

CHAPTERS 0-6

NEVERLAND IN SHADOW



PETER WENDY HOOK
REIMAGINED

JAY GREEN

For my mum & dad

And for boys and girls who never grew up

This book
belongs to



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CHAPTER 0

HERE'S WHERE THE STORY ENDS

2022

When Wendy looked back on it all, it was still difficult to believe that everything had begun with just a light in the distance. Even now, some eight years later, she sometimes wondered if it would have been better to have never seen that light at all.

CHAPTER I

THE MOTH AND THE FLAME

Thursday October 16th 2014

The light had appeared with little ceremony. Blasting through the bedroom curtains, it socked the pop stars and footballers occupying the opposing wall. Then, slithering across the unhoovered carpet, it consumed gaming controllers and schoolbags, pools of clothes and, from the top bunk, the patched-up body of a toy hare. Next, it lingered briefly, the light, on the boys, John and Michael. Sleeping it found them. And sleeping it left them. But when it moved back towards the window and located the girl, it settled and, as if it had pulled at her hair or spoken into her ear, it woke her.

At almost fourteen, Wendy was the oldest of the Darling children. And she was in no mood for a night without sleep: one of those *white nights* that her mother often complained about. The ones she tamed with hot milk and honey and, when that failed, banished instead with pills.

Sat up now, and swearing softly into air that felt as frozen as it looked, Wendy tapped her phone. A couple of minutes past midnight. Terrific. Exactly what she needed right now was to be kept awake by a police car or ambulance tinting the room in blue. What next? The siren?

Reaching backwards, Wendy grabbed her pillow and pressed it tight against her face. A wet patch of dribble felt cold against her ear. Then up her nose went the stench of a laundry-lab spring. To tire herself out she called upon art movements and grammar rules. French verbs and the periodic table. Then, perhaps less worthy, US serial killers and their nicknames. But it was no use. As if assembled by some sinister corporation, Cubism and non-dependent clauses, noble gases and the Connecticut Ghoul united to keep her conscious.

Wendy flipped the pillow back behind her head. Then she rose, stepped to the window and drew back the curtains. Out on Lilybank Road all was quiet. And it was the same story also when she hoisted herself up and curled around to take in the visible slither of Spicerhill High Street. She'd imagined whatever was causing the light, to be parked out there. But it wasn't. Instead, she spied a glow way further out. Way beyond Charlotte Park and those posh streets that surrounded it. Through almost-bare trees it travelled, and when Wendy pushed her hand into its glare, and opened out her fingers, it turned her skin practically luminous.

Standing high above London, in the ship's crow's nest, the boy, Peter, grinned. Through the cracked lens of his telescope he watched Wendy, wrapped up in curtains and, fascinated, twisting now her entire arm into the beam.

Doused in blue, the boy whispered just one word. 'Gotcha.'

And then the light went out.

CHAPTER 2

THE BOY IN THE BASKET

Thursday October 16th 2014

Wendy had hung around at the window for a few minutes more. But when she was certain that the light had gone for good, she'd climbed back into bed. It had been difficult to settle though, and she remembered hearing the clock at the top of the stairs chime three. Or was it four? At that point it had been kind of academic.

Sat at the breakfast table, she yawned. Mrs Darling motioned at the girl to cover her mouth. 'You tired?' she said. Wendy nodded.

'A bit. It was that funny light kept me up. Didn't you see it?'

But Mrs Darling shook her head, and everyone else looked blank. Wendy nodded to her brothers. 'They slept right through it.'

Michael, at six, the younger of the boys, crossed his eyes and tapped a few times on his head. John snorted a laugh.

'Stop that you two.' said Mrs Darling. 'Was it that lamppost? Was it flashing again? It's a nuisance that thing.'

'No, it was something else.' said Wendy, 'It was blue.'

'Police car, maybe?' said Mr Darling. 'Or a fire engine?'

'Or an ambulance from the funny farm.' said John.

'I won't tell you two again.' said Mrs Darling.

'It was him that said it.' said Michael, and he folded his arms tight.

'Yes. But you laughed.'

'It wasn't any fire engine I don't think.' said Wendy. 'It was coming from over that way,' and she nodded to the window, 'across the park. Behind those big houses on Charlotte Terrace. It was really bright.'

‘I knew we should have gotten thicker curtains.’ said Mrs Darling.

Wendy had made a face at this. Those curtains were thin, it was true. But the woman at the stand had told them they were proper vintage. From the 1950s. Practically antiques.

‘It was probably a light on a crane. Might have gone faulty.’ said Mr Darling, ‘There’s new houses going up kind of around there. The cranes need lights. For planes. It is a bit odd though because they really ought to be red.’

‘I bet it’s all sorted by tonight.’ said Wendy’s mother. And she brushed toast crumbs into her hand.

But Wendy wasn’t quite so sure. Despite being so tired, bedtime wasn’t about sleep anymore. Tonight it was all about the blue light. This was something that, on her Tube ride to the office, Mrs Darling was already beginning to suspect.

‘Did you hear me, Wendy?’ asked Mrs Kirkham.

‘Penguins.’ said Asha as quietly as she could. Then, staring straight ahead, and barely moving her lips, she added ‘What is it they eat?’

She’d heard not a word of the lesson, Wendy, so, trading on the currency of well-received homework and a legacy of high essay marks, she said ‘Ice lollies, I should imagine.’ Quiet laughter filled the classroom. ‘Ice lollies, and those crushed ice drinks they sell in coffee shops. And ice cream, of course.’

‘Yes. Very funny, Wendy. Go and grab a box of board pens. The coloured ones.’

She liked Mrs Kirkham. Wendy. Aside from being a great teacher, she’d occasionally adopt the persona of some frightful old battleaxe and say things like ‘You. Yes, you. The *plain* girl.’ She was careful of course, to limit such wheezes to certain classes and study groups. And careful also to fire that particular crack at girls who were, by the reckoning of most people, both not at all of the plain variety and perfectly willing to give back to Mrs Kirkham as good as they received.

She slid, Mrs Kirkham, one key out from a bunch around a ring. Then she lobbed it at Wendy.

‘For the resource room. Catch.’

Wendy picked up the key from the floor. The girls in class might have teased her a bit on the way out, all exaggerated yawns and half-closed eyes, but it was an errand Wendy was glad to run. Five, possibly six, minutes could be spent from door to door. That was five or six minutes closer to home time, night time and the window of her bedroom.

Wendy unlocked the door and waited for the fluorescent strip light to stop its slow, headachy on-off flickering. Eventually it popped on, revealing the muddle of boxes and overstuffed cubby holes that passed for a storeroom at St Matthew’s. Wendy liked it though. It was one of those places, like museums and libraries, with its own special smell of *stuff*: stacks of paper, pencils, paints, unclean science kit and dust. One entire wall was taken up by rows of wooden shelves.

Here, a battle raged. That’s because it was here that the various school departments jostled with one another for space and supplies. The evidence of these tussles? Sticky notes. In pastel shades these were slapped at crude angles, and claimed ownership of anything likely to be plundered.

With the pens way out of reach, Wendy slid a storage box beneath the shelf. Filled with cloths and cleaning materials, a note on the lid read *Sine macula!* It was the St Matthew’s motto, and it translated to *Without stain*. Wendy smiled. It was Miss Blake’s handwriting. That lazy, elegant *S* – on display in the *Some strange interpretations of this short story...* comment that had crowned a recent English paper – gave the game away.

Wendy stepped onto the box. Its lid bevelled, but just about took her weight. Then she stretched an arm up and quickly grabbed the carton before the whole thing buckled. Next, to waste a bit of time, she snooped the shelves for something to pinch. A ream of printer paper would have been handy. But it was impossible to conceal. So she settled instead for a couple of Biro’s. In a corner, Geography’s telescope sat folded up on its tripod. Recently, a few of the class had assembled at dusk. Then they’d taken it out to the pitches

– where only the other week Wendy had scored a superb volley – and, with Mrs Kirkham pointing the way, had spotted Mars and Saturn. The excursion had also given some of the more creative girls plenty of opportunity to wheel out the ruder-sounding pronunciation of Uranus.

Wendy grabbed the thing and carried it across the linoleum. With the tripod's legs splaying out and bashing against boxes and crates, the red gravel caked to its feet loosened up and hit the deck. But eventually Wendy made it to the other side of the room. Here, dust sparkled in the daylight from the tiny window overlooking Spicerhill.

Bullying the tripod so it stood up, Wendy looked into the telescope, and through someone's careless thumbprint. By twisting the eyepiece, a wiry blur quickly sharpened into a steeple. In a slit of a window: a pigeon. On the street below: a lady walking a dog. Then a man chasing, hopelessly, a bus. It sped away, but to save face he continued running long beyond the stop.

But these were only enjoyable distractions. What Wendy was really looking for was that crane her father had mentioned. St Matthew's was about half-a-mile to the left of her home. So she swung the telescope to the right. There, in the park, was that fountain. The one that she'd never once seen working. Behind that: the skateboard park. And a little further ahead: the statue of Sir Oliver Brassington on Pinnacle, his charging horse. Each were topped, as per local tradition, with a traffic cone.

It had to be, this crane, somewhere beyond the statue. Somewhere behind those posh houses where everything – Terrace and Circus and Mews and Place – was preceded by the word *Charlotte*. But no cranes did Wendy see. Just to be sure, and conscious that Mrs Kirkham would soon send someone to fetch her, she quickly panned across the park again. Nothing. Except... there was something actually. It wasn't a crane though. Looked more like a pole. Wendy twisted the eyepiece a little more.

A ship's mast thrust into the sky, and on the ropes and lines around it, climbing towards a basket contraption, was a boy.

CHAPTER 3

ARE YOU READY FOR VALHALLA?

Thursday October 16th 2014

With a single agile twist, the boy had installed himself in the wooden basket. He was fast. Almost too fast for Wendy. It had been a job to keep him in the telescope's sight. Snapshots were all she'd managed: tight, murky-coloured jeans he wore. And a dark-green jumper that cried out for a needle, thread and soap. Now that he had settled though, she saw that he was a pale sort and that his wild hair angled out like the roots of an upturned tree. There was an odd feeling of power, thought Wendy, in observing someone from so far away.

Gripping the brim of the basket, the boy leaned out, his back arching and stretching. He was staring, with screwed-up eyes, at the streets below; rotating first one way and then the next. He was looking for something, guessed Wendy. And when at last he thrust his head forwards, then scrambled, in seconds, down the mast and out of sight, she reckoned that he'd found it.

Despite the boy's exit, it had been difficult for Wendy to drag herself from the telescope. She'd tried to follow his route but found the ropes were obscured behind trees and rooftops and long-redundant chimneypots. She'd spied a flag, though – a rag more or less – nailed a few feet above the basket. The colour sucked from it, it ascended in a puny breeze. Then it quickly drooped, as if exhausted by the effort. Wendy huckled the telescope back to more or less where she'd found it. Then she negotiated the path to the door, clipping shelves and boxes along the way, and stepping across loops of uncoiled cables.

The pen nibs squeaked on the whiteboard. And in blues and greens Mrs Kirkham charted the decline of the polar icecaps. But to Wendy it was all just noise in the background; a distraction from the mystery of the boy in the basket. At home time she deliberately meandered, taking an age to sort her bag, and even emptying it out to buy more time. She didn't want company on the walk to No. 14. She wanted space to think about what she'd seen. It was a ship's mast. Of that she was certain. This basket, then, was a kind of a perch. Stopping for a moment she had a look on the internet. A crow's nest. That was the proper name for the thing. But how could that be? Find a ship, she thought, and you generally find a sea. At least a river. It was true that Wendy didn't know too much about that Charlotte Park area, but she knew enough to conclude it was no place for a boat.

From behind a battered old telephone box, Peter watched the men, half-a-dozen of them piling into the back of the van. The last one, slamming the wooden hoarding encasing the shop, twisted a key in the padlock. Next, and despite the catcalls to get a move on, he tugged the base of the lock, making quite certain the hasp was screwed good and tight against the wood. He wouldn't be rushed. He was in charge and it wasn't their jobs on the line if the place got turned over. A final shove and, satisfied that the site was secured, the man walked, saluting in a fashion, towards the jeers and slow-handclapping.

When eventually the van's double-doors were pulled closed, and it had putted up the road, Peter approached the shell of a shop. He was inside – amid the busy smell of glue and drying plaster and just-sawn wood – before the van had even disappeared over the hill. Across boxes of tiles and slabs of marble he walked. He untwisted the half-packet of digestives and looked around. Against an unvarnished bar: plastic pails full of expensive-looking chrome fixtures. At the far-end wall: virginal ovens and grills, wrapped, like gifts, in tight coats of protective black plastic. But none of these interested Peter. He wasn't here to rob the place. Not really. He was after just one thing. Through

the telescope he'd been watching all day the men bolting, above the unit's door, a huge neon sign. *Madison Avenue American Diner* it read (although, confusingly, the restaurant was actually located on Honeyview Road). Now, as the boy had hoped, a thick flex protruded from a hole in the opposing brickwork. From his pocket, he whipped out a stick. Small it was, but with its whittled edge he quickly cut himself a generous length. The girl, you see, would soon be visiting. And he had to be ready.

As Peter wrapped the flex around his waist, a mobile, left on a workbench, rang out: *Let 'em all come down to The Den* went the ringtone. On its screen: *Monica*. Soon someone would return for it. The boy had gotten what he came for though, and he was back out on the street before the chant had given up.

At dinner that evening Wendy remained lost in puzzles. Her mother had noticed the girl's frowns and calculations but was quickly fobbed off with talk of algebra and Bannockburn. Then, despite longing to plot alone in the bedroom, a half-hour was wasted on washing-up duty. Well, not completely wasted.

'A river? Behind Charlotte Terrace?' said Mr Darling, 'A duck pond maybe. But that'd be in the park. Why?'

He handed Wendy a wet plate.

'Oh, Asha at school's looking for somewhere to swim.' It was a rubbish lie, but on the spot it was all she could think of.

'Brittlefield Baths sounds a better bet than Charlottesville I'd have thought.' Wendy smiled at her dad's nickname for the area.

'I'll tell her.'

With the dishes done, Wendy jogged up to the bedroom. Inevitably, John and Michael were sprawled upon the carpet. Eyes fixed on the TV, they meddled with controllers.

'Porthos. Level nine. Mission accomplished.' said John solemnly.

'With lives to spare.' said Michael.

‘My heroes.’ said Wendy. ‘Shift over a bit.’

Reluctantly, Michael moved his legs so Wendy could get at the wardrobe door.

For Wendy, vintage dresses were the thing, and inside that wardrobe, decades – from the 40s to the 60s – hung chronologically from identical wooden hangers. Left unchecked, this rabble of frocks would, one day, push out John and Michael’s jackets and jumpers for good.

It was Alison Thompson – schoolfriend Bethany’s older sister – who’d begun it all. Two years ago, Alison’s vintage-clothes shop, Foxtrot, had opened. Wendy had spotted a feature in the Spicerhill Echo’s *On The High Street* column, asked for a job and – unofficially – had become a kind of opener-of-boxes and sorter-of-stock.

In the small room at the back, among drawers of buttons, ribbons and pins she’d logged and labelled dresses from exotic-sounding places: Palm Rivers, Florida. Sunblush Valley, Wyoming. But no matter from where they’d been sent, the boxes always revealed that same great scent: that patchwork of mothballs, antiseptic, lavender and something else that Wendy could never quite work out. Alison reckoned it wasn’t really a smell at all; it was the ghosts of the girls who’d once worn the frocks. Wendy’s pay had been a dress a week, and now the scent had taken over the wardrobe.

‘Shut that door.’ said John. ‘It’s smelling like girls in here.’

‘Rather that than your socks.’ said Wendy.

‘My coat was stinking of it yesterday. What are you looking for?’

‘Just a thing. Hold on.’

Below the dresses, in a plastic bag, Wendy knew she’d find her Illness Jumper: a scraggy old black thing worn for comfort during colds and flu. She grabbed it, then manoeuvred herself away from her brothers and onto her bed. There, Wendy waited out the hours until bedtime proper. She was ready.

Under her sheets she thought about the boy and also read by torchlight. But mainly she thought about the boy.

CHAPTER 4

THE BECKONING BELL

Thursday October 16th – Friday October 17th 2014

Out on the landing, a cheap chime from a cheap clock announced the quarter-hour. The last one before midnight. Next, like clockwork, Mr and Mrs Darling's bedside lights clicked off. Almost, but not quite, in unison. They never were. Nana? She had clumped down the stairs some time ago. The boys? They had been sleeping soundly for a while now, lost in *Porthos*-drenched dreams. All spaceships and strategy.

So now – now that the parents and the brothers and the dog were out of harm's way – now would be the moment for the light to flash through the curtains. From her pillow, Wendy stared out towards the window. She snapped her fingers, convinced that sooner or later one click would summon a blast of blue. But when a noise drifted out from one bunk or other she stopped. It was frustrating, all this waiting around. Already dressed, she was primed, ready to spring from bed. She rose and headed for the window. Maybe the light was on, but it just hadn't made it this far. Or maybe a cloud had gotten in the way. Carefully, she inched across the room and peeked out through the curtains. Two moths flitted around the phasing orange beam of that faulty streetlamp – the one that the council never quite managed to fix – but beyond that, all was quiet.

Wendy flumped back down on the mattress. That damn spring dug into her back again. She pushed it aside. It wasn't the waiting really; it was the uncertainty. There was of course an excellent chance of the light not appearing at all. Tonight or any night. And how disappointing would that be? Wendy pulled her bed sheet tightly across her face and sucked the cotton in then out, in then out. Through the cloth, and in the reedy glow of a nightlight, shapes Michael's schoolbag hanging on a hook, London's oldest

wardrobe, John's unstrung guitar – blurred and distorted. Sleep began to pull at Wendy now, and it would have quickly dragged her under. But then, from beneath the stretching cotton, Wendy saw the room change from muddy yellow to crisp, clean blue. Automatically, she rose. Wendy had fixed it so that she would more or less step into her trainers from bed. But with her hands shaking it took her two goes to tie the laces. The Illness Jumper – now she realised she'd put that on backwards. To fix or not? The tag was annoying; it dug into her throat. Then she stopped for a moment and scolded herself. 'Calm down' she whispered, and counted, slowly, to five. Next, keeping one eye on the bunks, she tucked her two pillows beneath her sheets, angling the things to resemble what she assumed she looked like when asleep. Then she crept to the window. Her foot, though, clipped something. One of Michael's trucks or cars or rockets. She couldn't be sure. It whizzed, whatever it was, across the carpet and thudded the skirting board. Ducking behind her cabinet, Wendy froze, certain that her brothers would wake. They slept on though. All clear.

Through the glass, Wendy saw that frost had settled on the windowsill. Under that crooked lamppost, and in sync with its crippled light, the stone sparkled-then-dulled, sparkled-then-dulled, warning Wendy to be extra careful. They made her stop for a couple of seconds, those warnings. Stop and think. It's a Thursday. It's freezing. It's dangerous. And those trainers? She'd walked the grips off them all that summer. One false move on the sill and she'd break her neck or worse.

But then the blue light reeled her in again.

The window squeaked a little as Wendy slowly lifted the glass. In the breeze, the curtains silently ballooned out. No such serenity from the jotters and magazines though. They flapped and snapped away. Someone, probably John, grunted. Then, from the hall clock, the first of twelve chimes rang out. Another sound: a gurgle, from Michael. Then, like a pendulum, the huge, ancient paper lightshade – that she called embarrassing and old-fashioned, but her mother insisted was retro and *kitsch* – began swinging. Next, posters caught by the gust billowed back and forth, pinging tiny thunderclaps into the air. The boys, she knew, would wake up any second. It was now or never.

And Wendy chose now.

Under the window she went, clamping one steady hand onto the trunk of the cherry tree. Swivelling on the sill, Wendy slid the glass down, leaving just a finger's worth of gap for her return. Through the thin cloth she watched as calm and silence descend once more on the bedroom: the curtains settled; so too did the jotters and books and posters. But all the same she waited, Wendy, her breath clouding the window, until that globe of a lampshade eventually finished swinging.

Years of shinning up and down the cherry tree made for a silent escape. The drop to the lawn wasn't so terrible and, besides, her mother had done precisely the same thing when she was Wendy's age. Now, again like Mrs Darling had done as a girl, Wendy aimed to land on the weird grassless patch below the tree. The Landing Pad, she and her brothers called it. She leapt from the lowest branch: a direct hit. And as she jogged across the crunchy grass only Nana heard the faintest sound. Nana, though, had already looked into the children's bedroom on her nightly patrol. So she thought nothing of it. And this was how the girl slipped undetected through the gate of No. 14 Lilybank Road, out onto the empty Spicerhill High Street and towards the blue light.

Jogging along the high street, Wendy ticked off the shops: Carter's Comics, its tightly packed racks just visible behind a busy window of figurines and massive cardboard cut-outs. There was Appleby's the chemist, serene and reliable. Icarus: the gifty, cookwarey, expensivey place. There was the bakery, Sugar and Spice. Gloucester and Graham the shoe people. Then Jacqueline's the posh children's outfitter with its mezzanine full of shorts and dresses in summer, and coats and scarves in winter. There was Pollet the Stationers, elegant as ever. And, still lit thanks to drowsy, lingering diners, Zenzero the Italian place.

Up ahead was the newsagent, Frampton's, with its hilarious, chained-up Spicerhill Echo boards. Tonight, on thin paper, and from behind a criss-cross of wire it shouted, to nobody: *Spicerhill Scouts group banned from all council venues*. And in the window, for £2 a week, rows of postcard-sized

advertised announced fetes and fairs and things for sale. A piano auction in Harrow. A treadmill (buyer collects). A Girl Guides uniform (worn twice) for £12.

Two doors down stood Foxtrot. Wendy couldn't resist a quick peek in the window. Sometimes, opposite the tiny changing room at the back, Aloysius, Alison's massive, solemn marmalade cat, would be sleeping – crammed, somehow, into a hatbox. But tonight there was no sign of him.

Foxtrot's displays always reflected the time of year. And now, with Halloween approaching, a headless wicker mannequin showed off a magnificent silky black evening dress. Next to this, on a plaster column, sat a menacing iron candelabra. Inside, on the glass, Alison had painted skeletal autumn trees. She'd scattered real leaves around too. A beetle, scooped up with the foliage, trundled around on the floorboards, lost for the moment in a repeating figure of eight.

Wendy moved on. But after a couple of seconds she winced and sat as best she could on the narrow ledge beneath Foxtrot's window. She untied her left shoe, took it right off and gave it a shake. Then into her hand bounced the three little tablets she'd meant to take before setting out. Nothing illegal: just a vitamin and a couple of caffeine pills swiped from Mrs Darling's bottle. Despite her dry throat, Wendy swallowed the lot and ignored the foul combination. Then she finally twisted her jumper around.

Before long she'd passed the park and crossed way beyond Charlotte Terrace. Now though, at seventeen minutes past midnight, she was scuttling through less-familiar territory. Kemp Street. Brittlefield Way. Bleak Walk. Every right or left turn shifted and tweaked the horizon. On Preston Avenue, beats, and bits of chorus – *and if this is the last I see of you tonight* – rose above the ticking engine of an empty minicab. The words faded in, hung around for a few seconds, then evaporated.

Shadows grabbed at the mundane and presented them instead as monsters. On Cardoman Road, lines of wheelie bins had looked for all the world like a gauntlet of muggers. On Admiral Drive, the bent spines and black fabric of a cheap umbrella poked out from a hedge. To Wendy it had been a gigantic insect bristling at the thought of a midnight feast.

Each little detail made Wendy jumpy: the distant *whop-whop-whop* of a police helicopter; a white shirt, floating on a line and, over at the corner of Twinnet Avenue, the warning, daubed in yellow paint, across a bottle bank: *Mind your manners – you're in Spicerhill Spartans territory.*

But the blue light – that one mysterious constant – urged Wendy on. The truth, though, was that the light wasn't getting any closer. At least, that's how it seemed. And right now it looked further away than ever. That minicab had appeared again, and it had slowed down as it passed her by. And on Comet Road, when a tin can, caught in the wind and leaking dregs of cola, rattled towards her, Wendy drew the line. Light or no light, it was time to go home. Tomorrow she'd find some excuse to be in the resource room. She'd take a look through the telescope again and get a proper idea of where to search. And it was a thing she'd undertake on Saturday. In daylight. It had been daft and dangerous to slip out at midnight like some burglar on the prowl.

Looping back home, Wendy marched past the fussy front gardens of Gosling Street. In the centre of one lawn a wooden windmill spun and squeaked in the breeze. Wendy knew this street. Asha from her Geography class lived at No. 19. The house with the netball hoop above the back door, and the flap at its base for Bunny, their cat. They sat together in that class, Wendy and Asha. Ever since a bunch of girls had tried teasing Wendy for being 'dressed like an evacuee' and Asha had told them to shut it. Armed with knowledge from the lesson itself, they'd tried, those girls, to tie a stringed tag around Wendy's neck. Upon it, they had written:

Name: World War Wendy

Address: 39-45 Weirido Street

Wendy had grabbed an arm though, and when she'd twisted it around the back of one of the offending group Mr Bradley had bounded from his desk and called a halt to the scrap. Now they copied each other's homework, Wendy and Asha, with Wendy supplying English and History, and Asha in charge of anything scientific or related to numbers. And they avoided detection via the eighty percent rule: pinching only that ratio of the other girl's work.

As Wendy walked on, she imagined the route as her own private train

line. And when she neared the lamppost at the corner, she quickly bolted onto it a loudspeaker. Then a cut-glass voice shrilled into the bedrooms of Comet Road:

The Wendy Darling now departing from Gosling Street is the – Wendy glanced at her phone – midnight twenty-four service to Lilybank Road. From the screen, Wendy silently reeled off the route from her map app. Calling at Comet Road – Twinnet Avenue – Admiral Drive – Cardoman Road – Preston Avenue – Llewelyn Crescent – Bleak Walk – Brittlefield Way – Kemp Street – Charlotte Terrace – Spicerhill High Street and terminating at Lilybank Road.

In less than ten minutes Wendy was on Admiral Drive, where every house had a name – *Highview – The Burrow – Swan Rise*. Next, she crossed Cardoman Road. On Cardoman Road, the name of your house didn't matter, but the state of your lawn did. And on Preston Avenue, where neither names or lawns held much fascination, Wendy almost hugged the sad – and saddle-less – tiny pink bike with the *For collection* label taped to its frame.

Llewelyn Crescent – it felt comforting and familiar to Wendy – marked the halfway point. Here, posh white terraced houses stood tall behind smart black iron railings. Fixed to them, stern little signs sneered that *Bicycles left chained to these railings will be disposed of immediately*.

Wendy checked the time. Forty-eight minutes past midnight. Her map had gone haywire though. All flashing lights and weird error reports. She shrugged; she didn't really need it anyway. Soon she'd be back in bed. And with luck nobody would be any the wiser.

A couple of doors away, Wendy saw that perched on a railing was a child's woollen mitten. A kind soul must have rescued it from the pavement: a simple thing, really, but something that made the girl smile. It was worth a photo she thought. The bright-red knit against the whiteness of the building might make a nice Christmas card. Even the slug trails that criss-crossed the wool looked kind of silvery and festive.

It was precisely as she had framed the shot that she heard it for the first time. The jangle of a bell. Wendy looked up and down the street. Nothing. Could it be a wind chime? That seemed a bit studenty for this part of

Spicerhill. A bit too New Age.

Perhaps she'd pressed something – some camera function – on her phone. That had to be it. Satisfied, Wendy began zooming into the mitten once more. And it was then that she felt it: the brush of something at her ankles. Wendy yelped and leapt back. Staring up at her was a wiry grey dog. Bigger than a Corgi. Smaller than a Labrador.

As the dog circled around Wendy, first one way then the next, the tinkling continued. She crouched and softly stroked the pup's head. On a green collar, a small silver bell hung, and below that, on the dog's breast, she sported a scar. But that was all. No name tag. And when Wendy felt around for a microchip – between the shoulder blades was a good bet – she found nothing.

Wendy looked up and down the street. People sometimes, she supposed, walked their dogs this late. But here, bang in the centre of Llewelyn Crescent, where you could see for yards in both directions, all was quiet. So, intending for the dog to follow her, Wendy made soft clicking sounds and beckoned with her hand. She'd decided to bring the animal home and worry about explaining it all later. But the dog had a better idea. And as she moved down the avenue – and back towards the light – she knew well that Wendy would be the one doing the following.

This was the last thing Wendy needed. The clock was ticking and she had wanted this affair to be done within an hour. But how could she leave this strange ringing dog on her own? Imagine if Nana was lost? And so Wendy found herself, at seven minutes to one in the morning – and on a school night – drawn further and further from home.

Through avenues, crescents, lanes and squares they jogged. But the dog remained one step ahead. Then, on a patch of waste ground, Wendy eventually had to stop for a rest. She hunkered down on her heels for a moment while the dog sat a safe distance away. Underfoot, bricks jutted from the earth here and there, betraying the outlines of long-demolished buildings. On one side of the red gravel patch stood a row of railway arches. A few of these had been turned into scruffy lock-ups: little semicircular Aladdin's caves of crates and boxes and machinery. Square in the middle, driven into the ground, a large sign, beaten by years of exposure, had spoken with

ill-advised optimism of a *Superb development opportunity* and advised interested parties to *Call without delay*. But that had been two London phone codes ago.

Wendy rose. It was a cue for the dog to disappear through a tangle of bushes and on into one of the arches. The bell echoed around the tunnel but by now Wendy was tired of the thing. She was moments from leaving the dog to her own affairs when she saw it. It was reflected in a puddle that in time she would misremember as being heart-shaped. A half turn, a tilt of the head, and Wendy found herself squinting at a bright blue light. The light? It squinted straight back at her. And it was only later that Wendy remembered the sound of the bell had stopped at that very moment.

At No. 14, Wendy's mother had risen from bed. She watched nothing in particular from the bedroom window and wondered what it was that was making sleep impossible.

Eventually she gave in to a pill and dreamed a dream of danger and loss.

CHAPTER 5

IONE

Friday October 17th 2014

From a spot opposite the mouth of the tunnel, Wendy peered through tangles of ferns and lanky purple-blue buddleia. Railway roses, her mother called them. Was it definitely this tunnel the dog had zoomed into? It was difficult to be sure. Wendy pushed through the undergrowth and got a bit closer to the entrance. From beyond, sweet wafts of must and dampness added to a weird, solemn silence. Now and then though, she heard the sounds of things scurrying back and forth. Drops of water pinged from the roof too, then plopped into the shallows and echoed across the bricks.

With a dock leaf, Wendy rubbed away at the sting from a nettle. Then she leant a little into the tunnel. The dense air dared her to breathe it in and she scooted, quickly, a couple of puffs from her inhaler. Then that bell rung out once more. She had taken with her Michael's torch, the one she often nicked for reading under bed sheets. But as she poked it at the sounds, it flickered, then died. She pocketed it, and with her steps half-illuminated instead by her phone, walked slowly towards the bell. Soon she was swallowing, every few seconds, great gulps of nothing for fear her ears would pop.

For a minute or more she carried on, Wendy, stumbling once on something: a rotting sleeper or a root. She couldn't be sure. All the while, the bell drew her deeper and deeper in. And when eventually it stopped ringing, Wendy stopped walking. The air had thinned and as the dog trotted away and out of the tunnel, she did so immersed in blue.

The broad road at this end of the tunnel had seen better days. Ill-lit, and blemished with potholes, it attracted fly-tippers, the occasional HGV and little else. From her spot at the tunnel's threshold Wendy clocked a child's wardrobe, its doors plastered with stickers of a once-adored film franchise.

Beside this, a busted-up supermarket trolley. In its basket: paint cans and off-cuts of wood. Behind these, and making the entire thing resemble an art installation, stood an uplighter, its shade brim-full of rainwater, its flex disappearing into the undergrowth.

With both palms anchored to slimy brickwork, Wendy peeped around the corner. The coarse stone scuffed her cheek and muddied her skin. On one entire side of the road: more and more arches, most bricked-up long ago. Opposite these, a huge metal fence arced away into the distance.

The fence, a series of no-nonsense battleship-grey sheets, was high alright. But it didn't quite reach far enough to completely hide a grand iron gate. Its summit of black railings peeped just over the edge. Originally, Wendy concluded, each railing had been topped with what amounted to an arrowhead. But here and there rust had won the day, and only five or six remained. Above the gate hung a neon sign. It had been in the wars for sure, but once it had spelled out its greeting in bright, eye-popping twists of light. Now, the dirty glass tubes were all that remained. Even so, like a drunk, they slurred out their words:

Welcome to New Adventure Land.

The sign spoke to nobody now, thought Wendy. But whatever it had been, this New Adventure Land, at some point it must have meant something to someone. From a short distance, the bell snapped her out of it. She glanced towards the sound and saw the dog disappearing around the shallow curve of the fence. She followed, and when she'd rounded the bend, the dog vanished into a patch of dandelions. Her phone lighting up the border, Wendy flattened the weeds and thick grass with her other hand. Then, from behind the foliage, emerged a large flap of sackcloth. Riveted into the fence it was, and when Wendy prodded it, quickly, with a stick, it revealed a sawn-out hole.

Wendy sized the thing up. It was definitely big enough to crawl through. With that dog jangling around on the other side, she cautiously pulled the flap aside and looked in. From where she was crouched, and because of the dark, it was tricky to see anything beyond the odd shape here and there. She had a think: through the gap or back to bed?

It was a shade over quarter past one when Wendy crawled beyond the fence and through the pair of half-snapped railings on the other side. Crouching close to the fence, she wiped the gravel and dirt from her hands and onto her jumper. Then she pulled at those lengths of wool that had snagged on the jagged edges of the hole. A little distance away, the dog was sniffing around something that Wendy couldn't quite make out. She took a few cautious steps forward. The dog, meanwhile, scampered off and even when she listened hard Wendy heard not a sound from her again.

It was the eyes that Wendy saw first. Two cold, emotionless circles of blue and white. They were a poor match for the bright-red nose and grinning mouth. The massive plastic head had fallen, years ago, from on top of the crumbling funhouse. Now it lay sideways in a puddle. Scarred and discoloured by the elements, weeds and moss had settled below its underside. Rinsed in the blue light it was a remarkable sight and Wendy grabbed shot after shot of it with her phone.

To the left of the funhouse stood a row of stalls: hook-the-duck and bingo, darts and hoopla. Caved in on itself, the last of these offered dollies for the girls and pocket knives for the boys.

Beyond the stalls, a ghost train sat next to the *Divebomber*. Here, a track of bends and swoops balanced on a criss-cross of disintegrating supports. Bevelled now, and with their blue-and-red paint job long since blistered and flaked, these spars disappeared into concrete blocks, each one sporting a faded RAF-style target.

Wendy crouched to snap the line of blocks and saw that upon one sat a copper coin. On one side was stamped a beautiful ship. Above this, in a curve, were marked the words HALF PENNY. Below the boat: the year 1959.

Wendy flipped the coin. Enclosing the portrait of the queen: the words ELIZABETH-II-DEI-GRATIA REGINA-F:D. Scattered on the ground nearby were more and more coins. Smaller than the halfpenny, a silver coin seemed to be worth six pence, whilst another one, also silver, and almost as large as the halfpenny, was marked ONE SHILLING.

They'd fallen, Wendy guessed, from the pockets of those riding this *Divebomber*. The ride wasn't the biggest, And nor did it loop like the one

she'd been on at that NitroWorld with the school. But that bendy track, and the way parts of it were twisted like a stick of liquorice, would just about do the trick. What it didn't explain though, was the broken glass that also littered the area. Although she'd heard that years and years ago people would pay for a trip to the cinema with a jam jar, Wendy had always thought it was just something her dad had made up. But maybe it was true. And maybe it had worked for fairground rides too.

Wendy picked up the coins. They were absolutely ancient after all, and might be worth loads of money. And then, sticking close to the shelter of the track, she moved on.

Beside the coaster stood a traveller's caravan. Once beautiful, years of London weather had long-since defeated its canvas roof. It had sunk, the roof, into the bloated wooden wagon and was good now only for collecting gallons of rainwater. Consequently, one of its wheels had buckled beneath the weight, so the whole affair lurched at an angle. It wasn't collapsing anytime soon, thought Wendy, so she circled it and grabbed a few photos. Above its little saloon doors was nailed a sign. Wendy read the fancily painted words: *Have your fortune told by the all-seeing Caterina Volante*. She tugged, Wendy, at the door, and the motion caused a glug of water to slosh out from the roof and down the side of the carriage.

Standing on the little row of steps, Wendy poked her head through a beaded curtain and swished Michael's torch around the inside the wagon. There, the busted wheel had caused everything to either collect towards the right-hand side or, in the case of the pictures and charts fixed to the walls, hang askew. One of these pictures, a huge illustration of a hand, its palm and fingers sectioned off and annotated, seemed to Wendy to have been caught mid-wave.

She leaned further in and read from the chart. Alongside common components like the line of life and the heart line, the drawing detailed also lines of fate, happiness and success. Beyond these were areas even less familiar: the Girdle of Venus as well as a number of mounts: Apollo, Mercury, Jupiter and more. Pointing the torch at her own hand, Wendy compared it to the one on the wall.

Below the chart, a small round table and a couple of chairs had been pulled to the side. An ornate fringed cloth had slid from the table surface and, on the bare wooden floor lay the fragments of a crystal ball. Smashed-up also were a teapot and a solitary cup. These had fallen from a shelf, above which a sign offering tea-leaf reading was pinned.

In the roof, a single beam extended from one end of the wagon to the other. Broken now, almost in two, attached to this via a chain was a bird cage. It was swaying, the cage, and when Wendy shone the light upon it she revealed the prostrate skeleton of some unfortunate creature. Stepping towards the cage, Wendy became conscious that her weight, modest though it was, had caused the carriage to creak and shift. But she took another step anyway. Then she undid the catch, pulled open the tiny arched door of the cage and jabbed gently at the skeleton inside. Responding, a joint moved the way it would if the poor thing were still alive. But then a drop of water landed on Wendy's hand and the surprise caused her to mishandle the thing. A bone separated out from the frame and landed with a tap on the base of the cage. She looked up, Wendy, at the roof. Bulging across the beam, that balloon of a canvas hung heavy and taut. So pendulous was the roof, and so invasive, that at its lowest point Wendy would have had to crouch beneath it. She prodded at it and her finger disappeared into the fabric. Outside and above her, the water reacted. Then, as it found its way down the side of the carriage, much of it leaked back through the wall and gathered in the furthest corner. Fearing the roof could burst at any moment, Wendy reversed out of the squat space and away from the stench of stagnant water and dead pigeons.

Once, thought Wendy, New Adventure Land had been the venue for a thousand birthdays; a magical place in the city that swapped pocket money for rides on coasters and trains, merry-go-rounds and dodgem cars. But as she looked all around, it struck her that this fairground hadn't simply closed. It had, she was sure, been abandoned.

Directly in the fair's centre stood what would have been a magnificent carousel. Now, peeling paint, crooked wooden slats and gaps in the roof showed that the elements had had their way with this ride too. But Wendy loved it all the same. In a circle, horses, elephants, tigers and rabbits had,

for who knows how long, been waiting here in silence. Wendy climbed carefully onto a bear. It sank, but only a few inches. She placed her face against the bear's, then gently rocked back and forth.

It was sound that came first. A soft, happy little organ tune leaked into the air. Wendy looked to her right.

Then came the lights. Wendy's eyes darted around the canopy as above her those few coloured bulbs with breath remaining pinged into life. Revealed now: bits of wooden animals scattered on the slats below: a tusk and a trunk. A tiger's ear. A glorious horse's tail.

Then the entire ride seemed to creak and sigh as reluctantly it shunted into life and began spinning.

Sliding from the bear, Wendy grabbed the stripy pole in its centre and hoisted herself back up. Her phone, those coins and that torch of Michael's: all had fallen from her pocket. Behind her, the sound of something being mangled blasted from the machinery below. Wendy looked back. The torch had plunged through the floor, and now from the oblong gap shards of plastic and glass were tumbling. Wendy's phone, though, lay on the edge of the hole. On the next pass she stretched to the deck and only just managed to nab the thing without pushing it, also, into the void. The coins? Valuable as they were, she was delighted to leave them.

As the carousel rotated, faster than you'd imagine, almost all of the animals were rising and descending. Those too broken to move? They jutted and shunted, paralysed, thought Wendy, and dragged against their will. A few, compelled by the failing machinery, thrashed back and forth as if afflicted by a fit. Above Wendy, a bulb exploded and a rain of green glass scattered onto the boards to her left. Then, up ahead, a lion began shifting to one side, as if in slow motion. Wendy watched it peel away from its axis, and when eventually it met the surface, it swept, with its mane, the mildewed slats, bouncing and jerking against those most buckled and bent.

The carousel spun for a couple more circles then, as bluntly as it had started, it halted in precisely the same position it had begun. After a few seconds the bulbs went out too. But the music meandered on. Wendy gripped

the candy-striped pole even tighter. Should she sprint to the hole in the fence? Or try and creep there in the shadows?

Moving stiffly, Wendy climbed down from the bear. But before her foot had found the floor, the carousel began moving once more. Again, she clamped, as best she could, the pole and hauled herself back into the saddle. Wendy closed her eyes tight. Below the slats, the grinding of uncoiled machinery clashed with the twinkling carousel music. That poor lion. The first time round its mane had created a clean channel; swept away puddles and dirt and feathers and droppings. But now its body slid further down that skewer of a pole. And when, as if reacting to a rifle shot, its back end hit the deck, it began breaking up and snagging on floorboards long ago separated from their joists.

The ride spun on for a good minute or so, and when it stopped Wendy kept her eyes shut tight. Then, when at last she climbed from the bear, and dared to open one eye, she was faced with an awesome sight. The thing had halted directly opposite a huge, weather-beaten ship of dark wood. The *Gargoyle* she was called.

From the portside – the left-hand-side of the ship – a row of eight copper-coloured cannons poked out. And on two lanky masts hung a couple of massive grey-and-black-striped sails. These would have billowed in the wind were it not for a collection of rips in the canvas. Around a dozen in each. On her bow, a stunning figurehead: a snarling winged gargoyle. It stared out, immune, it seemed to Wendy, to damage from wind or water.

Crouching in the shadow of the bear, Wendy lifted her head slowly and followed a highway of ropes that eventually narrowed around one of the masts. In less-careful times girls and boys would have scurried up and down these lengths. It was these ropes that Wendy had watched the boy climb before he'd leapt into the crow's nest. Finally, nailed to the mast's summit, flew the flag Wendy had spied through the telescope. Then, drooping and defeated, it had hung, like an old dishcloth, in deathly-still air. But not now. Now, from nowhere, a wind had picked up. It gathered the flag, and when the tattered fabric rose and snapped in the air, it flaunted the skull and crossbones of a vessel fit for pirates. On the carousel too it pulled, the wind,

at horses' tails and lions' manes. And it blew across the boards fragments of broken bulbs and the shrapnel from Michael's torch. Wendy watched the glass pooling, as if magnetic, in piles of red and blue and green. Then, demanding attention, the smaller sails, still capable of capturing the wind, fired from the *Gargoyle* soft clapping sounds as they breathed in and out.

Wendy moved out now from the cover of the bear. She began slowly, desperate to make not a sound. Prior to each step she tested the boards below, and when one rose, like something from a slapstick routine, she let it silently sink back and found another route. But underfoot, that bulb glass bit into the soft, worn soles of her trainers. Was there anyone around to hear the snapping and grinding? Crouching, she continued weaving between the wooden animals and across the scuffed, dust-free path the lion's mane had created. Then she stepped from the boards. Running, she figured, might tempt fate so she walked, briskly, across the open ground, doubled-up as far as was possible, and with one eye shut, as if that would make her less visible. And all the while on that frightful trip to the gap in the fence, Wendy's finger hovered over the phone key that would instantly call home – and instantly locate her in a whole other world of trouble.

To the sound of the organ music she made a promise that if she could only get back to No. 14 she would never again complain about washing-up or homework or John and Michael hogging the bedroom. She would own up too that it was she – not Nana – who had broken that vase the other day. Spinach? For the iron? Not a problem. And in her Design and Technology group she would never again sabotage the work of the ghastly, boasting Amanda Craven. They were surely a fair trade, these pledges, for a safe passage home.

Past the stalls now went Wendy, and round the clown's head. Then she knelt before the boundary. The broken railings. The hole in the fence. They were here somewhere. Weeds though, and shadows, were against her. What if she couldn't find the gap? No, that was ridiculous. *Don't panic*, she thought. *Take a moment. Just follow the row of railings and the broken bit will pop up.*

Too exposed, she backtracked, Wendy, and squatted against the clown's head. There, for a few seconds, she rested her own forehead against the cold fibreglass. Then she whipped out her inhaler. To muffle the sound she shook it beneath her jumper. And then she took a puff.

It was the *ssssccchhh* noise of the gadget that had done it. On cue, five pairs of eyes caught the moonlight and zeroed-in on Wendy. But only for a heartbeat. Disinterested, five lean foxes – a mum and four cubs – moved on. And when they each zipped through the gap Wendy followed behind so quickly that for one fleeting moment she became part of the pack.

After crawling through the dandelion clocks, Wendy stood for a few seconds and shook rain or dew or pee or whatever it was from her hands. She didn't care. She was back out on the street and it looked great. The foxes? They padded out towards Lisbon Street. Wendy, though, headed for the tunnel. On the way in, it had been something to fear. Walking through it had called for guts and crossed fingers. Now, after that carousel, that awful clown – after everything – it would be a breeze. Now it spelled safety and escape. Now it was almost welcoming.

Even so, for luck Wendy decided to hold her breath all the way through. She sucked in the cold air. And when it hit that sensitive tooth it throbbed beautifully. She'd wet herself a bit too. The freezing air from the tunnel had just confirmed that. But who cared? She began a jog. And it was then that she heard the sounds. A series of short, sharp fizzes were zapping out from somewhere behind her. Wendy's phone fell from her hand. Quickly she ducked down and grabbed the thing. Then she slowly turned around. With each fizz, the colour of the puddles changed from silver to green and back again. It was the neon sign. It had begun flashing on-then-off, on-then-off. Here and there, random letters – O – M – N – E – L – pinged to life and tinted the air before dimming and dying again.

Watching the letters, Wendy slowly released all that stored-up lucky air and took a couple of paces towards the sign. But a noise from behind the fence had her retreating again. She could have sprinted away. She could have followed the foxes' route and avoided the tunnel completely. She was, Wendy, a fast runner. In the top three of her year. But rather than run she began to

pad, slowly and silently, backwards. All the while she kept her eyes on the sign and her finger on the phone. Again, she heard a soft scuttle from beyond the fence. It sounded like an animal. That dog maybe. Or another of those foxes.

To the tunnel she marched, and straight through it she'd have fled had the most tender of growls not barred her path. At her feet, guarding the tunnel entrance, stood the little grey dog. Her low snarl, hooded eyes and arched back urged Wendy out towards the street. And when she tried a few feints – like the ones she used at netball and football – to clear a route to Lisbon Street, the dog remained one step ahead. Defeated, Wendy turned towards the sign.

It was then that she saw him.

He was sat, somehow, on top of that fussy iron gate beyond the fence. In his hands he held a length of sparking, crackling electrical cable. He was busy, the boy, twisting the cable back and forth and frowning into the tiny fountains of light that spurted from it. When at last he looked up, the boy grinned at Wendy. But only for a moment. The wire, it seemed, was more absorbing.

Wendy stared at the boy. Flickering in the strobing sign, he looked, she thought, like an imp on leave from Hell. That weird tousled hair she'd seen through the telescope sat above a pale, sharply featured face. He was *lithe* and *agile*, if you wanted to be kind. Or *too damn thin* if you didn't. Every so often he would steal a glance at Wendy, and flash that same mischievous smile. Had she wanted to escape she couldn't have. The dog, who'd demonstrated already her skills, was now circling her, although so gently that her bell barely registered. But the truth is Wendy felt little danger now. Fear had given way to fascination.

The boy whistled as a spark caught him unaware. Then, either through accident or design, the glass tubes of the sign at last stopped dancing and a steady green glow popped into the air. The cable he'd taken from Madison Avenue had done the trick at last.

'Ta-dah.' said the boy with no fanfare.

Wendy read the words. Then she looked at the boy. Expecting rather more from her, he leaned out from the railings and, anchored by one hand, stared up at the sign. And then he grumbled softly to himself. Not all of the neon letters had illuminated. And now, rather than reading *Welcome to New Adventure Land*, it spelled out, the sign, a message that Wendy would never forget:

Welcome to Ne- -ve---r- Land.

She read the words again. Slowly and in a whisper that only she could hear.

Neverland. That's what she'd call this place.

The boy watched her, and when she looked to him again he was stood up: balanced upon the railings, legs splayed, cable coiled and fizzing around his neck, and both hands on his hips. He thumped his chest and said 'Peter.' This he followed with an entitled little smirk.

The entire thing reeked of a triumphalism for which he'd done precisely nothing to earn. *Who on earth does he think he is, this boy*, thought Wendy.

Moving, for a second, the arm that had been obscuring the wet patch on her jeans, the girl struck her own chest, harder than this Peter had thumped his. It hurt a bit, but she didn't show it. Instead, with conviction, she said 'Wendy.' Then she stared, unimpressed, straight back at him.

Eventually the boy lowered his hand and, like two cagey gunslingers slowly holstering their weapons, Wendy lowered hers too.

Peter nodded to the dog. 'Tink.'

Wendy glanced down to where the dog had been spooling around her, but she caught only a tail disappearing through the gap in the fence. And when she looked up to where the boy was sitting, he too had vanished.

It was silly, but Wendy waited for a couple of minutes in case either of them reappeared. But they didn't and, fascinated or not, she wasn't going to follow the dog back into this Neverland. Not tonight.

Through the fence, Peter and Tink were already on their way to bed. They were certain, of course, that they'd be seeing Wendy again soon. And as she jogged through the tunnel and back to sheets and pillows and brothers, the girl knew this also. She followed the row of arches to where they met the

junction at Brittlefield Road. Embedded in the soles of her trainers, those thin shards of bulb-glass kept her company as they crunched and crumbled for a while on the paving stones of Spicerhill.

Before Wendy had even reached the high street, the boy and his dog were dreaming. The Neverland sign, meanwhile, began to stutter once more. With the cable now looped, like a noose, around a railing post, one by one, the letters sputtered out. The *W* of *Welcome* hung on though. Only when the girl had shinned back up the cherry tree and through the window did it too stammer and flash, and eventually darken.

Wendy knew not a thing of it, but a fox followed her all the way home that night. It had been sent by the boy. He had plans for this Wendy and wanted to make sure she reached No. 14 safe and sound.

CHAPTER 6

EX MARI VICTORIA

Friday October 17th 2014

Eleven. On the dot. Lowered into Mr James Hook's white china cup: a biscuit so large it required snapping in half in order to reach the tea inside. Mr Hook's Rule of Three stated that the biscuit should spend no more than three seconds immersed in the liquor. Beyond three seconds and it would disintegrate. And sink. And then all hell might break loose.

This morning, the Rule of Three had already been contravened twice. The cause was 'A problem of the left hand. The *sinister*. From the Latin. And what, Mr Smee, could be more sinister than this unfortunate beverage that now resembles more a bath of mud than a cup of tea?'

The query was addressed to the figure sat facing the imposing desk of James Hook. Samuel Smee was Hook's opposite in almost every way. Where Hook was tall, confident, sometimes arrogant and always a fan of the flamboyant, Smee was small, balding and apologetic. He dressed dourly too, in shades of tan and sand. Smee, when he stumbled upon a shirt or shoes or a jacket or jumper he liked, would buy five or six of each item. And this would kit him out for years. When styles, though, moved forward, Smee would of course remain sewn to one particular era. Sometimes, however, he'd find himself accidentally in vogue as one fashion or another rose from the grave, be it for hipsters or the general population.

When he spoke, Samuel Smee whistled his esses. You couldn't make up that kind of bad luck. Smee had considered, years ago, changing either his name or his teeth, but in the end had left both well alone. Consequently, he had gotten through life introducing himself as seldom as possible. It was said of Smee, too, that when he entered a room it became more empty. And years of self-doubt had caused him to begin most sentences with 'It's probably a really bad idea, but...'

Sat on his seat, set with psychological cunning lower than Hook's own, Smee watched the bolder man jabbing, irritated, at the buttons of the intercom on his desk. It seemed rude to keep staring, so instead Smee let his eyes wander around the office. Moored on shelves and ledges were more than a dozen model ships. Big ones. Small ones. And each more rich in detail than the last. Upon the walls hung paintings of nautical scenes. And from inside a glass cabinet, a collection of miniature wooden figureheads faced out. From his spot some yards away, Smee peered over his spectacles and into the display. There he found a curious menagerie: unicorns and angels, lions and eagles, dragons and maidens. *Hook might be a ruthless businessman*, thought Smee, *but at heart he is a frustrated sailor*.

On a strip of wall, between two great windows, was nailed Hook's own coat of arms. Smee rose. And automatically he adopted his museum stance: hands clasped reverentially behind back; shallow lean into the object. On the shield's crest was pictured a cutlass, a candle, a book and, naturally, a ship. It bore Hook's family name too, and a motto: *Ex mari victoria*.

Hook, meanwhile, had finally grown tired of prodding at the intercom. He stood and, eschewing all technology, shouted 'Moira. Moira, more tea, please.' Then, standing behind Smee, Hook clamped his hands firmly on the other man's shoulders. Then he lowered and angled his head so that when he spoke, Smee felt Hook's breath in his ear.

'It's all before you in these four symbols, Mr Smee.' whispered Hook. 'Fearlessness. Illumination. Knowledge. And my people's proud seafaring heritage.' As he reeled off these noble qualities, Hook punctuated each one with a sharp squeeze of Smee's shoulders. It hurt like hell, but Smee remained silent.

For all Hook's fancy words, the truth, though, was quite different. The truth was that Hook had chosen the icons using an internet gadget. The motto – *From the sea, victory* – he had constructed that via an online translation tool. Then the item had been posted to him from a factory in Dongguan. Its crimson velveteen, stretched across a shield-shaped slice of plywood, was held in place by thirteen staples, all visible on its rear.

The men returned to Hook's desk. As a pile of papers were lifted, a silver galleon was revealed: the *Cassandra*. Beneath her hull crafted curls of metal lent motion to the piece. And when Smee dared to touch the bow of the model, Hook stopped fussing with his paperwork. Then he trained his eyes on Smee's hand until it retreated. What a beauty she was, the *Cassandra*.

'She's one of a kind.' said Hook, clearing space on his desk, 'I commissioned Claude Chevalier himself to create her.'

When Smee didn't look quite impressed enough, Hook added a snooty postscript, 'The man was the world's finest nautical silversmith.' then he added sadly, 'It was the last piece he made before he died. Felled in his native Marseille by a motor car of all things. What irony. Unfinished it was at his death. As you can see from the mainmast.'

Smee hadn't seen anything of the kind, but now that he scrutinised the pole, sure enough, its topmost section had been left uncompleted. 'It would have been sacrilege,' said Hook, 'to have asked even a gifted craftsman to meddle with a masterpiece. It shall remain as Chevalier left it to me. Left it, more accurately, to the world. Even the flawed,' he said, with an air of the tragic, 'can somehow also rise to perfection.'

Hook then gazed at the model and a terrible silence fell upon the office. Only the buzzing, crackling innards of that ancient intercom system filled the air. Eventually, Smee could stand it no longer. He motioned to Hook's bandaged right hand. 'Is it getting better?'

Hook, hauled from his meditation, now scowled at the clumsy paw. Then he closed his eyes. 'It will be better only when the tinkling bell of the canine who bit me is silenced forever.'

He was prone, Hook, to episodes of self-pity and he fairly howled as he asked of Smee 'Why me? Why Hook, a man who would home every stray in London if he could? And what thanks do I get?', and he held his hand aloft, 'The teeth of a dog who runs like a racehorse but rings like a...' Then Hook's face grew pale, his eyes became wide and he stiffened in his cold leather chair, 'Did you hear it? Did you? The dastardly dog is back. It wants to finish me off. It, and that ink-stain of a boy it associates with.'

Smee's eyes narrowed and he angled and cocked his head to one side. Hook was correct. A bell *was* tinkling somewhere close by. Then Smee gulped. Spell broken, he marched to the coat stand and silenced his telephone.

'I'm terribly sorry Mr Hook. My bank. Again. They can't leave a man alone.' Then Smee switched the thing off. 'Insurance for this. Special rates for that. Remember when banks just took your money, ripped you off and left you alone? Those were the days.'

But Hook listened to none of Smee's babble. Instead, he clasped his head in his hands, causing sunlight to zing from the silver skull around his finger. It caught the light, the ring, then flashed it across the office walls. 'It will be the end of me, this hound who tolls like the sixteen bells of the Hogmanay ship's watch.'

A sharp knock on the door signalled the arrival of fresh tea. 'No calls please, Moira.' said Hook from beneath his hands.

Moira looked at Smee. Then she nodded to the unsighted Hook and silently asked *Is he alright?* Smee nodded several times and gave a twitchy thumbs-up.

When Moira had closed the door, Hook opened one eye. Then he sprang up. For the moment, ringing dogs and ringing phones were put to one side. Instead, Hook's attention shifted to a large green chest in the corner of the room. Pasted to the battered box, ancient labels – Genoa, Seattle, Cairo, Athens – told of ports and passports, crossings and customs. This box, thought Smee, was better-travelled than the average person. Certainly, it had seen more of the world than he ever would. Sad then for it to be stranded here in an office. Even one with such a nautical bent.

Hook removed from the surface of the chest yet another ship, the *Pentacle* this time, before a key from his pocket unlocked a formidable brass padlock. Next he pulled out a huge roll of creamy paper. He flattened it out on the desk, Hook, but its edges rolled back towards the centre. Smee clamped a hand on one edge and Hook tucked the other beneath the intercom. Then the two men stared at the sheet. Upon it was drawn a series of rectangles. And alongside these were printed various measurements and sums. 'Mr

Jukes reckons we can squeeze another hundred square metres around this corner.’ said Hook, tapping rapidly on the paper, ‘If we’re very careful.’

The Mr Jukes in question was William Jukes. Hook’s old university friend had enjoyed a sterling career in the Army. And when that had come to an end he’d founded JukeBox, the burgeoning chain of enormous supermarkets. They were controversial, these stores. Often they destroyed an area’s smaller shops and businesses. And to those shopkeepers affected, the JukeBox slogan, *Everything’s inside*, seemed to smirk about it all.

Jukes, though, gave not a hoot about any of that. As far he was concerned he was simply giving the world of commerce the kick it required. And he positively bristled at the thought of turning that site he’d identified – the one on Old Valhalla Road – into his biggest store yet. It would all begin with the roll of paper on Hook’s desk.

‘A hundred?’ said Smee, surprising himself, ‘But we’re already way past the boundary as it is. That’s not going to...’ His protest tailed off, though, as Hook caught him with a glare.

‘Oh I’m sure it can be arranged.’ said Smee. It was amazing, however, he thought to himself, the lengths they were going to just so Jukes could sell a few more pallets of beans.

‘When we’re finished with it, that fairground is going to make me – us – all of us – a lot of money.’ said Hook. He dipped a biscuit into his tea. He’d forgotten, though, about that bandaged hand and, in his rush to honour the Rule of Three, tipped the teacup over the plans. In a flash, they turned sepia.

He had, Hook, since the incident with Tink, tried to teach himself to become ambidextrous. And never short of self-belief, he reckoned that in one weekend he would be using his left hand as easily as he used his right. His confidence though had been ill-founded.

Mechanically, Smee whipped a cloth handkerchief from his pocket. But with his hand no longer pressed upon the paper, it rolled across the desk, dunted the cup, and sloshed across the plan the remaining dregs of tea. Smee began fussing over the drenched paper. But Hook shooed him away with a wave. ‘Leave me, Mr Smee. I will be wretched company now until dinnertime at earliest.’

Smee gathered his belongings: coat, case, briefcase and umbrella. Then he buddied-up to Hook's florid vocabulary: 'I wish you an effectual convalescence.'

'You're most kind.' said Hook. 'Now...,' and as he motioned to the door he was careful, Hook, to call out a non-specific, track-covering trifle that Moira would hear. 'Thank you again for bringing your brochures in. We'll be in touch, Mr Johnstone.'

Clumsily, and at the last moment, Hook had glued-on the name they'd agreed Smee would be known by when in the presence of Pendulum employees. He'd chosen, Hook, Johnstone specifically because it was an unremarkable name. A name that hid in plain sight. It was one also that could be spelled several ways: *Johnson. Johnston. Johnstone. Even Jonson.*

Hook had devised also a bland and difficult-to-pin-down business for his Mr Johnstone. Should Hook be pushed for it by Moira or anyone else, the twitchy little man would be an agent for General Office Supplies. But really, this was all belts-and-braces stuff. The truth is: *nobody cared.* Hook suspected this. But even so, with Moira nearby, it had been a risk to have Smee, however covertly, in the building. He made a note to avoid such events from now on.

Despite Hook's checks and balances, it made Smee nervous too, this clandestine operation. But as he stepped from Hook's building onto Charnelhouse Street – like a proper man about town – it excited him greatly too. At the traffic lights he waited for the green man. There, he practiced an involuntary grimace: a prop to back up the dental appointment story that had freed him for the meeting.

Slumped across his desk of spilt tea and biscuit sludge, Hook spoke wearily into the fizzing old intercom. 'Moira, no more calls for a while, please. Unless it's whatshisname. Simon.'

'Simon the tailor or Simon the stockbroker?'

'Tailor.' said Hook, 'He said he might phone.'

'Tailor' said Moira, and she split the syllables in half, the way people do when they're indicating that they're writing something down. 'I've made a note. They sound exactly like one another is the problem.'

‘They really don’t.’ said Hook, ‘One’s from Derbyshire, the other’s from Cumbria. I’ve never understood why you insist they do.’

‘Don’t sound alike.’ said Moira. And again, she separated the component parts out. Hook shook his head. He never could tell when she was teasing. He almost threw in, for good measure, some throwaway comment about how they wouldn’t be requiring anything from Mr Johnstone’s brochures. Then he stopped himself. It would be safer to simply stay silent about the thing.

‘Anything else?’ said Moira.

‘What? No.’ But then he glanced at the mess on his desk. ‘Actually, can you ask one of the chaps in administration for a fresh print of plan number 1904? That fellow Darling will do it. Yes, Darling. Odd sort of name for a man.’

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