



WAITING FOR DAWN

Lila sat with Max's head in her lap as he tossed and moaned. Baca rested on the boy's stomach, breathing softly into his skin. Lila's eyes were red, and she'd bitten her lip so many times it was bleeding.

As the evening started to grow blue, Fred could feel his nerves begin to crackle with terror. Max looked so thin, lying in the firelight, as if a single jolt from the aeroplane might kill him. He sat counting Max's breaths until at last he could take it no longer. He jumped up and went in search of the explorer.

He found him bending over the plane's engine, a burning torch in one hand for light.

'You'll have to take off as early as you can tomorrow,' said the explorer. 'Max is lucid, but burning hot. Follow the river north-east.'

'Which way is north-east?' Fred forced himself to stop nervously scratching at the bites on his arms, which were already swollen and bleeding.

'There's a compass in the plane. Con will be your navigator: she has a memory for topography. The river will take you to Manaus; the city's built right on the edge of the water. You can't miss it – there's a vast opera house, with a glass dome roof and pink walls. The roof catches the sun, and you can see the shine of it from miles away.'

'But if you run out of fuel before you reach the city – and I must warn you, you probably will – fly inland; there will be some cattle ranches, with open fields. Land on the smoothest field you can find. Remember: front wheels first.'

'Front wheels first.'

'And the others should be heads down low, behind

the seats, and with their hands clasped behind their necks.'

'What if I forget, though? What if I go crazy and panic?'

'I think it is very unlikely you will do either.'

'What if I do, though?'

'You won't. Fred, I may be eccentric, but I'm not mad.' He looked at Fred; it was the kind of look that on a clear day could see through your chest cavity to your heart. 'I wouldn't ask you to do this if I weren't absolutely sure you are capable of doing it.'

Fred twisted his fingers. 'Are you sure you can't come with us? I mean - your leg doesn't stop you climbing trees.'

'Insolent child,' said the explorer. He reached into the engine and tightened a bolt. His spanner was carved from bone. 'No. You wouldn't all fit in the back.'

'We could do it in two shifts!'

'There is only enough fuel for one journey. One way. And the plane wouldn't take off with the weight

of five people - I would have to leave one of you here.'

'I could stay here! With you!' he said, wondering as he said it if he meant it.

'You could not, Fred. There are people at home who need you.'

'Adults don't need children.'

'Yes, they do!' He looked suddenly so fierce that Fred took a step backwards.

'You said children are undercooked adults.'

'I know. I'd forgotten things I should have never forgotten. Trust me. Your father needs you more than you know.'

Fred said nothing, just stood staring at the plane, holding himself still.

'Fred, listen to me. Even if I could fly Max myself, it would mean I'd never get back here. They would recognise me, and they would recognise the plane. There would be questions, and interviews, and newspapers.'

'Why? Why would there be interviews? Is it because - is it because your name is Percy Fawcett?'

Or John Franklin? Or Christopher Maclaren? Are you one of them? The lost explorers? You are, aren't you?'

'John Franklin would be more than a hundred and fifty years old if he were alive,' said the explorer mildly.

'That's rather unflattering, Fred.'

'But you've got to be one of them!'

'I told you, I've been alone so long I have no need for names.'

'You're just a coward! You're scared to leave.'

'I do not want to leave, certainly. And that is my choice, Fred.'

Fred made a face.

'I know. But believe me, this is where I am happiest.'

Fred found himself swept with an unexpected wave of fury. He fought back the many unforgiveable things he could have said. 'You don't seem all that happy,' he mumbled.

'Happy is a peculiar word. It's one of the few words that makes me sad. I should have said: this is where I feel most honest.'

'That's insane! Fred felt himself grow hot. Every inch of his skin was raging, including his gums.

'Why are you angry, Fred?'

'I'm not! He glared at him full in the face. 'I'm scared, all right?'

'Of course you are. But you've been scared all along, and you've kept going.'

'But that was different!'

'Why?'

'The others did everything with me. The raft, and the food, and everything.'

'It has to be one of you. Why not you?'

'If I mess this up,' he didn't say, *if we die*, but it was there, unspoken, 'it will be my fault. This is worse.'

'Then you will make the decision to steer towards fear. I think you can. I think you were built to pursue the things you are afraid of. Fear is a panther. Humans are stronger than panthers. You fight it, tooth and claw. But you don't stop when you're tired. You stop when the panther's tired.'

Fred nodded. Then, just to check, he asked, 'Do you mean metaphorically, or —'

'Metaphorically, yes. Although also sometimes — in the case of my leg, for instance — literally.'

There was a cough behind them.

'Can I talk to you about something?' said Con.

The explorer bent over the oil tank. 'Yes, of course,' he said. 'What's on your mind?'

Con glanced at Fred. 'Alone.'

The explorer didn't look round from the engine, but he jerked his head at Fred.

Fred glared at Con, but turned to go. He was halfway across the city square when he heard her speak. She tried to whisper, but her voice was sharp and carried on the night air.

'I'm not leaving.'

Fred turned in astonishment. The explorer was still methodically checking the engine. Fred stepped behind one of the trees that lined the central stone boulevard.

'I'm staying with you,' Con said. 'I've made up my mind. Max needs to get to the hospital, but I don't.'

'I'm afraid you're not,' said the explorer. He adjusted a bolt in the engine.

'I wouldn't be any trouble. I've been saving my food, and I can eat spiders. I've got lots of dried meat, in my pockets.'

'I know, I can smell it. And your face gave you away hours ago. There's a hint, and then there's an alarm going off on the ground floor of the Bank of England. Your face is a siren. I'm sorry, child. But you will be getting on that plane.'

'I can't! I just can't.'

'I know,' said the explorer. His voice was very gentle. 'But you have to.'

'I'm better here. At home, sometimes, I wish people were dead.'

The explorer nodded, silent. He waited.

'You don't understand!' said Con. 'I wish it really hard. Sometimes I'm almost sick I want it so much.'

The explorer nodded again. 'That's something that the human heart does, Con. It bites. Don't let it panic you. It will pass, that specific kind of wishing.'

'How do you know?'

'Between the ages of ten and sixteen I spent much of my time wishing half my class and most of my school masters dead, and all of them remained indubitably, frustratingly alive. Nothing bad happened to any of them. Though one of them, I believe, did move to Belgium. But that was as far as it went.'

'But I need to stay here!' Con's face was pink. 'It all makes more sense here.'

'I understand. Although, of the four of you, I rather thought you were the least keen on this place?'

'You're allowed to change your mind!' She was turning steadily redder: red at the ears, at the neck, and rising to her forehead. 'I love it. I've never loved anything like this! At home it's just - it's all sit still and don't touch. Everything has a cover, so I don't get it dirty. Some of the covers have covers! People want me to be ways I can't be.'

'Yes. I know what that feels like,' said the explorer.

'But if I want to scream here, I can. If I want to eat with my fingers, or climb a tree, nobody stops me. I

can sleep when I want to, and I can *run* if I want to.' She looked particularly defiant at the last words, as if confessing a sin.

He seemed to swallow a smile. 'You don't have to go to the rainforest to do those things. They're more to do with you than with the jungle. Pay attention to the world the same way you did out here. It will change the way you feel. Attention and love are so closely allied as to be almost indistinguishable.'

'Please,' Con whispered.

He sighed. 'You need to go home because I don't want people coming looking for you and finding you here. I cannot have people finding this place.'

He squatted down to look Con in the eye. 'But know this. This is the first, and not the last, of your adventures. It's not going to be easy for you. You will have to be honest: resist the urge to arrange your fears and angers at their most becoming angles. You're not one who was born to ride lightly over the world. Do you know what a lion heart is?'

'I'm not sure,' she said. She was blinking hard.

'People think it means brave – and it does – but it also means a heart with claws. That's you. Con the Lion Heart.'

Fred stepped into their line of vision. He coughed loudly. Con whipped round and glared, a black glare of embarrassment.

'I thought you'd gone,' she said. 'I didn't know you were an eavesdropper.' She began to stalk away.

Fred ran after her. He wasn't sure if what he was about to do was a sensible idea. It might, he thought, get him elbowed in the face.

'Con,' Fred said, 'where do you go during the holidays?'

'I live with my aunt. You *know* that,' she said aggressively. Then, after a long pause, 'Why?'

'Well,' Fred said, 'it's just, we've got a spare room. And my father's always telling me to bring more friends home.'

'Friends?' said Con. A flush began to rise up her neck to her ears and cheeks.

'Obviously,' said Fred. 'Friends.'

