



FLIGHT HOME

Lila woke Fred just before sunrise. The light was blue-grey, and her face was gaunt. She looked closer to eighty years old than twelve.

'You have to make sure he gets there, Fred,' she said. She took hold of his arm and dug her nails into it, to make sure he was listening. 'You don't have a choice.'

Fred could feel the heat radiating from her skin; the heat of hope, and desperation, and love. 'I know that,' he said.

He barely had time to splash water on his face before the explorer was calling them.

'Quick, all of you!' He stood in the middle of the stone city in a patch of sun, the light shining on the scales of his signet ring. 'It's time.'

They gathered around the aeroplane, just as they had in the airfield. It felt, Fred thought, like years ago. They were all four of them less neat now; their clothes were burnt, mud-covered, fish-flavoured, torn. Their faces and hands were covered in mosquito bites and scratches. They were slightly thinner, slightly rangier, slightly tougher.

Lila's hands were shaking as she took Baca and draped him over the explorer's neck. 'He makes a much better scarf than monkeys do.' Her eyes glittered, but she did not let a tear fall. 'Will you look after him?'

'What?' said the explorer, startled. 'Of course not.'

'But, please! He's not old enough to be alone yet – he needs –'

'He doesn't need me. He needs you. He's yours. You rescued him, you fed him. You need him.'

'But, my parents —'

'Your parents will understand. They will see these are not ordinary circumstances.' He placed Baca just below her shoulder, as if affixing a medal. 'You belong to each other.'

The explorer lifted Max and laid him in the back seat. 'Comfortable?'

Max's eyes were closed and his breathing was very shallow. His fingers had begun to swell.

'Not long now, little cataclysm.' He touched Max's head, and turned to Lila. 'He is a very loud enigma. But I am glad to have met him. Very glad.'

'He loved you,' said Lila. '*Loves* you,' she corrected herself, blanching.

The explorer swallowed, then nodded. He cupped his hands for her foot, and she climbed into the plane, cradling Max in her lap.

'Listen.' He looked down at Max's flushed cheek. 'When you get home, tell them how large the world is, and how green. And tell them that the beauty of the world makes demands on you. They will need

reminding. If you believe the world is small and tawdry, it is easier to be so yourself. But the world is so tall and so beautiful a place.

'And all of you — do not forget that, lost out here, you were brave even in your sleep. Do not forget to take risks. Standing ovations await your bravery.'

Con swallowed. 'But I'm afraid,' she whispered.

The explorer nodded, scarred and dusty and matter-of-fact. 'You are right to be afraid. Be brave anyway.'

He held out a hand to Con, and she took it like a queen and climbed into the plane. She squeezed in next to Lila on the back seat. Together they arranged Max across their laps.

The explorer looked at Fred for a long moment. Then he jerked his head towards the front seat. Fred swung up into the plane.

'Lila, hold Max steady: I'm about to shut the door.' He slammed shut the yellow tin door of the plane and fixed the catch. 'And one more thing! Remember — if you learn nothing else, remember to check daily for

maggots. I once had an entire colony in the crook of my elbow.'

'In your elbow?' Fred's brain spun a full circle.

'Exactly so. It was a terrible blow to my vanity.' He turned to go.

Fred's eyes stretched wide. 'Wait!' he called. 'I think I know who you —'

But the explorer was already stalking back into the jungle. Fred stared after him.

Max gave a grunt of pain and Lila bent over him. 'We need to go,' she said.

Fred nodded. He shook himself, and set his feet against the pedals. He took a last look at the explorer.

'Ready?' he called to the back seat.

'Ready,' said Con. Her jaw was locked so tightly he could hear her teeth creaking, but she managed to smile.

'Ready,' said Lila. She gathered Max closer to her and sheltered his head in her arms.

Fred glanced over his shoulder. Max lay still,

breathing shallow breaths. Con and Lila were holding hands, and their knuckles were white.

Fred pressed the ignition button. The engine woke, sputtered, gave a roar like an animal.

He pulled back on the throttle and steered the nose of the aeroplane straight towards fear and towards home.