

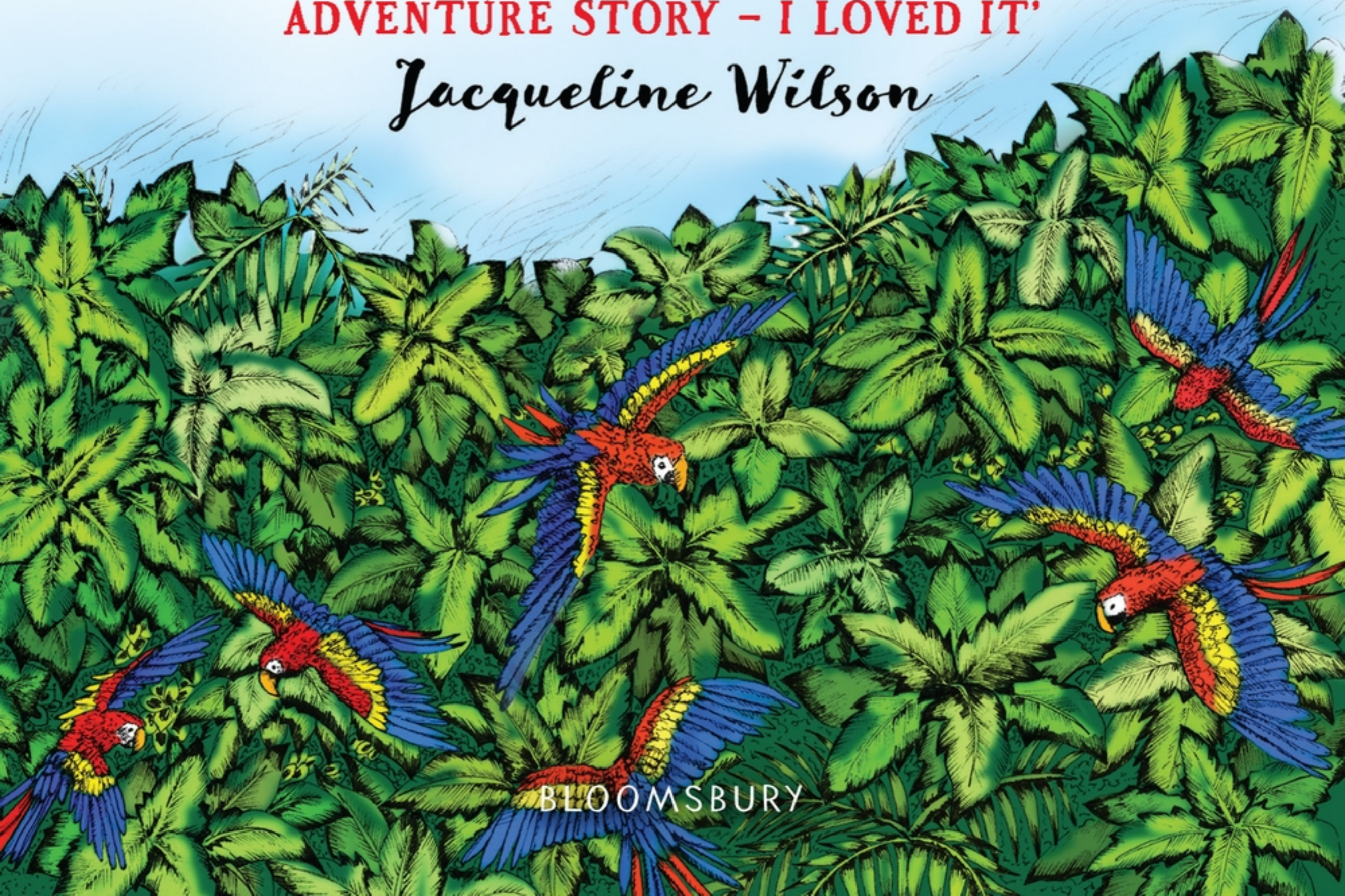
KATHERINE RUNDELL



The
EXPLORER

'A VERY EXCITING
ADVENTURE STORY - I LOVED IT'

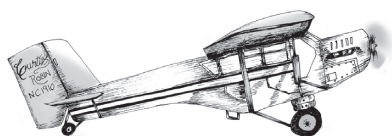
Jacqueline Wilson



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The
EXPLORER



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KATHERINE
RUNDELL

ILLUSTRATED BY
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BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi and Sydney

First published in Great Britain in August 2017 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP

www.bloomsbury.com

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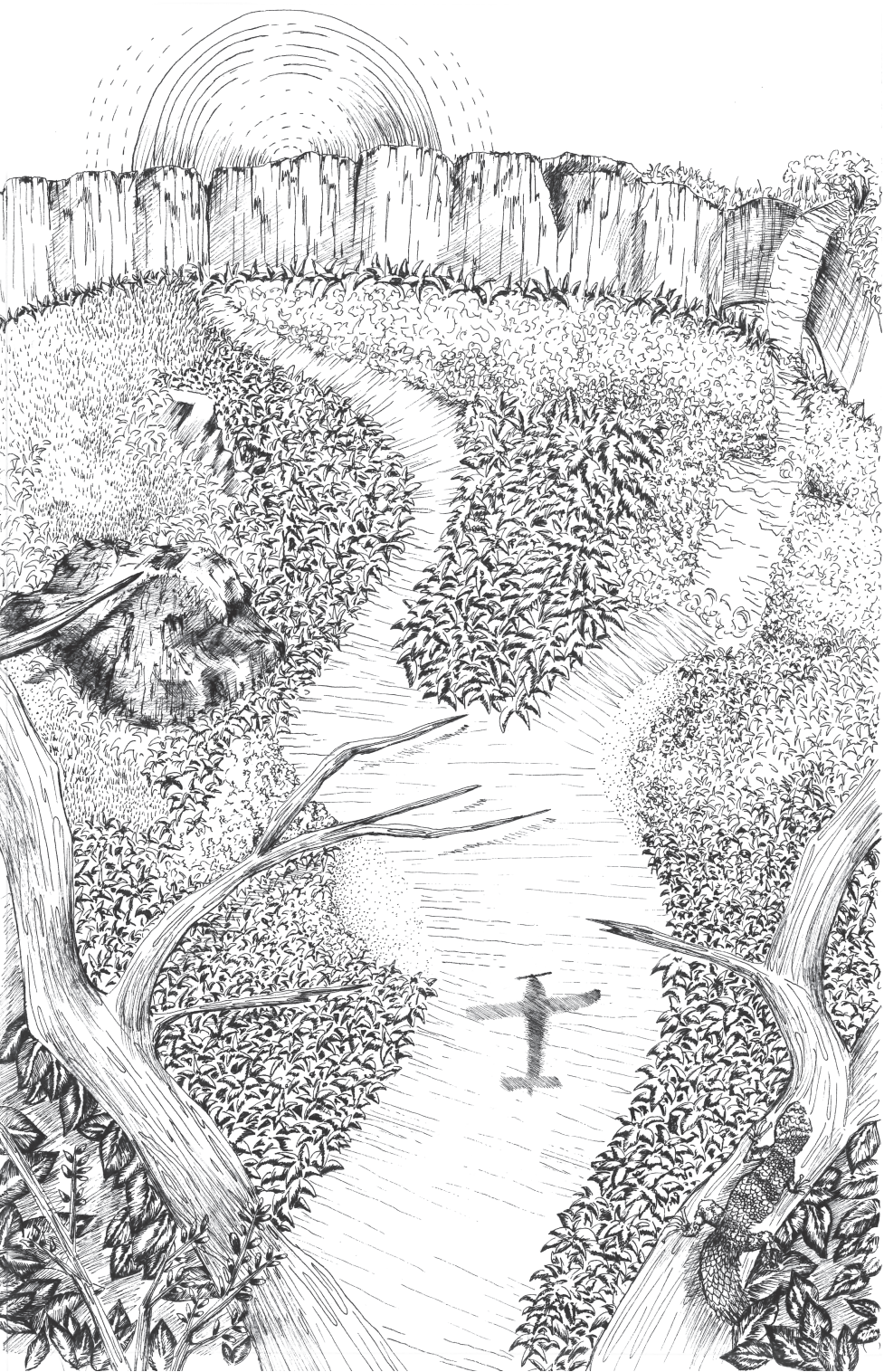
A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 4088 5487 7
3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4

Export ISBN 978 1 4088 8528 4
5 7 9 10 8 6 4



Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



FLIGHT

Like a man-made magic wish, the aeroplane began to rise.

The boy sitting in the cockpit gripped his seat and held his breath as the plane climbed into the arms of the sky. Fred's jaw was set with concentration, and his fingers twitched, following the movements of the pilot beside him: joystick, throttle.

The aeroplane vibrated as it flew faster into the setting sun, following the swerve of the Amazon River below them. Fred could see the reflection of the six-seater plane, a spot of black on the vast sweep of blue, as it sped towards Manaus, the city on the

water. He brushed his hair out of his eyes and pressed his forehead against the window.

Behind Fred sat a girl and her little brother. They had the same slanted eyebrows and the same brown skin, the same long eyelashes. The girl had been shy, hugging her parents until the last possible moment at the airfield; now she was staring down at the water, singing under her breath, her brother trying to eat his seatbelt.

In the next row, on her own, sat a pale girl with blonde hair down to her waist. Her blouse had a neck-ruffle that came up to her chin, and she kept tugging it down and grimacing. She was determinedly not looking out of the window.

The airfield they had just left had been dusty and almost deserted, just a strip of tarmac under the ferocious Brazilian sun. Fred's cousin had insisted that he wear his school uniform and cricket jumper, and now, inside the hot, airless cabin, he felt like he was being gently cooked inside his own skin.

The engine gave a whine, and the pilot frowned and tapped the joystick. He was old and soldierly, with brisk nostril hair and a grey waxed moustache which seemed to reject the usual laws of gravity. He touched the throttle and the plane soared upwards, higher into the clouds.

It was almost dark when Fred began to worry. The pilot began to belch, first quietly, then violently and repeatedly. His hand jerked, and the plane dipped suddenly to the left. Someone screamed behind Fred. The plane lurched away from the river and over the canopy. The pilot grunted, gasped and wound back the throttle, slowing the engine. He gave a cough that sounded like a choke.

Fred stared at the man – he was turning the same shade of grey as his moustache. ‘Are you all right, sir?’ he asked. ‘Is there something I can do?’

Fighting for breath, the pilot shook his head. He reached over to the control panel and cut the engine. The roar ceased. The nose of the plane dipped downwards. The trees rose up.

‘What’s happening?’ asked the blonde girl sharply.
‘What’s he doing? Make him stop!’

The little boy in the back began to shriek. The pilot grasped Fred’s wrist hard for a single moment, then his head slumped against the dashboard.

And the sky, which had seconds before seemed so reliable, gave way.






THE GREEN DARK

Fred wondered, as he ran, if he was dead. *But*, he thought, *death would surely be quieter*. The roar of the flames and his own blood vibrated through his hands and feet.

The night was black. He tried to heave in breath to shout for help as he ran but his throat was too dry and ashy to yell. He jabbed his finger into the back of his tongue to summon up spit. 'Is anybody there? Help! Fire!' he shouted.

The fire called back in response; a tree behind him sent up a fountain of flames. There was a rumble of thunder. Nothing else replied.



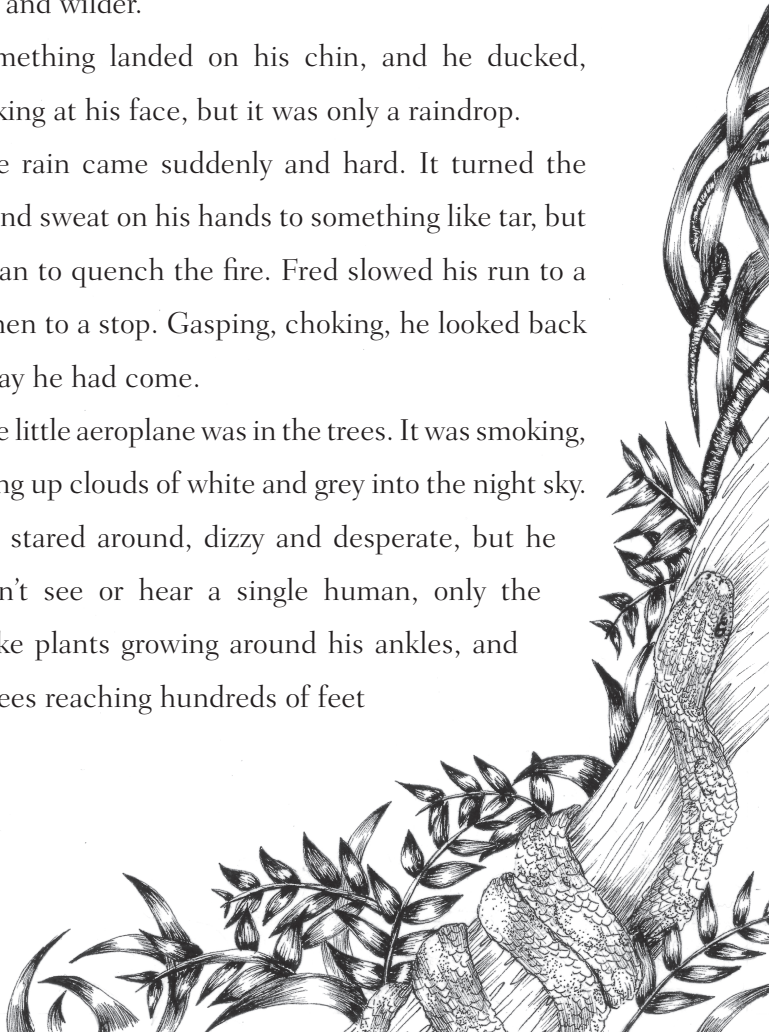
A burning branch cracked, spat red, and fell in a cascade of sparks. Fred leapt away, stumbling backwards into the dark and smacking his head against something hard. The branch landed exactly where he'd been standing seconds before. He swallowed the bile that rose in his throat and began to run again, faster and wilder.

Something landed on his chin, and he ducked, smacking at his face, but it was only a raindrop.

The rain came suddenly and hard. It turned the soot and sweat on his hands to something like tar, but it began to quench the fire. Fred slowed his run to a jog, then to a stop. Gasping, choking, he looked back the way he had come.

The little aeroplane was in the trees. It was smoking, sending up clouds of white and grey into the night sky.

He stared around, dizzy and desperate, but he couldn't see or hear a single human, only the fernlike plants growing around his ankles, and the trees reaching hundreds of feet



up into the sky, and the panicked dive and shriek of birds. He shook his head, hard, trying to banish the shipwreck-roar in his ears.

The hair on his arms was singed and smelt of eggs. He put his hand to his forehead; his eyebrow had charred and part of it came away on his fingers. He wiped his eyebrow on the sleeve of his shirt.

Fred looked down at himself. One leg of his trousers was ripped all the way up to the pocket, but none of his bones felt broken. There was vicious pain, though, in his back and neck, and it made his arms and legs feel far-off and foreign.

A voice came suddenly from the dark. 'Who's there? Get away from us!'

Fred spun round. His ears still buzzing, he grabbed a rock from the ground and hurled it in the direction of the voice. He ducked behind a tree and crouched on his haunches, poised to jump or run.

His heart sounded like a one-man band. He tried not to exhale.

The voice said, 'For God's sake, don't throw things!'

It was a girl's voice.

Fred looked out from behind the tree. The light of the moon filtered deep green to the forest floor, casting long-fingered shadows against the trees, and he could see only two bushes, both of them rustling.

'Who is it? Who's there?' The voice came from the second bush.

Fred squinted through the dark, feeling the remaining hair rise up on his arms.

'Please don't hurt us,' said the bush. The accent wasn't British; it was something softer, and the voice was definitely a child's, not an adult's. 'Was it you, throwing poo?'

Fred looked down at the ground. He'd snatched up a piece of years-old, fossilised animal dung.

'Oh,' he said. 'Yes.' He was becoming accustomed to the dark, and could see the shine of eyes peering out from the grey-green gloom of the undergrowth. 'Are you from the plane? Are you hurt?'

'Yes, we're hurt! We fell out of the sky!' said one bush, as the other said, 'No, not badly.'

‘You can come out,’ said Fred. ‘It’s only me here.’

The second bush parted. Fred’s heart gave a great leap. Both the girl and her brother were covered in scratches and burns and ash – which had mixed with sweat and rain and made a kind of paste on their faces – but they were alive. He was not alone. ‘You survived!’ he said.

‘Obviously we did,’ said the first bush, ‘or we’d be less talkative, wouldn’t we?’ The blonde girl stepped out into the lashing rain. She stared from Fred to the other two, unsmiling. ‘I’m Con,’ she said. ‘It’s short for Constantia, but if you call me that I’ll kill you.’

Fred glanced at the other girl. She smiled nervously, and shrugged. ‘Right,’ he said. ‘If you say so. I’m Fred.’

‘I’m Lila,’ said the second girl. She held her brother on her hip. ‘And this is Max.’

‘Hi.’ Fred tried to smile but it made the cuts on his cheek stretch and burn so he stopped and made do with a grin that involved only the left half of his face.

Max was at the breathless stage of crying, and he clung to his sister so tightly his fingers were pressing

bruises on her skin. She was leaning over to one side to hold him up, shaking with the effort. They looked, Fred thought, like a two-headed creature, arms entwined.

‘Is your brother badly hurt?’ he asked.

Lila patted her brother desperately on the back. ‘He won’t talk – he’s just crying.’

Con looked back towards the fire and shivered. The flames cast a light on her face. She was no longer blonde; her hair was grey with soot and brown with blood, and she had a scratch on her shoulder that looked deep.

‘Are you all right?’ he asked, wiping rain out of his eyes. ‘That cut looks bad.’

‘No, I’m not all right,’ Con spat. ‘We’re lost, in the Amazon jungle, and statistically speaking it’s very likely that we’re going to die.’

‘I know.’ Fred didn’t feel he needed reminding. ‘I meant –’

‘So, no,’ Con’s voice grew thin and high, ‘I think it would be safe to say that none of us are all right, not at all, not even slightly!’

The bushes rustled. The rain hammered down on Fred's face.

'We need to find shelter,' he said. 'A big tree, or a cave or something that would –'

'No!' Max gave a sudden scream: a yell that was wet with spit and fear.

Fred stepped backwards, raising his hands. 'Don't cry! I just thought –' Then his eyes followed Max's pointing finger.

There, three inches from Fred's shoe, was a snake.

It was speckled brown and black, patchworked to match the jungle floor, and its head was as big as a fist. For one second nobody breathed. The jungle waited. Then Max let out a second scream that dug deep into the night and the four of them turned and fled.

The ground was sodden and they ran pell-mell, sending up mud into one another's eyes and grazing their elbows against trees. Fred ran as if his body were not his own, faster than he'd ever run, his palms stretched ahead of him. He tripped over a root and

turned a full somersault, coming up spitting earth. He ran on. The rain blinded him and shadows flashed past him in the darkness.

There was a yell behind him.

'Please, Max!' said Lila.

Fred turned back, skidding in the mud.

'He won't run!' Lila bent over her brother. 'And I can't carry him!'

The little boy lay on his back, weeping up at the sky, his whole body shaking in the driving rain.

'Come on!' Fred heaved Max over his shoulder. The boy was far heavier than he'd expected and he screamed as Fred lifted him, but Fred grabbed both of Max's knees and started running, his whole body screaming with pain. He could hear Lila, her feet thumping close behind them.

The stitch in Fred's side was almost unbearable when he tore out of the trees and into a sudden clearing. He halted, and Max bumped his head against Fred's spine and yelled. Angrily, he began trying to bite one of Fred's shoulder blades.

‘Please don’t,’ said Fred, but he was barely paying attention to the boy on his back. He stared, stunned, ahead of him.

They were standing at the edge of a wide circle of trees, open to the sky and lit by the fat moon. There was a carpet of green moss and grass, and the stars above them were clustered so thickly that the silver outnumbered the night. Fred lowered Max to the ground and stood bent over, his hands on his thighs, panting.

‘Did the snake chase us?’ said Max.

‘No,’ gasped Con.

‘How do you know?’ wailed Max.

Lila dropped to her knees, clutching at her side.

‘Snakes don’t, Maxie. We both know that. I just ...’

‘Panicked,’ said Con. Her voice was bitter. ‘That’s what happened. See! Look: no snakes. We were stupid. Now we’re even more lost.’

The ground in the clearing sloped slightly towards a large puddle of water. Fred crossed over to it, his muscles aching, and sniffed; it smelt of rotting things, but he was feverishly thirsty. He took a tiny sip and

immediately spat it out. 'No good,' he said. 'It tastes like a dead person's feet.'

'But I'm thirsty!' said Max.

Fred looked around the clearing, hoping to find water before Max started crying again.

'If you wring out your hair,' he said, 'there'll be water in it.' He tugged his dark fringe down over his forehead and twisted it: a few drops fell on his tongue. 'It's better than nothing.'

Max chewed on his hair for a second, then scrunched his eyes closed. 'I'm scared,' he said. It was said without whining, as simple matter-of-fact. Somehow it was worse than the tears, Fred thought.

'I know,' Lila said softly. 'We all are, Maxie.' She crossed to her brother and pulled him close to her. His small bony fingers closed over a burn on her wrist, but she didn't brush him away. She began to whisper in his ear in Portuguese: something soft, almost a song; a lullaby. They were both shaking slightly.

Fred swallowed. 'All this will look less bad in the morning,' he said.

‘Will it?’ said Con. There was bite to the question.
‘Will it, really?’

‘It can’t look much worse,’ he said. ‘Once it’s light, we’ll be able to work out a way to get home.’

Con looked hard at him: there was challenge in the look, and Fred stared, unblinking, back at her. Her face was all geometry; sharp chin, sharp cheekbones, sharp eyes.

‘What now, then?’ she said.

‘Our mama and papa say—’ began Lila. The mention of her parents made her face crease and crumple, but she swallowed and went on. ‘They always say: you need to sleep before you think. They say, when you’re exhausted, you do stupid things. And they’re scientists. So we should sleep.’

Fred found his whole body was aching. ‘Good. Fine. Let’s sleep.’

He lay down on his side in the wet grass. His clothes were soaked through, but the air was warm. He closed his eyes. Perhaps he would wake up in his bed at school, he thought, next to the snoring

of his roommates, Jones and Scrase. An ant crawled over his cheek.

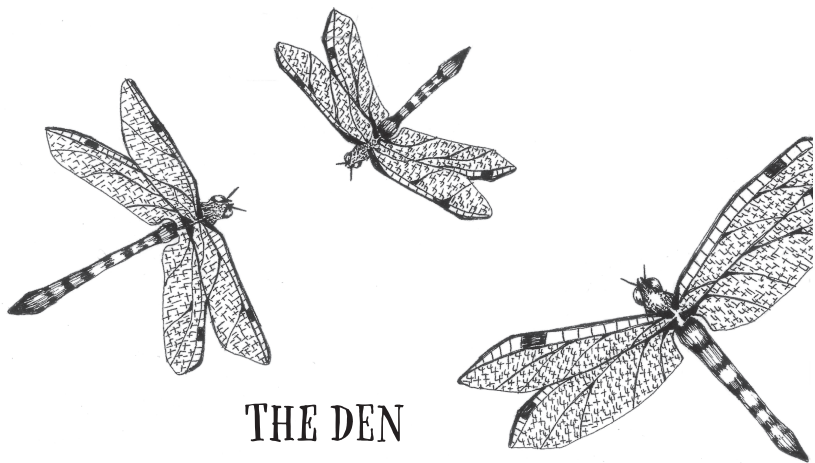
'But aren't we supposed to stay awake in case we die of concussion?' said Con.

'I think if we'd got concussion we'd be dizzy,' said Lila.

Fred, already half-asleep, tried to work out if he was dizzy. The world began to spin away from him.

'If we all die in the night, I'm blaming both of you,' said Con.

It was on that cheering thought that Fred felt himself dropping down, down, away from the jungle and the thick night air and into sleep.

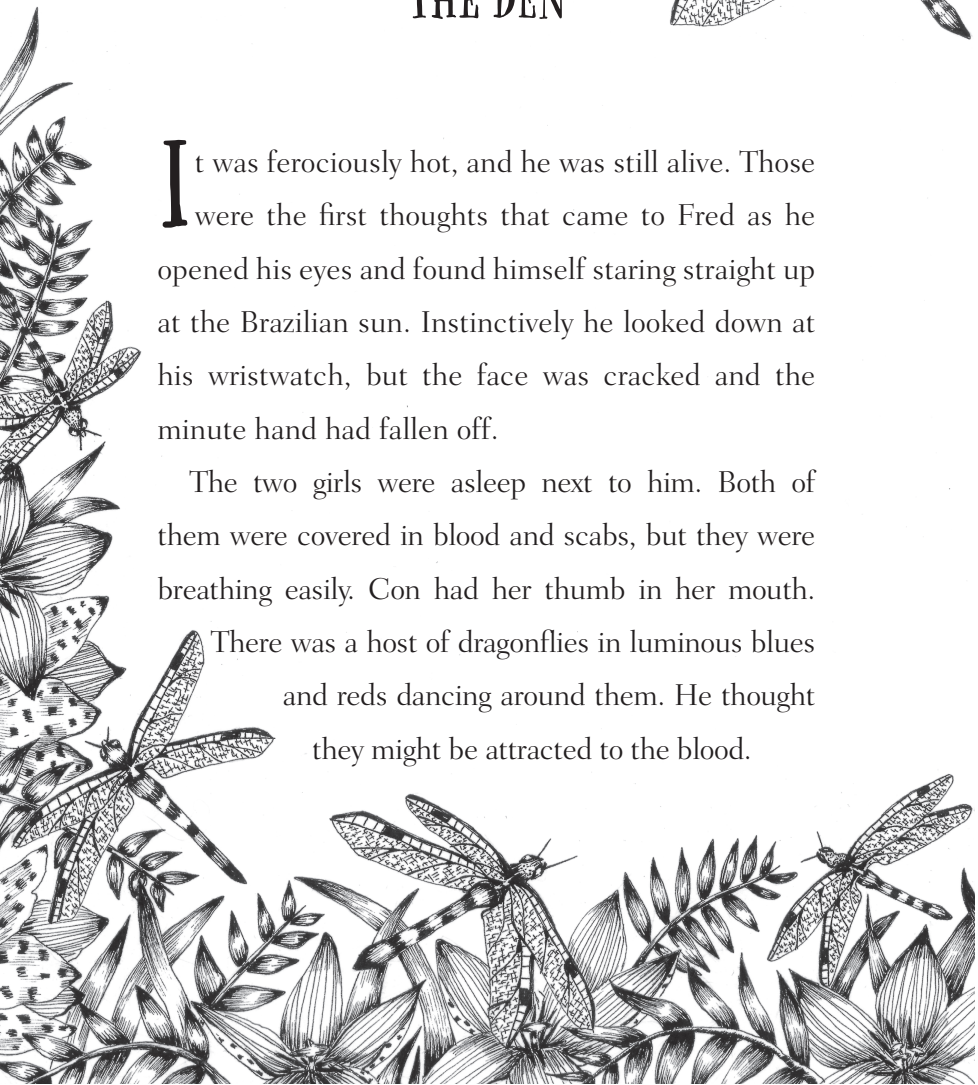



THE DEN

It was ferociously hot, and he was still alive. Those were the first thoughts that came to Fred as he opened his eyes and found himself staring straight up at the Brazilian sun. Instinctively he looked down at his wristwatch, but the face was cracked and the minute hand had fallen off.

The two girls were asleep next to him. Both of them were covered in blood and scabs, but they were breathing easily. Con had her thumb in her mouth.

There was a host of dragonflies in luminous blues and reds dancing around them. He thought they might be attracted to the blood.





But there was no sign of the little boy. Max was missing.

'Max!' Fred whispered, jumping to his feet. There was no answer, no movement except the burr of dragonfly wings.

Fred's heart started to pound. 'Max?' he called louder. Lila stirred in her sleep.

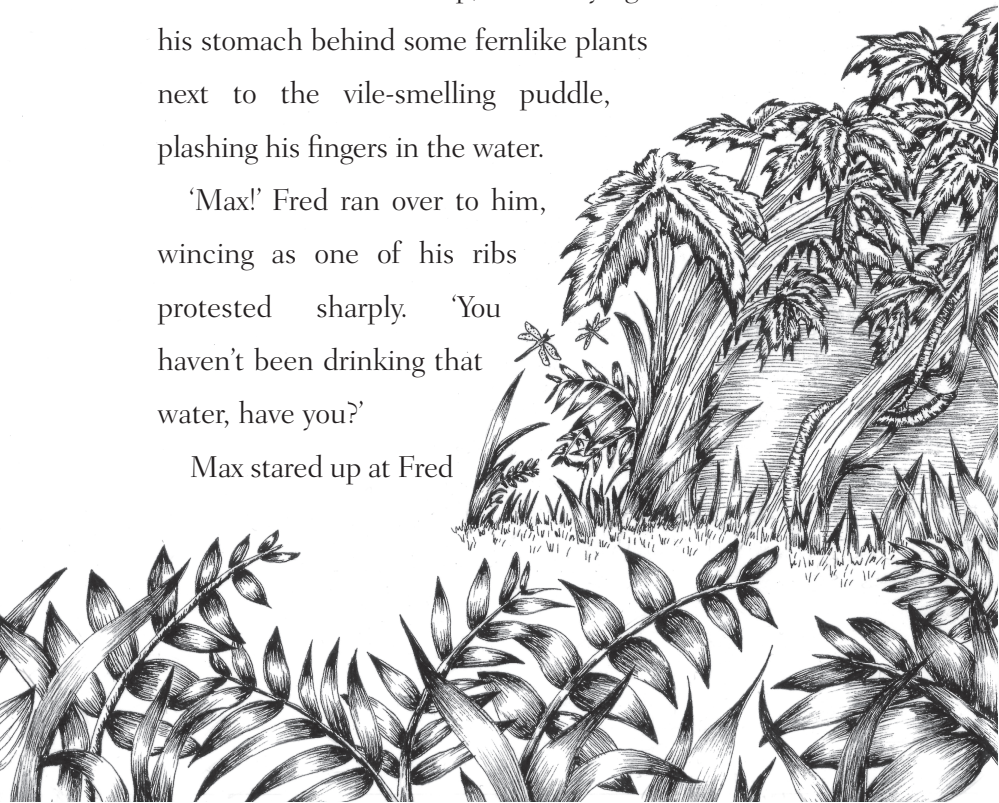
He ran to the edge of the trees. There was no trace of the boy.

'Max!' he roared, staring wildly around.

'What?' Max looked up; he was lying on his stomach behind some fernlike plants next to the vile-smelling puddle, plashing his fingers in the water.

'Max!' Fred ran over to him, wincing as one of his ribs protested sharply. 'You haven't been drinking that water, have you?'

Max stared up at Fred



as he approached, then screwed his eyes shut and let out a scream that shook the baby flesh in his cheeks. Across the clearing Lila gave a yell as she startled awake.

‘That’s not very flattering,’ said Fred to Max, but it was possible, he reckoned, that covered in blood and soot, and with less eyebrow than usual, he didn’t look very reassuring.

The boy kept screaming, barely drawing breath.

Lila jumped to her feet. ‘Max!’ she called. ‘What’s happened?’

Sugar, Fred thought. He knew that you should give people sugar for a shock. ‘Do you want a sweet?’ He had some mint humbugs in his pocket. ‘Please stop crying!’ He fished the sweets out.

His hand came out wet: there was a cut on his thigh and half-dry blood in his pocket, and the mints had spent the night marinating in it. He grimaced and put one in his mouth. The taste hadn’t been improved, but the sugar gave his blood a twitch.

‘Do you want one of these?’ Fred spat on a corner of his shirt and polished one clean. ‘It’s a mint.’

'No! I hate mints!' said Max.

'It's the only food I've got.'

'Oh. Then I'll take it,' said Max. He said it like a lord accepting a peasant's bread.

'Here,' said Fred. He put it in the boy's sticky hand. 'Eat it slowly if you can.'

Max sucked loudly. His nose began to run, down past his lips and on to his chin.

'Max!' Lila called. 'Come here!'

'Come on,' said Fred. The boy's face was intent on working on the mint, his eyebrows furrowed in concentration. He looked very breakable. Fred felt his chest tighten, but he said only: 'You should probably blow your nose.'

'I don't blow my nose,' said Max. They walked, both limping, towards Lila. 'It's not a thing I do.'

'I think you should.'

'No!' Max licked the snot off his upper lip and added it to his mouthful of mint.

Five-year-olds were not easy to argue with, Fred thought. Max had a sweep of dirt encrusted on his

cheek, and his eyebrows turned up at the corners: it gave his face a mischievous tilt.

Fred hooked his finger into Max's shirt collar to steer him from thorns and what looked like rabbit droppings. The ground was mossy, speckled with patches of grass and creeper. One of the trees had scarlet flowers that had fallen and red-carpeted the forest floor.

Sitting among the flowers, under the bright white sun, Lila and Con were arguing.

'You! Boy, what's your name, Fred!' called Con. 'Come and tell this girl she's completely wrong.'

'She thinks –' began Lila, flushing.

'Obviously, I think we should go back and wait near the plane,' said Con. 'In case they see it from the air. So they can rescue us.'

'It makes more sense to stay here,' said Lila. She pulled her knees up to her chin. 'We'd just get lost, trying to find our way back. And I don't think anyone will see the plane. They don't know where we crashed; they'll have to search the entire jungle. We're on our own.' She fixed her eyes on a dandelion-like plant,

fierce and unblinking. 'We'll have to find a way to get to Manaus ourselves.'

Fred looked at the girl properly. She had a scratch across one side of her narrow face, and hair woven into two dark plaits, one of which had been charred in the crash. She wore a scarlet skirt and a blood-red top, both now stained grey-green. She looked about his age. She was scowling at Con.

Con glared back. 'That's crazy. We need to stay near the plane and wait to be rescued. My family will have sent dozens of planes to search for us by now. A hundred planes, probably.'

'But,' said Lila, 'where we crashed is burnt by the fire. Half the trees are charcoal, and so there'll be no animals –'

'We don't need animal friends!' said Con. 'This isn't a fairy tale!'

'– for us to eat,' finished Lila. 'And back there, there's –'

'What?' said Con.

'There's the pilot.'

'He's dead,' said Con. She seemed genuinely puzzled. 'He can't hurt us.'

Lila spoke very quietly, but Fred was surprised by how authoritative she sounded. 'We should make camp here.'

'No!' said Con. 'That's completely illogical.'

'Fred?' asked Lila. 'You get the deciding vote.'

'No he doesn't!' said Con. 'That's not fair; one person shouldn't get to decide!' She glared at Fred from foot to chin. 'Not unless he agrees with me.'

Fred looked around the clearing again. The air was fresh here and the sky above them a blue that does not exist in England. He was just about to answer when he saw that at the far end, where the forest grew thick and tangled, four trees had fallen together, their tops meeting in a point. The very tips of the hairs on the back of Fred's neck began to rise.

'Do you think there's anything odd about this clearing?' he said.

'That's not an answer to the question!' said Con.

'Why?' asked Lila.

'Those trees,' he said, 'over there.' He pointed.

'What about them? They fell over,' said Con. 'That's what trees do.'

'But they don't look like they fell, to me,' said Fred. He ran across the clearing. A sense was rising in him that something was strange. His curiosity pushed aside his fear.

The largest of the trees was immense: its trunk was as thick and tall as Nelson's Column in Trafalgar Square. Three smaller trees leant against the thicker one. Each had grown a few feet from the next in a rough square, their branches entwined and darkened by green creepers.

'Leave it alone, Fred,' called Con. 'Stay in the open!'

'There's something odd here.' He ran his hand down one of the smaller trees. At the base was a mess of fernlike plants and a few mushrooms. He pushed the ferns down, and felt his stomach swoop.

The three smaller trees didn't have roots. They were logs, fifteen feet high, each carefully tipped against the

central tree; he could see where they'd been hacked with an axe or a machete. Ferns had grown – *or been planted*, Fred thought – at their bases, disguising the places where the cuts showed.

'A den,' breathed Fred.

'What did you say?' called Con.

Fred pushed at the vines that stretched between each of the logs.

'It's like a tent,' said Fred. 'A den.' He bent down, ready to push past the foliage.

'No! Don't go in there!' said Con. It came out in a burst. 'It's not that I'm scared. But please don't. It's not a reasonable risk.'

Fred stared at her. 'A what?' He had never in his life considered whether a risk was reasonable; it sounded like something his headmaster would say.

'There could be anything in there! Jaguars, or snakes, or rats,' said Con.

'I can't *not* look!' said Fred, astonished.

'She might be right, though,' said Lila. 'About the snakes. Be careful.'

'I'll look!' said Max grandly, jumping to his feet.

'No you absolutely won't!' said Lila, grabbing his wrist. *'You're staying right here.'*

Fred pushed aside the vines hanging down between the logs.

'Ach!' He winced: some of the tendrils had tiny but vicious thorns, and they'd caught in one of his cuts. He brushed away another handful of vines, and froze. His heart, which hadn't stopped double-beating since the crash, quickened to triple speed.

The trees met to make a tent, high enough for a man to kneel in, or for someone Max's height to stand. The air smelt deep green. There was a spiderweb in one corner, and below it was a pile of banana leaves, stacked a dozen leaves thick in the shape of a sleeping mat. They had been almost entirely devoured by ants.

Fred looked up, and felt his eyes stretch wide. *'Come and look at this!'* he called. The space between the four tree trunks had once been covered in a roof of plaited palm leaves. He reached up and touched

them. The palms were riddled with holes, half-rotted, and the light shone through, but he could see how intricately they'd been woven.

He crawled further in, slowly, looking for snakes in the green light. The ground squelched under his hands. In the far corner of the den was a hollow gourd, rotten with mildew. Fred touched it, gingerly; it was mulchy. He turned it upside down, wrinkling his nose at the smell. A cascade of flints spilt out. Half had been chipped into the shape of arrowheads; others were square and squat, large as a fist.

'You two!' He crawled backwards and stuck his head through the vines. 'Come in! Quick, you have to see this! Someone was here!'

'You're crazy!' spat Con. 'If someone was here, they won't want us trespassing. I've had enough of this.' She turned and began to march back into the trees.

'Wait! Con! We shouldn't split up,' called Fred. Infuriated, he scrambled out of the den and ran after her.

‘Whose house is it?’ She turned to face him. Fred was startled; there were tears in her eyes. ‘You don’t know, do you?’

‘Of course I don’t,’ said Fred, ‘but I just think –’

‘What if they come back? I’ve read about it in ...’ Con hesitated, casting around for an idea, ‘... *Goldilocks*. I know how it ends. I’m not getting eaten!’

‘I’m pretty sure this place wasn’t built by bears,’ said Fred.

‘It could be cannibals!’

‘Cannibals are mostly a myth,’ said Lila.

‘Says who?’

‘Everyone! Scientists. Our mama and papa.’

‘How do they know?’

‘Mama grew up in the jungle, near the Solimões River. And she’s a scientist. A botanist.’

‘Bottomist!’ said Max.

Con scowled at him, the nerves in her face twitching. ‘You overrate the wit of the word “bottom”.’

Lila put a protective arm round Max and went on as if she hadn’t been interrupted. ‘And our papa’s

English, and he studies the plants of the jungle. For medicine. And our grandmother was a scientist's assistant; we were supposed to be going to visit her in England. We were going to get the boat from Manaus. She wanted to meet us before she died: she wanted to see what Max was like.'

Con snorted. 'Perhaps it's just as well we crashed.'

Lila ignored that. 'Listen, whoever lives here – if they come back – might be able to take us to Manaus.'

'Or they could *eat us for dinner*,' said Con. She stared from Lila to Fred, angry and bewildered.

'Just come inside,' said Fred. 'You'll see. Nobody's been here for ages.'

Grudgingly, very slowly, Con turned round. She bent down and edged into the shelter. Lila and Max followed.

Fred pulled at the rotten leaves lining the roof. 'We could weave new leaves for the ceiling,' he said, 'and make new beds. Then it would smell less like a sock.'

He began gathering armfuls of half-decomposed foliage and pushing it outside. Underneath, the earth was soft and dusty; it smelt of a thousand warm days, layered one over the other.

Lila brought in an armful of leaves, each as big as a pillowcase. She began to lay them down for beds.

‘And we could hang some extra vines over the front of the den,’ said Fred, ‘so nothing can see in.’

Con crouched in the shelter with her arms crossed. ‘Who died and made you king?’ she asked.

‘Nobody!’ Fred turned, startled. ‘But if we’re going to sleep here, we might as well make it waterproof.’

‘I’m not sleeping here!’ said Con. ‘Someone could come back here any second.’

‘But they won’t,’ said Fred. ‘Did you see those flints?’

‘Yes?’

‘They’re covered in moss,’ he said.

‘So they’re dirty. Fine. How is that supposed to be reassuring?’ said Con.

‘He means they’re old,’ said Lila. ‘It’s deserted.’

‘But why do you want to risk it?’ said Con. ‘What if they come back and think we’re intruders?’

‘Or what if they’re never coming back, and they’ve left behind this shelter?’ said Lila. Her voice wasn’t loud, but there was a toughness to it. ‘If someone was here that means someone else thought it was a good place to rest. It means it’s safe.’

‘But you can’t *know* for sure.’

‘But we can’t know anything for sure!’ said Fred. ‘Lila’s right. As soon as we work out how to get out of here, we’ll leave. But until then, it makes sense to stay in a place where other people have been.’

‘Unless they EAT US!’ said Con.

‘I’m staying here,’ said Max. ‘I want to live in the tree-tent. And if you try to make me move I’ll do a wee on you.’

‘No you won’t!’ Con backed away, smacking her head on a tree trunk.

‘He does sometimes do that,’ said Lila.

Which, for the moment at least, more or less settled it.

