried out into the hallway after Alexis.

She was already one and a half flights of stairs ahead of me. When

I caught up I found her leaning against a window with her forehead pressed to the glass, looking out across the moor.

“Is everything okay?” I asked. My irritation at her disappearance suddenly evaporated, to be replaced by concern.

Alexis jumped as if I’d caught her doing something she wasn’t supposed to be. “Oh, er—Amy,” she stammered. “Yes—I’ve just got a headache.”

I moved a step closer to her. She did look pale, and there were dark circles under her eyes that I hadn’t noticed that morning, perhaps because they’d been hidden under a layer of makeup. Her arms hung down limply at her sides. Even her colorful knitted dress looked as though somebody had covered it with a gray veil. She wasn’t okay. Of course she wasn’t. How could I have forgotten that?

It was only three days since Dominik had left her. Her world had fallen apart, just like mine had that Wednesday afternoon when Jolina had posted the photos online. And the fact that I’d spent a few hours in a dream didn’t change that.

I put an arm around Alexis’s shoulders. “Let’s forget about all that,” I said. “That’s why we came here. Stormsay is going to help us forget.”

Alexis said nothing.

I dreamed about the naked photos again that night. This time, however, they weren’t being sent from phone to phone but were printed on a poster on the wall of the Secret Library. Instead of Jolina and Paul and the rest of my class, it was Betsy, Will, and Glenn looking at the pictures. Will was snorting with laughter, while Betsy and Glenn argued.

“She can’t really look like that. The photos must have been doctored,” said Glenn. “No normal human being looks like that.”

“Rubbish. I took the photos myself in the locker room. She’s a Lennox, what do you expect?” retorted Betsy. “Just look at her sticky-out ribs. I told you, she’ll never be a book jumper. She’s nothing more than a dry twig.”

Will’s laughter grew louder now, and even Glenn began to grin.

“If you ask me we should just throw her on the compost heap,” added Betsy, pointing to a miniature rubbish pile that had suddenly sprung up in the corner of the classroom.

“Yes,” said Glenn, ripping the poster off the wall. As he did so I realized that I wasn’t standing behind the other three, as I’d thought, but inside the pictures. I seemed to be trapped inside them.

“We shall have to tell the Lady that Amy is not worth training,” Glenn continued. He tore the paper into tiny pieces, and me with it. First he ripped my face in half, then my body, my hands, my fingers. I screamed, but nobody could hear me. The poster disintegrated into smaller and smaller scraps; my arms and legs turned to confetti. My head was shredded. All that was left of me ended up on the stinking heap of muck.

I was woken by my own scream.

The sheets were drenched with sweat and clung to my body. Panting, I stared into the darkness of the canopy above my head. It wasn’t real. Nobody on the island except Alexis and me knew about the photos. My subconscious had been playing tricks on me again, and it had all been just a stupid nightmare. I’d had a lot of those recently.

But it still took a while for my breathing to slow. I didn’t dare

close my eyes. Who knew what crazy dream I would have next? Instead, I fumbled for my e-reader and switched it on. The screen lit up, bathing my face in its comforting glow.

I scrolled through the library and came across a book I had out on loan from the public library back in Germany: *Oliver Twist*, by Charles Dickens. I'd almost finished it, but now I went back to the beginning and skimmed through a few sentences about Oliver's life in the workhouse without really taking them in. I knew now, after all, that reading wasn't the only way to get inside a story. There was another way—a much more exciting way. What would it be like to jump into *Oliver Twist's* story? To join him on all his adventures in Victorian London—the journey to the big city, the time spent in the clutches of the band of thieves? I'd never been to London before.

I laid the e-reader carefully over my face. This was no easy task, since there was no fold down the middle and only one page, which I had to balance on my nose and forehead. I pictured the scene from that afternoon, the way I'd jumped from the stone circle into the book world, the way the letters had slowly started to warp before my eyes. I remembered how the blackness of the words had expanded and contracted, how the sentences had swirled and merged. The memory was so vivid that the lines of text on the screen in front of me suddenly seemed to be moving too.

At first the lines grew longer and longer, and then the letters began to trickle across the screen and melt into one another. The gray shades of the text gave way to brown. It was the brown of a table made of coarse wood.

Suddenly I was sitting underneath this table, wedged in among a gaggle of thin boys' legs in heavily patched trousers. I ran my

fingertips across the dirty floorboards in disbelief. I could smell sweat and unwashed bodies.

“I’m still so hungry,” came a voice from somewhere above my head.

“Course you are—we all are. Who could ever be full after three spoonfuls of gruel?” declared another.

“If it goes on like this, I shan’t be able to guarantee anything—I may end up eating one of you tonight in your sleep,” said a third. “That’s it—I’m going to ask for a second helping.”

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“No. But one of us must, else we’ll waste away and die.”

“Yes.”

“Before we all croak.”

“We’d best draw lots.”

There was no longer any doubt in my mind: this must be Oliver Twist’s workhouse! I crawled through the forest of legs until I found a spot where I could wriggle up onto one of the long benches. By now the boys were busy drawing matchsticks, and didn’t notice me. I was shocked to see how gaunt their faces were. They looked almost ageless—not like children, at any rate. The skin was stretched tight over their cheekbones, and most had greasy hair that hung raggedly down over their foreheads and into their eyes. They all had empty bowls.

This row of tables was not the only one in the room: there were three other rows full of scrawny children. And not a single one of them was eating, even though a grubby man stood in the corner stirring an even grubbier pot from which I could clearly see steam rising.

“Oliver Twist,” murmured the boys around me. “Oliver must ask.”

A small, watchful-eyed boy gulped nervously. His fingers were almost as thin as the broken match they held.

“Go on, Oliver!” prompted a buck-toothed boy not much older than him. “We’ll starve to death on the spot if you don’t.”

But the little boy hesitated. There was fear in his eyes. Trembling, he rose slowly from the bench.

I looked over at the grubby pot and the man standing behind it. His fierce expression would have put me off too. Why didn’t he just give the boy a bit more of the sticky grayish gruel he was slopping round and round in the pot? It would probably only end up having to be turned into dust-biscuits tomorrow anyway (Lady Mairéad’s favorite).

Oliver swung his leg over the bench, then shrank back as the cook glanced in our direction. Fortunately, he didn’t see me.

“Wait,” I said—I’d had an idea. “If you’re that hungry, I might . . . I might be able to help.”

Thirty heads turned to look at me. Oliver Twist gazed at me hopefully.

“She’s a Reader,” somebody whispered.

“A Reader,” came the echo from farther down the table. “From the outside world.”

“What does that matter? As long as she’s got some grub for us!”

“Just a second,” I murmured. “Wait here, okay?” I dived back under the table and crawled back to the spot I’d arrived at. The next moment I found myself back in my four-poster bed on Stormsay. The thought that I’d just jumped from my bedroom into a book exploded

in my head like a firework. I'd done it—I'd gone to visit *Oliver Twist* in the middle of the night! I—

No: I'd have plenty of time to celebrate later. Right now I had to help the half-starved boys in the workhouse. On my bedside table I found the plate of biscuits Lady Mairead had sent up that evening. (She was evidently very keen to get rid of them. Well, that wouldn't be a problem now!) I dropped the biscuits into my pajama pockets, then quickly fished a packet of chewing gum out of my backpack. A moment later the e-reader was balanced on my face once more.

I jumped back under the table and tugged at one of the boys' trouser legs.

Oliver Twist ducked his head under the table.

"Here," I said, pressing the biscuits and the chewing gum into his hand. "That's all I can rustle up for the moment. These are biscuits and this is chewing gum. You can munch on them till you get something else to eat. But don't swallow the chewing gum. I hope it helps a bit."

"Thank you," he mumbled.

Above my head, boys quickly set to sharing the food out equally between them.

I heard somebody say: "But tomorrow *Oliver* will have to ask, if they keep giving us such tiny portions."

And then I found myself back in my bed in the twenty-first century.



“I choose you,” said the princess. “Kneel.”

The knight did as he was bid.

*“Do you swear that you will hunt and kill the monster
and that you will not rest until I, your princess,
am safe once more? Do you swear it upon your life?”*

*The knight looked up at the princess’s face,
her dainty nose, the arch of her eyebrows, her rosy cheeks.
Her beauty was flawless. He would be happy, he thought,
to look upon this face and nothing else until the day he died.*

It was like looking into the eyes of an angel.

No harm must ever come to this angel.

“I swear it upon my life,” he said.



BETWEEN THE LINES

THE NEXT MORNING'S LESSON began disappointingly. I'd hoped to be able to jump straight back into *The Jungle Book*. Instead, Glenn gave us a two-hour lecture about the book world. He talked about our duty as book jumpers to protect literature—a duty that was both an honor and a burden. He told us it was possible, in an emergency—although strictly forbidden otherwise—to bring characters back with us to the outside world (in order to rescue them in a crisis, for example) and to let them find their own way back into their stories afterward. He also explained in detail how all books bordered on other books in certain places, and that there were paths between stories that would take you from one to another and, if you were lucky, to the so-called Margin. This was a place outside the lines where lots of book characters liked to hang out when they weren't currently appearing in their own plots. His explanations were interspersed with anecdotes about some great-great-uncles of

ours who had made various stupid mistakes. And he gave us an emphatic warning about the consequences of altering a story—such alterations, he said, would immediately appear in every printed copy of that story. *In every printed copy?*

Betsy and Will must have heard all of this a thousand times already. As Will stared dully at the cover of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (was it just my imagination or had the book got thinner overnight?), Betsy seemed to feel the need to emphasize every word Glenn said. She spent the whole time nodding and saying things like “Exactly,” and “Yes, that’s right,” and “You probably won’t be able to manage that for a while yet, Amy.” Her lips were so shiny with lip gloss this morning it looked like she’d eaten a tin of sardines in oil for breakfast.

“Lady Mairead, for example, jumped into *Macbeth* once when she was younger and—” Glenn broke off. “Yes, Amy, what is it?”

I put my hand down. “Is it bad—” I began. “I mean—um—would it do any harm if somebody were to jump from somewhere other than *Porta Litterae*?”

Glenn furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Well—yesterday you said we could only jump into books from the stone circle. Why is that? Would it be bad if somebody was, say, reading in bed, and then . . .” I’d had a guilty conscience ever since I’d woken up that morning, and it had been bothering me more and more as Glenn’s speech had gone on. I’d simply jumped into *Oliver Twist* without a second thought, and as if that wasn’t bad enough I’d interfered with the storyline by giving the boys dust-biscuits and chewing gum. The longer I’d listened to Glenn the more it had dawned on me that I didn’t really know anything about the

book world and that it might not be such a great idea to go tinkering about with it however the fancy took me. “If something like that happened—would it be a problem?”

Betsy rolled her eyes and quietly sighed. “Oh, Amy.” She looked almost as cruel as she had in my dream.

Glenn, however, shook his head. “No,” he said. “It wouldn’t be a problem. It just wouldn’t be possible. Your gift only works within the stone circle.”

“Really?” I looked over at Will and Betsy. “Have you ever tried to jump from anywhere else?”

“I’ve got better things to do with my time than make an idiot of myself,” said Betsy. “Now if you’ll excuse me.” She pulled out a makeup bag and sailed from the room, while Will looked at me properly for the first time that day. He was still as pale as if he’d seen a ghost, and his hair was just as unkempt as yesterday. He looked hard at me.

“Of course,” he said at last, and smiled, a little bit more with the right-hand side of his mouth than the left. “I often tried when I was a kid. But it never worked.”

“Hmm,” I said. Had I only imagined my excursion into *Oliver Twist*? Had the whole thing been just another dream?

Glenn’s lecture continued for another hour and a half before he finally led us up to the top of the hill. One after the other we jumped into our practice books: Will (whose task was to try to find out why his book really did only have a few pages left), Betsy (who was going to negotiate with the ice-cream-parlor dwarf and had touched up her eyeliner especially for the purpose), and me—who knew nothing about anything and was bursting with curiosity.

It began almost as soon as I'd slid the book over my face. Again I was greeted by the hot, humid jungle air; the letters exploded into plants before my eyes, and I heard Mowgli and the wolf cubs playing together. The roots of the giant tree creaked softly as I landed in them. This time, however, I immediately slipped off in the opposite direction from the voices.

"You're back," observed Shere Khan, who was crouched in the thicket nearby.

I nodded to him. Glenn had tasked me with trying to get an overview of Mowgli's story. But any child capable of watching TV knew what happened in *The Jungle Book*, surely? I left the tiger behind me and went tramping off toward the edge of the jungle.

The signpost was still there, as was the ravine where I'd come across the tearful young man with witch issues the day before. Today, however, I did a surprisingly good job of clambering over the boulders and rubble. So much so that I was almost disappointed when the path grew wider and straighter and eventually turned into a road. The steep walls of the ravine still towered into the sky on either side of me, but they grew farther and farther apart before eventually curving inward and meeting in the middle to form a kind of natural amphitheater. At the base of this amphitheater was a town.

It wasn't a big town. It consisted of only one street, in fact. But this one street was packed full of shops of all shapes and sizes, newsstands, cafés, and pubs. In the window of a chemist's shop was a sign advertising a cure for weak verbs, and a fat woman with a hawker's tray was shouting something about a miracle powder that could apparently be used to concoct a happy ending in a matter of minutes if you didn't happen to have one handy. On a market stall I spotted

a tub of self-service periods and commas (there was a special offer on—three quotation marks for the price of two). The shop next door had cloaks, swords, and wands on display. The sign above the door read: *Hero Outfitters—from classical drama to science fiction epics. (We also cater to secondary characters).*

And everywhere you looked there were throngs of book characters, dressed in clothes from every era imaginable: a man in a toga surrounded by a gaggle of girls in dresses with enormous crinolines and ruffs, soldiers marching past them with laser guns, magicians in colorful hats, businesswomen in court shoes and trouser suits, and orcs with grotesque misshapen faces. Fairies with dragonfly wings buzzed in and out of the crowd. A goose with a tiny boy riding on its back pecked at the instant happy endings, and was shooed away loudly by the fat lady.

Then I spotted a tomcat wearing a pair of riding boots and walking on its hind legs, and followed it through the crowd until it disappeared into a pub called the Inkpot. Not really fancying the “ink cocktail” being advertised on a board outside, I decided to keep walking. But just as the door to the pub was swinging shut, I caught a glimpse of a familiar face bent over a glass at the bar.

I went in and sat down beside the young man, who cut just as wretched a figure as he had at our last meeting. “Are you still not feeling better?”

He looked up, his eyes red from crying and glittering with tears. “Ah, Miss Amy. How nice to see you again.”

“Nice to see you too. Have the old women been bothering you again?”

“No, no,” he said, downing his half-full glass in a single swig.

And if his glazed eyes were anything to go by, this glass was not his first. “I am merely full of sorrow,” he mumbled, flinging out his arm so wildly that the tabby cat on the bar stool next to him narrowly avoided a blow to the face. “About life, you understand? About the world, about love, about fate. Cruel fate! O, a thousand emotions rage within my breast!” His voice grew steadily louder.

The cat got up and moved seats.

“Ah, yes,” I said. “I understand.” Unhelpful sentences like *But you won't find the answer at the bottom of a glass* hovered on the tip of my tongue. I bit them back, however, and instead pushed away my stool and stood up. “I’ve never been here before, and I don’t know anyone apart from you. Would you be so kind as to . . . show me around?”

The man gazed wistfully into his empty glass, then nodded and stood up. He swayed a little at first, but soon regained his balance. “I can refuse nothing to such a pretty young lady,” he declared, tucking his shirt back into his breeches and a few loose locks of hair back into the velvet ribbon that fastened his ponytail. Then he bowed, almost falling over forward in the process. “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Werther.”

The title of a book we’d read last year in school flashed through my mind, the letters bright and vivid: *The Sorrows of Young Werther* by Goethe. Lots of things suddenly started to make sense. So the guy was drinking because he was unhappy in love—so unhappy, in fact, that at the end of the book he committed suicide. And those weird witches had been tormenting him by prophesying that there was still hope for his doomed love. Poor man!

“Er—pleased to meet you,” I said, putting out my hand. Werther

did not shake it but planted a boozy kiss on it instead. I forced a smile. “Very busy in here, isn’t it?”

Werther nodded. More and more characters were crowding into the pub; most had gathered at a table in the corner where they put their heads together and whispered.

“How much gold is missing?” asked a man whose head was covered with scales instead of hair.

“They’d been slaughtered, just like that,” said the tiny boy on the goose’s back to a woman with a fish’s tail, who reached for a jug of water every few seconds and poured some over her face. “The whole stable was full of blood—away from the plot, thank goodness.”

“And have you heard about Alice?” murmured a man with grayish skin and a briefcase under his arm.

Werther drew me outside. There he took a few deep breaths, as even more people streamed past us into the pub. “There is something afoot. The rumor mill has been turning for hours now. Something seems to have gone awry in our world.”

“In *Oliver Twist*?” My heart beat faster. “Has the story been messed up?”

“What? No.” Werther rubbed his nose with his thumb and forefinger. “Apparently, gold has been stolen from *The Arabian Nights*. And Alice is rumored to have missed the White Rabbit this morning, and to have been unable to find her way to Wonderland. I know no more than that—I have spent the past few hours . . .”

“Drinking?” Werther was swaying dangerously, and I linked arms with him to stop him from falling over.

“Thinking,” he corrected me. “At any rate, people are up in

arms—nothing like this has ever happened here before. Alice has never once missed the rabbit, you understand. Such a thing is simply unthinkable. She must be reproaching herself very severely.”

“Does that mean . . . could some tiny little change have set off a chain reaction?” If all stories were connected somehow, could introducing a harmless packet of chewing gum into *Oliver Twist*’s workhouse have led to repercussions like this?

“It looks more as though somebody has been intentionally interfering with parts of the affected stories,” said Werther, his face suddenly turning pale. He leaned weakly against a market stall and closed his eyes.

“I’ll get you a drink of water,” I offered.

But Werther shook his head. He pulled out an embroidered handkerchief and pressed it to his mouth and nose. “No, thank you,” he said. “But . . . perhaps tomorrow I could . . .” He wheezed. “. . . show you around? If you would be so good as to excus—”

He vomited into a crate of fresh exclamation marks. Feeling rather nauseated, I decided to head home.

That afternoon the sun was shining over Stormsay for a change, reminding us it was July. Alexis made the most of the good weather by going for another walk, and I felt the urge to be outdoors too. After combing the pages of *Oliver Twist* for a while looking for changes in the story (I found none—Oliver must simply have asked for a second helping of gruel the day after I’d seen him), I gathered together my art materials. There was a lot I hadn’t been able to bring with me; my acrylic paints had been left at home to make room for more books, as had my paintbrushes, easel, and canvases, which

wouldn't have fitted in my suitcase anyway. But I had packed a sketchbook and a few pencils. Tucking them under my arm, I headed off across the moor and up the hill to Shakespeare's Seat. The cliffs looked just as steep as they had on our arrival. From up here, in fact, they felt even higher and more treacherous.

I sat down on a rock and began to sketch the vegetation at the edge of the cliff and the ocean beyond. The waves were dove-gray and ebbed lazily against the foundations of the island with an ancient sighing sound. The wind had died down over the past few days too. It was still blowing my hair all over the place, but at least I actually felt warm in my sweater now. There was a smell of salt and freedom; the sunlight danced across my fingers. With quick strokes I sketched the movement of the waves and the pattern of the few clouds reflected on their surface. I wished I hadn't left my paints in Germany now. This was the most beautiful view I'd ever seen.

I felt like I was sitting at the end of the earth. There was no wireless or cellular signal here—it didn't matter who posted what on social media. Jolina was far away. All that mattered was the sweep of smoky blue sky overhead, stretching away to the horizon and caressing the sea. I'd never felt so much space around me before—space to breathe, space to think. Space for the heather that dangled curiously over the edge of the cliff to peer down into the depths.

I was busy sketching the tiny blossoms when a shadow fell across the paper.

"Pretty," said a voice behind me.

I clung to my pencil and the magic of the moment for a second longer, then let out my breath and turned around. "Hi."

Before me stood Will. He pointed to the sketchbook on my lap. “I didn’t know you liked drawing.”

I raised my eyebrows. “Well that’s hardly surprising, is it? You don’t know anything about me.” It came out more brusquely than I’d intended.

“Well,” said Will, “I do know your name. And I know you must be a talented jumper because you got to the edge of a novel on your first ever visit to the book world.”

“Hmm.” I bent over my drawing again. “Still not a massive amount, all things considered.”

“True.”

The wind caught my hair as I reached for a softer pencil to shade in the waves.

Will stood beside me a little longer and studied my drawing, watching me shade in the sky. After a while he cleared his throat. “But it looks like you want it to stay that way. I get it.” He leaned closer to me. “I’ll get out of here and leave you in peace, then, shall I?”

I didn’t answer. He was right—up to now I’d only spoken to Betsy and Will when absolutely necessary, and in lessons I usually tried to avoid meeting their eyes. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to make new friends. I was just more cautious now. Hypercautious.

And anyway, it wasn’t like my new classmates had exactly been falling over themselves to make me feel welcome. Will in particular gave the impression most of the time that his thoughts were somewhere else entirely.

He obviously interpreted my silence as an answer to his question, and turned to leave. His feet were stuffed into battered leather

boots and his shaggy hair flew out behind him. Only now did I remember where I'd seen hair flapping in the wind like that before.

"You were up here the night before last, weren't you?" I said just as he reached the path that led back across the moor.

Will stopped. "Yes," he said.

"What were you doing outside in that storm? And what was that massive dog you had with you?"

He came back and sat down beside me on the rock. "I was looking for someone. A . . . a friend. It's his dog."

"Did you find him?"

"Unfortunately not." He put his head in his hands. "I've turned the whole island upside down. But he's disappeared."

"Has he gone away?"

"You could say that."

We looked out over the sea. "Aren't you going to carry on?" asked Will.

My sketch was nearly finished, but I laid down the sketchbook and pencils on the grass and snuck a sideways glance at Will. His nose had a very small bump in it, as if it had once been broken, and his face was a little too angular to be perfect. But in his blue-gray eyes was a clarity like that of the sky over Stormsay. They were stormy-sky eyes.

"Did you manage to find anything out? About why your book has suddenly got thinner?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied, dropping his voice to a whisper. "It's because Sherlock Holmes isn't there anymore."

"Oh," I gasped. "Might he be in a different book? There's a whole series of Sherlock Holmes novels, isn't there?"

Will sighed. “Yes, and none of the other Sherlocks have seen him.”

“I heard today that some gold has been stolen, and there’s been some kind of misunderstanding in *Alice in Wonderland*.”

“He’s my best friend,” said Will, who didn’t seem to have heard me. “He has been since I was five years old. He always used to think up riddles and cases for me, and I helped him outside of the plot. He practically brought me up.”

“And now you’re looking for him on Stormsay?” I was confused by this sudden overlap between the literary world and the real one. “What would he be doing here in the outside world?”

Will tipped his head back and closed his eyes in the sunlight. His eyelashes cast shadows on his skin, like dark moons. But he wasn’t as relaxed as he made out. I could see that his lips were pressed tightly together. He’d dug his fingers into a tuft of grass.

“You brought him here, didn’t you?”

“We’re not allowed to do that.”

“Didn’t you?”

“It’s not allowed, Amy. As Glenn explained at great length this morning.”

“I gave chewing gum and biscuits to Oliver Twist.”

He blinked. “Really?” The beginnings of a smile crept onto his face. He scrutinized me for a moment, as if wondering whether I could be trusted. “Amy Lennox,” he murmured. “Our families don’t like each other very much, did you know that?”

I remembered Betsy’s remarks. “I had noticed.”

He grinned at me, and a dimple appeared in his right cheek.

“Well—I was going to go and have another look for my friend in the village and on the beach. Perhaps Holmes is testing me and I just need to find the vital clue. Or else he’s drinking himself into a stupor at the pub. Do you want to come with me?”

I nodded. I’d had enough of drunken book characters for one day, but I had nothing against a walk. Especially in such charming company.

The beach extended along the east coast of the island all the way to the Macalisters’ castle. This beach was no white-sanded bathers’ paradise out of a glossy travel magazine. It was covered in pebbles and fragments of seashells and other broken things; in the shallows, huge rusty bits of metal coated in flaking green paint jutted up out of the water. Will told me they were the remnants of a submarine fleet that had been torpedoed during the Second World War. The crew had all been killed and for days bits of the wreckage had washed up on the shore of Stormsay and sunk deep into the silt.

Holmes was nowhere to be seen.

I amused myself by letting the waves lick at the soles of my sneakers. Will poked about with a stick in clumps of seaweed and a washed-up plastic bag. But still there was no trace of the great detective and the closer we got to Macalister Castle, the slower Will advanced. Ahead of us, meanwhile, the castle’s turrets loomed higher and higher into the sky. Will eventually came to a standstill a few yards from an imposing quarried stone gatepost.

“Nice pad,” I said, looking up at the Macalister coat of arms over the gateway. It showed a dragon against a green background, blowing books from its nostrils instead of flames.

Will hurled the stick into the sea with surprising force. It sailed through the air and landed a long way out. “Bit uncomfortable if you ask me.”

“But perfect for playing the lady of the manor.”

Will grinned. “You mean like Betsy does all the time?”

“Well, I don’t know about that—she spends most of her time putting makeup on, doesn’t she?”

“Also true.” He laughed, but immediately afterward grew serious again. “I’ve searched this dump multiple times already. I think we should try the village next.”

“Okay,” I said, tilting my head. “You don’t like your home very much, do you?”

Will didn’t answer.

A quarter of an hour later we came to the little hamlet Alexis and I had passed through the evening we’d arrived. The village that could scarcely be called a village. Now, by daylight, I could see that almost all the cottages were standing empty. They looked derelict; most of the windowpanes were broken. Wooden beams jutted like ribs from the crooked roofs, and some of the doors were nailed shut. Only two of the houses looked even remotely habitable.

One was small and shabby, with a patch of weeds out front enclosed by a rotting picket fence. The clay and straw walls of the cottage looked as though they might have been whitewashed once upon a time, but now they were just covered in muddy handprints. Here and there a creeper sprouted from the plaster, causing it to crumble. On the broken steps leading up to the front door sat a boy, his lips moving soundlessly. Or was he a man? He was burly and broad-shouldered and dressed in blue dungarees. His face was covered with

an uneven layer of fuzzy hair. But his gaze was that of a child, and it was glued to a sandbank on the shoreline that was covered with gray bodies.

“Hello, Brock,” Will greeted him as we passed.

The man-child didn’t respond. He carried on mouthing words, his brow furrowed in concentration. Then he cried suddenly, “Seventeen!”

I jumped. “Pardon?”

But he was still staring at the sandbank. His mouth opened and shut as if he were talking to somebody only he could see.

Will nudged me onward. “He’s counting seals,” he whispered in my ear. “It’s his hobby.”

“Counting seals?”

“Twenty years ago, when Brock was little, he got washed up on the beach here. We think he must have hit his head somehow.” Will tapped his forehead. “He must’ve been floating around at sea in his life preserver for ages, all alone.”

Goose bumps stole across the back of my neck.

The second house was the one where the ferryman had disappeared in search of something alcoholic the night of our arrival. It was bigger and nicer than Brock’s. A chalkboard was propped up on a bench outside, announcing that stamps, lettuce, and toilet paper were currently on special offer. Frilly curtains hung in the windows. A little bell tinkled as we went in.

Inside there was indeed a bar, with three stools standing in front of it. The walls were lined with shelves where spools of thread were stacked alongside boxes of tissues and tins of corn. An umbrella stand held several spades, a crutch, and two badminton rackets.

“Is this a pub or a shop?” I asked.

“Both,” said a man I hadn’t noticed amid all the clutter. He was sitting at a table in the corner stuffing his pipe. His hair was red. “I’m also the local post office. Welcome to *Finley’s*.”

“Hello,” I said. The man looked familiar, somehow. “I’m Amy.”

“I know,” said the man, pipe between his teeth. “News travels fast here. I’m your uncle.” He struck a match.

“Oh. Er . . .” I didn’t know how to reply, and gnawed at my lower lip. Alexis had never told me she had a brother.

Will was wandering around the room peering under tables and behind shelves. “Has anyone been in today?” he inquired.

Finley raised his eyebrows, exactly the same way Alexis did. “No, why?”

Will pulled a spade from the umbrella stand and weighed it in his hand as if considering whether to buy it or not. “Doesn’t matter,” he murmured.

I still didn’t know how to react to the fact that this man was claiming to be my uncle. Why had Alexis never told me about him? On the other hand . . . she had kept pretty much everything about our family a secret. She’d always refused to tell me who my father was, most importantly. It shouldn’t really surprise me to learn that I had more relatives kicking about on the island. What I didn’t understand was why Alexis hadn’t told me all this in the first place.

“How many people live here?” I began once Will and I were back outside in the sunshine. “Altogether on the whole island, I mean?” It looked as though I was going to have to find a few things out for myself.

“Not many. There’s Lady Mairead and Mr. Stevens at Lennox

House, Brock and Finley and a guy called Henk here in the village, and Betsy, her nanny Mel, and the Laird at Macalister Castle. And me, of course, and now you and your mum.”

“You forgot Glenn, Clyde, and Desmond.”

“They live in the library.”

“Aha.” Fourteen people, then. That wasn’t just “not many”—it was *hardly any*. There were five times that many people in my apartment building alone, back in Germany. This island really was at the end of the earth, and it obviously did something strange to its inhabitants. Something that either kept them here irrevocably or drove them away completely, like Alexis. Something I didn’t fully understand yet. I eyed Will’s leather boots, his tattered trousers, and the ancient sweater he wore. With the best will in the world, I couldn’t picture him in a city like Bochum. “Have you ever been to the mainland?” I asked.

He laughed. “Of course I have,” he said. “Many times.”



*“The monster’s poison works quickly.
It causes spasms in the bowels
of its victims, rendering them helpless,”
explained the king’s counselor. “And most
of the time, it kills them.”
The princess shuddered.*



IN SEARCH OF THE WHITE RABBIT

IN CLASS THE NEXT MORNING, WHEN I jumped back into *The Jungle Book*, Werther was there waiting for me. He was wearing a knee-length coat made of red silk and an old-fashioned hat. A vine had sunk its thorns into one of his silk stockings and laddered it. He was struggling to free himself from the plant's grip when I landed.

"Good day, Miss Amy. My sorrows are great indeed," he greeted me.

"I know," I said. "I've read your book."

"But today I suffer more cruelly than ever. My head feels as though it had been trodden under a horse's hoof." He grimaced. "I have the Inkpot to thank for that. Never again shall I set foot in that den of iniquity. I almost missed my own suicide last night," he cried indignantly. "Can you imagine?"

"Not really," I admitted. "But are you sure you're feeling up to showing me around today?"

“Barely,” said Werther, finally wrenching himself free of the thorns. His stocking was in tatters, revealing a pale calf decorated with red scratches. “But I would willingly suffer a thousand sorrows for a young lady such as yourself.”

In the undergrowth nearby, Shere Khan rolled his eyes.

“Um—cool,” I said. “So, I was thinking: I saw the Margin yesterday, so I’d prefer to visit *Alice in Wonderland* today to see if everything’s back to normal there. Shall we?”

“Your wish is my command.” He gave me his arm and I took it. But it proved almost impossible to make our way through the dense jungle arm in arm, and I soon attempted to extricate myself. Werther’s grip on my arm, however, was unshakable. In true gentlemanly style he insisted on escorting me across the rough terrain, and so we stumbled on clumsily over roots and undergrowth and squeezed along narrow tracks side by side, treading on each other’s toes, until at last we reached the edge of the story. At the crossroads with the signpost we turned left.

We hadn’t gone far before the sandy road turned into a garden path made of flagstones that led across a meadow. On either side were beds of brightly colored flowers; the air had the scent of a summer’s afternoon. From somewhere ahead of us came the quiet murmur of water. Werther and I passed through an archway covered with climbing roses, and then the path ended as suddenly as it had begun. Now the garden was split in half by a stream, and on the banks of the stream sat two girls in pinafores. One was reading a book and seemed not to notice our arrival. The other was wearing several daisy chains in her hair, and burst into tears when she saw us.

“I’ve missed him again,” she sobbed, and the cat in her lap mewed piteously. “The White Rabbit simply doesn’t come anymore. Or if he does, it’s when I’m not looking.”

“But—but—my dear Miss Alice,” said Werther, fishing out his handkerchief. The little girl blew her nose.

“Could the rabbit be ill, maybe? Have you been to look for him?” I asked.

Alice shook her head, dislodging the daisy chains. “I can’t. I have to stay here until he comes. Otherwise the whole story will get into a muddle.” Tears ran down her cheeks and dripped onto the cat’s back. “What if I never find my way back to Wonderland?”

“Then you can read my book with me,” said the other girl.

Alice made a face. “That book’s far too dull,” she said. “It hasn’t even any pictures in it. We’d rather carry on making daisy chains, wouldn’t we, Dinah?” She tickled the cat behind the ears, then bent to pick some more daisies.

I turned to Werther. “We have to find the White Rabbit,” I said. “Perhaps that’ll help us find out what’s going wrong?”

He gave me his arm again. “Indeed,” he said. “We had better skip forward a few pages.”

“Is that possible?”

“Well—as a Reader, you must know that. Or do you only ever read one page of a book at home?” said Werther.

“No.”

“You see.” He marched straight into a flowerbed and tugged at a daisy.

The world folded up around us; the sky tilted sideways. Where

the horizon had been, the garden—stream and all—was now suspended in midair, and the water was flowing upward. I craned my neck to see where it was going, but Werther pulled me forward with a jerk. We tumbled through the wall of meadow as if it were mist, and found ourselves in a cave whose walls were lined with a tangled web of tree roots punctuated by kitchen cupboards and shelves. Though it wasn't so much a cave, really, as an enormous hole. Beneath us was a yawning chasm, and we were falling into it feetfirst. I only vaguely recalled the story because it was a while since I'd read the book. But I did remember that at the beginning Alice had spent quite a long time falling down a rabbit hole. Despite the fact that there was no ground beneath my feet for miles, I felt a surge of excitement. I still couldn't believe I was actually *inside* a novel. My gift was so new and surprising that I still hadn't considered all the possibilities that came with it. It looked like I was about to enter the *real Wonderland!*

I blinked, and when I opened my eyes I found the cave had turned into a long corridor full of doors. At the end of the corridor I saw something white scurrying away from us.

"There he is, over there!" I called, pointing to a tiny door half hidden by a curtain. "He hopped through there." Unfortunately, the door in question only came up to my ankles. "We have to go after him. Can you skip forward?"

Werther waggled his head from side to side. "Yes—but we must be sure not to miss him. And we must alter our size for the next part of the story." He massaged his temples—his head must still be pounding.

"Oh yes," I said, "of course." I remembered that on her journey

through Wonderland Alice was forever eating and drinking things that made her grow and shrink.

Werther handed me a little glass bottle filled with what looked like cough syrup. The label read “Drink me.”

“Well then—cheers!” I said, and gulped down some of the liquid, which didn’t actually taste that bad. It was a bit like Black Forest cake . . . But before I’d had time to think, my legs contracted like elastic bands, my arms shortened and my hands grew so tiny that I could no longer hold the bottle. I was shrinking. Just as I was about to be crushed to death by the bottle, Werther picked it up again and drank from it himself.

“I hope it will help with my indisposition too,” he muttered. His voice went booming through the cave. He was a giant.

By this time I was the size of a grasshopper. The toes of Werther’s shoes towered above me like two hills and I retreated a little way to make sure he didn’t accidentally trample on me. Fortunately, however, he now began to shrink too.

A few moments later, Werther pulled at the handle of the tiny door and the cave turned upside down. This time he skipped both forward and backward: first we found ourselves surrounded by a gaggle of animals swimming in a lake, then suddenly inside a house, then out in the open again. Somewhere in between the pages floated the Cheshire Cat’s mouth, grinning—the rest of its body was invisible. But the White Rabbit was nowhere to be seen.

We stopped at last in front of a mushroom, on top of which lay a fat blue caterpillar. The caterpillar had a kind of hookah pipe clasped in its numerous little arms. Smoke rings coiled into the air above its

head. I had to stand on tiptoe to see over the top of the mushroom. The caterpillar stared at us for a while. Its face creased as it took a drag on the mouthpiece of the pipe.

“Um—excuse me? Has the White Rabbit been by here recently?” I asked.

The caterpillar blew a smoke ring over the top of our heads. “Who are you?” it asked in a raspy voice. “Where is Alice?”

“Ah! My sincerest apologies!” Werther bowed. “My name is Werther and this is young Miss Amy. We are delighted to make your acquaintance.”

“Alice can’t come because she missed the White Rabbit again. We’re trying to find out why,” I explained. The way the caterpillar was staring at down us from on high was starting to annoy me. “So—have you seen him?”

The caterpillar crawled down off its mushroom. As it slid past us through the grass we were engulfed by the smell of tobacco. “Yes—he came by here earlier. But he seemed to be in a great hurry.”

“Which way did he go?”

“I believe he was on his way to tea with the Hatter and the March Hare,” the caterpillar replied before vanishing into the undergrowth.

Werther sighed and put his head in his hands. “I should be glad to rest a moment,” he said. “The hooves are pounding against my poor brow from the inside out now.”

I laid a hand on his arm. “I know—but if we’re ever going catch up with the White Rabbit, we’ve got to keep going. We’ve got to find the Hatter.”

Werther nodded sorrowfully. “In that case, we should eat some

of this mushroom to return ourselves to our proper size.” He reached up and broke two chunks off the top of the mushroom. No sooner had we bitten into them than we started growing—just large enough to comfortably drink tea with a rabbit.

Again, Werther skipped forward and backward through the pages of *Alice in Wonderland*. Colors, landscapes, and characters whizzed past us in quick succession. I saw the eyes of the grinning cat, and at one point we hurtled past a queen in a heart-patterned dress screeching, “Where is Alice? Off with her head!”

We arrived at last at a little house in the woods. In front of the house was a long table, set for tea. And at the table, all crowded together at one end, sat a hare, a dormouse, and a little man with buckteeth. He wore a top hat with a price tag attached.

The Hatter and the March Hare were drinking their tea with the dormouse wedged in between them, so deeply asleep that it had no idea it was being used as an armrest.

“Tell me: what do a raven and a writing desk have in common?” asked the Hatter, the instant he spotted us.

“Um . . . they both begin with an *r* sound?” I guessed.

The Hatter wrinkled his nose. “Hmm,” he said. “That could be it. What do you think, March Hare?”

“I think my watch has stopped again. Even though I put the best butter in it. It really was the very best butter,” said the March Hare. “And why are you two sitting down, may I ask? We didn’t invite you to sit down. This is outrageous!”

But Werther and I stayed seated. “I beg you, sirs—there is enough room here for all of us,” said Werther, visibly cheered by the winged armchair he had flopped down in. The March Hare snorted.

“Both begin with an *r* sound . . .” murmured the Hatter. “That’s good! That may well be the answer! Will you take some tea?”

Before we could reply he’d poured us both a cup of tea and deposited a slice of cream cake on each of our plates. “Dig in,” he urged.

“Thanks,” I said. The cake looked delicious. But it would have to wait. “We’re looking for the White Rabbit. Have you seen him?”

Hare and Hatter exchanged a glance.

“He is not well,” said the March Hare.

“He is much changed,” said the Hatter.

“So he was here? Where did he go?”

“Nowhere.” The Hatter opened the teapot and pulled out a dripping wet rabbit that must once upon a time have been white. Brown rivulets of tea trickled down its legs. It looked around fearfully at the occupants of the table.

I raised my eyebrows. “*That’s* the White Rabbit? He looks . . . pretty ordinary.” The rabbit wrinkled its nose, affronted.

“We’ve tried butter too, but we simply cannot put him to rights,” declared the March Hare. “He has lost the ability to talk. And his watch and waistcoat have disappeared. So he keeps crawling inside our old teapot to hide.”

“Strange,” murmured Werther. “It is almost as though his idea had disappeared.”

“His idea?” I asked.

“The author’s idea that this story should feature a talking rabbit with a pocket watch and a waistcoat, which leads Alice into Wonderland,” he explained. “Could somebody have . . . no, it cannot be.”

“What?” I asked.

“Well—it seems almost as though somebody had stolen the idea.”

“Is that even possible? Who would do something like that? And *why*, more to the point?” I didn’t understand how you would even go about erasing an idea from a book.

Werther shrugged.

“Who knows?” The Hatter stuffed the rabbit back inside the teapot and seemed instantly to forget that it existed. “But both begin with an *r* sound! Isn’t that wonderful? Come, eat your cake, drink your tea!”

Unfortunately the cake didn’t taste nearly as good as it looked. A bitter taste filled my mouth the moment I bit into it. It rolled across my palate and down my throat. I coughed and took a sip of tea to take the taste away. But it didn’t help.

The bitter taste persisted long after I had jumped back to Stormsay. At lunch I could hardly eat a thing, and gulped down glass after glass of water instead. My grandmother kept shooting inquiring glances at me, but I ignored her. A big row about how I’d wandered into a story I wasn’t supposed to be in was the last thing I needed right now. At last I slipped into my four-poster bed and lay staring at the fabric overhead. I took the smallest breaths I could manage. The taste of the cake had formed a lump in my throat, and it was now sliding up and down my gullet like a slimy rubber ball. At the same time a knot was forming in my stomach, tightening into a ball of iron and gurgling loudly. I panted, drew my knees into my chest, shut my eyes for a moment, and then leaped out of bed and lurched to the bathroom.

I was only just in time.

Three hours later, Alexis found me lying on the bath mat. She brought me a pillow and a blanket. The walls were spinning: it felt as though the sink and the toilet were dancing around me, laughing at me. Alexis crouched down beside me and mopped my forehead with a washcloth.

“I don’t feel well,” I whispered. My lips were chapped. “There was something wrong with the cake in Wonderland.”

“You were in *Alice in Wonderland*?”

“Yes.” I wanted to tell her about Werther and our search for the White Rabbit, but I was too weak.

“I went there, too, when I was younger,” said Alexis. She stroked my hair. “I played croquet with Alice and the Queen of Hearts. It was wonderful.”

“I thought . . .” I wheezed. The lump in my throat was threatening to surface again. “. . . I thought you hated the literary world.”

“Not at all,” said Alexis. “I loved it. I loved it far too much, unfortunately.”

Her words sounded muffled, as if I was hearing them through a wall of cotton wool. “Really?” I whispered as the bathroom began to spin even faster and dark clouds crept across the edges of my vision.

“Yes. But going away was my only option. Especially once I found out about you, little giraffe. I—”

It was as if somebody was turning the volume lower and lower. Everything went black.

When I next opened my eyes I found myself back in bed. Alexis was bending over me, trying to feed me some lukewarm tea, while my grandmother paced up and down the room. Macbeth was dozing on the window seat.

“I don’t understand it. Literary food never goes off! Either it is already rotten because the plot requires it, or it is fine. But nothing ever goes moldy inside a book,” said Lady Mairead. “Stories never go out of date.”

“Perhaps somebody *wanted* her to get ill,” suggested Alexis.

“But why? Amy has only just started jumping.” Lady Mairead pursed her lips. “Simply to go wandering off into Wonderland! I hope you realize, Amy, that it was completely against the rules, and I very much hope it will not happen again. You see what can happen. We must face facts, however.” She put her hands on her hips. “Nobody in the book world would have been capable of turning *Alice in Wonderland* so topsy-turvy as to end up with an inedible cake at the Mad Tea-Party.”

“Hmm,” said Alexis. She gently lifted my head and held the cup to my lips. “We need to get some fluids into you.”

I sipped at the tea and forced myself to swallow some of it. A trace of the bitter taste wormed its way back down my throat. Perhaps I should head for the bathroom just in case? I sat up. The room immediately started to spin.

“Are you feeling sick again?” asked Alexis.

I nodded, shook my head, swung my legs out of bed, and tottered a little way across the carpet. My knees were shaking. The nausea was starting to subside again now, though, and I went and flopped down onto the window seat next to Macbeth.

Alexis hurried after me with the teacup. “Take one more sip. And these.” In her hand were several little tablets.

“Later,” I said, looking out across the moor. I could see three figures moving toward us. A woman in an apron with an old-fashioned

white cap on her head was pushing a man in a wheelchair across the uneven terrain. Both of them looked rather surly—probably because the chair’s wheels kept getting jammed despite the fact that there was a third person helping them lift it over the largest of the rocks and puddles. At first I thought it was Will, but then I recognized the gray habit and blond hair of the young bookbinder with the scar on his cheek. The weight of the wheelchair didn’t seem to trouble him in the slightest.

“Oh no—Mel and Desmond are on their way with the Laird,” Lady Mairead said with a sigh, following my gaze. “I completely forgot to ask Mr. Stevens to prepare a snack.” She hurried out of the room.

Alexis squeezed in between me and Macbeth on the window seat and waved the hand that held the tablets in little circles under my nose. “Take us, Amy,” she said in a squeaky voice. “We’ll make you better. We’re maaagic!”

I smiled. “I’m supposed to eat something that can talk to me?”

“Yes—we want to die!” squeaked Alexis. “Please, Amy! Eat us.”

“Fine.” I picked the tiny white globules out of Alexis’s hand and put them in my mouth. “Happy now?”

“Good,” said Alexis in her normal voice again. “I’d be even happier if you could make this tea disappear as well.”

“No way.” Just the thought of it made the rubber ball rise into my throat again.

The figures outside were still battling across the moor. The closer they got, the angrier the woman and the man in the wheelchair appeared. “What’s the Laird doing here? I thought the two families didn’t like each other.”

“They don’t. But our two clans are the only ones in the world with the gift of book jumping, and we have to share this island, and the library. So they have to consult each other about certain things,” Alexis explained. “Once a month the heads of the families meet to discuss how to manage and finance the library, and anything else that needs arranging. Today your grandmother is probably going to have to explain why she sent you to lessons without having introduced you to everyone on the island first.”

“Like my uncle, you mean?” I looked Alexis straight in the eye.

She blushed. “Oh, little giraffe. How was I to know I’d end up bringing you back to this godforsaken island one day? I didn’t think you’d ever meet them anyway, so what did it matter if you didn’t know about them? And quite frankly there are some people you’re better off not knowing. Like the Laird. He thinks he can control everything and everyone on this island.” She snorted. “The Macalisters have always thought their family was better than ours. They claim they were already living on Stormsay long before the Lennoxes, and that our family is just descended from a branch of theirs. But they’ve got no proof.”

“Well—their castle does look a bit older than this house. . . .”

“That’s because the Macalisters torched our castle hundreds of years ago.”

“Oh.”

Alexis nodded. “Crazy family. Most of them are, and always have been, idiots. The whole argument about the library and whose gift is more powerful is idiotic,” she said. Then she suddenly started

waving and put on a fake, sugary-sweet smile. “The worst thing is the annual banquet in August, where everyone has to pretend to like one another.”

The Laird had reached the grounds by this time and was looking up at our window. He wrinkled his nose as he caught sight of us.

I spent most of the weekend reading—reading in the traditional sense, that is, without jumping into the book world. I was itching to jump, but I felt much too weak to go clambering through jungles or chasing after white rabbits or even to spend the day at a magical boarding school. Though the prospect was hard to resist, I was in no fit state for adventures right now.

Despite having to fight off dizzy spells and jelly legs, I was relieved to find that the bitter taste in my mouth soon abated. On Saturday I was able to eat a bowl of chicken soup and on Sunday afternoon I even ventured out of doors.

The sunlight was the perfect color for a love story, and danced across the backs of a handful of sheep grazing on the edge of the parkland attached to Lennox House. One of the animals was munching an unsymmetrical hole in one of the geometrically trimmed hedges, while the others sampled some flowers. Mr. Stevens would not be happy. Only yesterday I’d looked out of the window and seen him slip across the grass with a little pair of scissors to trim the edges of the lawn. Alexis said he couldn’t sleep at night unless the grounds were up to his “very British” gardening standards.

I left the sheep to their munching and walked across the moor a little way, the light now dancing on my shoulders too. I took the path

that led down to the beach, and the air immediately grew colder. The wind tugged at my ponytail and my scarf. I wandered out across the broken seashells and, hoping to drive away the last remnants of the bitter taste, drank in a deep breath of the salty air that was filtering into every pore in my body.

Some distance away I caught sight of Will. He was playing with a gigantic dog (the Hound of the Baskervilles?), throwing a tennis ball into the sea for it to fetch. The dog bounded eagerly after it.

With my feet safely clad in a pair of my grandmother's dark green wellies, I too waded out to sea, letting the surf slosh around my ankles as I made my way toward the wreckage of the submarine fleet. The metal was old, the paint blistered. From afar the pieces looked sharp and jagged, but the passage of time had long since blunted their fangs. I leaned against one of the heavy bits of wreckage, ready-warmed for me by the sun. Now I had a good view of Will and the dog, who were still playing fetch and didn't seem to have noticed me.

The dog retrieved the ball and dropped it at Will's feet. Then it shook its shaggy coat and showered him with water before jumping up and down in front of him wagging its tail. Will laughed and threw the ball again. The dog sped off in pursuit.

Only now did Will look in my direction. I raised a hand to wave at him, then let it drop again because I'd just spotted something out of the corner of my eye that I hadn't noticed until now. I turned to face the open ocean. The waves rolled inexorably toward me and broke on the remnants of the warships. And on the surface of the waves, I saw something floating. Something large, snagged on the metal husks.

It was a human being.

“Will!” I yelled, and then again, “Will! Come here! Quick!”

The man was floating facedown. A clump of seaweed was stuck to the back of his head, and his leather shoes bumped gently against the wreckage.

“Hey, Amy!” called Will from the shore. He was still laughing. “Are you feeling better?”

I stared at the seaweed. It formed a nest in the man’s dark, wet hair. It had worked its way in and taken root. And it didn’t seem to want to leave. A lone strand wound cautiously down toward the shirt collar around the man’s neck, wanting perhaps to glimpse this strange island it had washed up on.

“What is it?” shouted Will, splashing through the water toward me.

The jacket was checked, with corduroy patches at the elbows. The legs were encased in tweed trousers. I looked at the seaweed again.

Will was beside me now. He gasped. “Shit!”

“Shit,” I echoed quietly. My mind only gradually understood what I was seeing, as if I was afraid even to think what I knew to be true: a man was floating there, and he was dead.

Will grabbed the body by the shoulders and dragged it onto the beach. As he did so, a pipe fell out of the inside pocket of the jacket and landed in the water. I fished it out and followed Will ashore, where he was rolling the dead man onto his back. The seaweed loosened its grip and slid off. I gripped the pipe.

The man’s face was bloated and pale, his eyes sightless. Under the jacket he was wearing a waistcoat, and under that a shirt. Both

looked threadbare and a little old-fashioned. Both were stained with a red blot that had spread from a hole in the man's chest.

Will sank to his knees beside the body, burying his hands deep in the seashell shards that littered the beach. He closed his eyes. "Sherlock," he said tonelessly. "It's Sherlock."



The knight bowed down before the princess.

“You can rely upon me,” he vowed.

*“I will put an end to the beast. It will be
a bloody end. A long, painful end.*

An end worse than a thousand deaths.

And I will laugh and think of you, Princess.”

