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KATHERINE  
RUNDELL

'A writer with an utterly distinctive  
voice and a wild imagination.'

Philip Pullman

# ROOFTOPPERS



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ROOFTOPPERS

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The Wolf Wilder  
The Explorer  
The Good Thieves

*For younger readers*  
One Christmas Wish

*For adult readers*  
Why You Should Read Children's Books,  
Even Though You Are So Old and Wise



# ROOFTOPPERS

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RUNDELL

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by  
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*To my brother, with love*



## INTRODUCTION

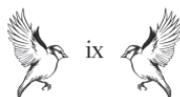
The idea for *Rooftoppers* came, without warning, while I was on a rooftop. When I was twenty-one I became a Fellow of All Souls College in Oxford, which was founded in 1438: a building with tall towers and some very stern-looking gargoyles. I have always loved to climb – trees and rocks and occasionally drainpipes – and when I first arrived there, I found out about a secret trapdoor that could take you, with a jump and a scramble, up on to the roof. I was up there climbing among the gargoyles one night (it had to be dark, as it's technically very illegal) when I found a dusty old beer bottle in the corner by the parapet. It made me wonder: what if somebody had



been living up here, close to the sky, and we didn't know?

That's how it began: with a *what if*. So many stories have a *what if* at their core: What if you had a scar on your forehead and had to save the world from an evil wizard? What if you went through a wardrobe and on the other side there was unfathomable beauty – and snow, and a witch, and a lion? What then? What would happen next? What if there really were people living up on the rooftop of an old college? What if there were people living secret rooftop lives all over the world? *What if?*

I have always loved being up high; I love aeroplanes, and mountains, and flying on the flying trapeze. I've always been shy, and I love the idea of seeing the world when it can't see you. When I was younger, I taught myself to walk on a tightrope – I find the feeling of focus and balance and height it brings a miraculous thing. I practised for many years (breaking only a couple of toes in the process) and can now walk a wire backwards and forwards, and in high-heeled shoes. (This is not, alas, a particularly



useful skill in the real world.) So I knew I wanted *Rooftoppers* to have a tightrope-walking boy in it: somebody who made it look as if gravity didn't apply to him.

Most of all, I wanted *Rooftoppers* to be about recklessly, riotously brave people – because I think, both in real life and fiction, they do us all a service: there is so much optimism and hope in their daring that it spreads out into the world around them. I wanted to write a book about children's brilliance and boldness, about children who charge across the rooftops of Paris, leaping and somersaulting, searching, hunting. I wanted to write an adventure story that would make the children who read it want to go on an adventure: a book that would say we should never ignore a possible.

Katherine Rundell, March 2020





## CHAPTER ONE

**O**n the morning of its first birthday, a baby was found floating in a cello case in the middle of the English Channel.

It was the only living thing for miles. Just the baby, and some dining-room chairs, and the tip of a ship disappearing into the ocean. There had been music in the dining hall, and it was music so loud and so good that nobody had noticed the water flooding in over the carpet. The violins went on sawing for some time after the screaming had begun. Sometimes the shriek of a passenger would duet with a high C.

The baby was found wrapped for warmth in the





musical score of a Beethoven symphony. It had drifted almost a mile from the ship, and was the last to be rescued. The man who lifted it into the rescue boat was a fellow passenger, and a scholar. It is a scholar's job to notice things. He noticed that it was a girl, with hair the colour of lightning, and the smile of a shy person.

Think of night-time with a speaking voice. Or think how moonlight might talk, or think of ink, if ink had vocal cords. Give those things a narrow aristocratic face with hooked eyebrows, and long arms and legs, and that is what the baby saw as she was lifted out of her cello case and up into safety. His name was Charles Maxim, and he determined, as he held her in his large hands – at arm's length, as he would a leaky flowerpot – that he would keep her.



The baby was almost certainly one year old. They knew this because of the red rosette pinned to her front, which read, '1'

'Or rather,' said Charles Maxim, 'the child is either one year old, or she has come first in a competition. I believe babies are rarely keen participants in competitive sport. Shall we therefore assume it is the former?' The girl held on to his earlobe with a grubby finger and thumb. 'Happy birthday, my child,' he said.

Charles did not only give the baby a birthday. He also gave her a name. He chose Sophie, on that first day, on the grounds that nobody could possibly object to it. 'Your day has been dramatic and extraordinary enough, child,' he said. 'It might be best to have the most ordinary name available. You can be Mary, or Betty, or Sophie. Or, at a stretch, Mildred. Your choice.' Sophie had smiled when he said 'Sophie', so Sophie it was. Then he fetched his coat, and folded her up in it, and took her home in a carriage. It rained a little, but it did not worry either of them. Charles did not generally notice the weather, and Sophie had already survived a lot of water that day.



Charles had never really known a child before. He told Sophie as much on the way home: 'I do, I'm afraid, understand books far more readily than I understand people. Books are so easy to get along with.' The carriage ride took four hours; Charles held Sophie on the very edge of his knee, and told her about himself, as though she were an acquaintance at a tea party. He was thirty-six years old, and six foot three. He spoke English to people and French to cats, and Latin to the birds. He had once nearly killed himself trying to read and ride a horse at the same time. 'But I will be more careful,' he said, 'now that there is you, little cello child.' Charles's home was beautiful, but it was not safe; it was all staircases and slippery floorboards and sharp corners. 'I'll buy some smaller chairs,' he said. 'And we'll have thick red carpets! Although – how does one go about acquiring carpets? I don't suppose you know, Sophie?'

Unsurprisingly, Sophie did not answer. She was too young to talk; and she was asleep.

She woke when they drew up in a street smelling of trees and horse dung. Sophie loved the house at first



sight. The bricks were painted the brightest white in London, and shone even in the dark. The basement was used to store the overflow of books and paintings and several brands of spiders; and the roof belonged to the birds. Charles lived in the space in between.

At home, after a hot bath in front of the stove, Sophie looked very white and fragile. Charles had not known that a baby was so terrifyingly tiny a thing. She felt too small in his arms. He was almost relieved when there was a knock at the door; he laid Sophie down carefully on a chair, with a Shakespearean play as a booster seat, and went up the stairs two at a time.

When he returned, he was accompanied by a large grey-haired woman; *Hamlet* was slightly damp, and Sophie was looking embarrassed. Charles scooped her up, and set her down – hesitating first over an umbrella stand in a corner, and then the top of the stove – inside the sink. He smiled, and his eyebrows and eyes smiled too. ‘Please don’t worry,’ he said. ‘We all have accidents, Sophie.’ Then he bowed at the woman. ‘Let me introduce you. Sophie, this is Miss Eliot, from the National



Childcare Agency. Miss Eliot, this is Sophie, from the ocean.'

The woman sighed – an official sort of sigh, it would have sounded, from Sophie's place in the sink – and frowned, and pulled clean clothes from a parcel. 'Give her to me.'

Charles took the clothes from her. 'I took this child from the sea, madam.' Sophie watched, with large eyes. 'She has nobody to keep her safe. Whether I like it or not, she is my responsibility.'

'Not forever.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'The child is your *ward*. She is not your daughter.' This was the sort of woman who spoke in italics. You would be willing to lay bets that her hobby was organising people. 'This is a temporary arrangement.'

'I beg to differ,' said Charles. 'But we can fight about that later. The child is cold.' He handed the vest to Sophie, who sucked on it. He took it back and put it on for her. Then he hefted her in his arms, as though about to guess her weight at a fair, and looked at her



closely. ‘You see? She seems a very intelligent baby.’ Sophie’s fingers, he saw, were long and thin, and clever. ‘And she has hair the colour of lightning. How could you possibly resist her?’

‘I’ll have to come round, to check on her, and I really don’t have the time to spare. *A man can’t do this kind of thing alone.*’

‘Certainly, please do come,’ said Charles – and he added, as if he couldn’t stop himself, ‘if you feel that you absolutely can’t stay away. I will endeavour to be grateful. But this child is my responsibility. Do you understand?’

‘But it’s a *child!* You’re a *man!*’

‘Your powers of observation are formidable,’ said Charles. ‘You are a credit to your optician.’

‘But what are you going to *do* with her?’

Charles looked bewildered. ‘I am going to love her. That should be enough, if the poetry I’ve read is anything to go by.’ Charles handed Sophie a red apple; then took it back, and rubbed it on his sleeve until he could see his face in it. He said, ‘I am sure the secrets



of childcare, dark and mysterious though they no doubt are, are not impenetrable.'

Charles set the baby on his knee, handed her the apple, and began to read out loud to her from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It was not, perhaps, the perfect way to begin a new life, but it showed potential.

