



PAGES & CO





... rushed to have got
... and the ogre
... with your
... the laddie you
... for your break
... careless you
... a live up
... d are it,
... heard
... that is Sara
... and thou
... when he said
... when he had
... her mother had
... Her father
... to be the only
... and been
... she had
... was rich because
... she would be
... She had always
... used to seeing many
... "Misses Sahib," and
... and pets and
... rmed that
... was all she
... d troubled her,
... day. The

... porridge of
... was neither too
... well, that she ate
... word about the litt
... for her.
... Then the little old Wo
... Bear, and that was too
... chair of the Middle Bear
... sate down in the chair of
... neither too hard, nor too
... it, and there she sate till th
... down she came, plump upon
... Woman said a wicked word
... Then the little old Woman wen
... which the three Bears slept. And
... the Great, Huge Bear; but that w
... next she lay down upon the bed
... too high at the foot for her. And th

... and thou
... when he said
... when he had
... her mother had
... Her father
... to be the only
... and been
... she had
... was rich because
... she would be
... She had always
... used to seeing many
... "Misses Sahib," and
... and pets and
... rmed that
... was all she
... d troubled her,
... day. The

... Past Jack's window, so all he
... So Jack climbed and he climbed and
... he reached the sky. And when he got there he found
... going as straight as a dart. So he walked along and
... and on the doorstep there was a great big tall woman.
... quite polite-like. "Could you be so
... he hadn't had anything to eat,
... hungry as a hunter.

... Riding
... in th
... some m
... lf.
... "I am much too ill

... One of the
... was a B
... One was a Middle-sized Bear, and the
... Great, Huge Bear. They had each a pot for the
... porridge, a little pot for the Little, Small, Wee
... Bear; and a middle-sized pot for the Middle Bear,
... and a little chair for
... which the three Be



...a bad word about that too. And then she
...the Little, Wee Bear, and tasted that; and that
...well, that she ate it all up; but the naughty old Woman said a bad
...word about the little porridge-pot, because it did not hold enough
...for her.

Then the little old Woman sate down in the chair of the Great, Huge
Bear, and that was too hard for her. And then she sate down in the
chair of the Middle Bear, and that was too soft for her. And then she
sate down in the chair of the Little, Small, Wee Bear, and that was
neither too hard, nor too soft, but just right. So she seated herself in
there she sate till the bottom of the chair came out, and
she came, plump upon the ground. And the naughty old
Woman said a wicked word about that too.

The little old Woman went upstairs into the bed-chamber in
the three Bears slept. And first she lay down upon the bed of
the Huge Bear; but that was too hard for her. And then she lay
down upon the bed of the Middle Bear; and that was too soft for
her. And then she lay down upon the bed of the Little, Small, Wee
Bear; and that was neither too hard, nor too soft, but just right.

And Little Red Riding Hood
she saw how the sunbeams
the trees, and what bright
path, she thought, "If I
nosegay she will be much pleased
that I can, even then, get there in good time!
into the forest she looked about for flowers. But
had begun she did not know how to leave off

made the porridge
it into their por-
to the wood while
t they might not
ning too soon to eat

So first she
too hot for
tasted the por-
her, and she
the porridge
was neither too
well, that she ate it
word about the little por-
for her.

Then the little old Woman
Bear, and that was too
chair of the Middle Bear
sate down in the cha-
neither too hard, nor
down she sate,
Woman said a wicked
when the little old Woman w-
which the three Be-

we do, ...
hands
her, I'll ge
"But, grandmother, what is that?"
"All the better to eat you with;" and hardly were the words spoke
Wolf made a jump out of bed and swallowed down poor Little R
Hood also.

before, and
ust sell Milky-
shop, or something."
ys Jack; "it's market-day to-
and then we'll see what
ter in his hand
m: "Good morning, Jack
orning to you," said Jack

when he met a funny
"Good morning, Jack
orning to you," said Jack

...heard
...imped
...ot ho
...nd s
...ry
...t wa
...sta
...re. And w
...the onder
...laid a golde
...Jack wa
...he deter

To my grandmother, she answered
"Oh, grandmother, what is that?"
"All the better to eat you with;" and hardly were the words spoke
Wolf made a jump out of bed and swallowed down poor Little R
Hood also.

"Oh, grandmother, what is that?"
"All the better to eat you with;" and hardly were the words spoke
Wolf made a jump out of bed and swallowed down poor Little R
Hood also.

"Oh, grandmother, what is that?"
"All the better to eat you with;" and hardly were the words spoke
Wolf made a jump out of bed and swallowed down poor Little R
Hood also.

"Oh, grandmother, what is that?"
"All the better to eat you with;" and hardly were the words spoke
Wolf made a jump out of bed and swallowed down poor Little R
Hood also.

"Oh, grandmother, what is that?"
"All the better to eat you with;" and hardly were the words spoke
Wolf made a jump out of bed and swallowed down poor Little R
Hood also.



PAGES & CO

TILLY AND THE LOST FAIRY TALES



ANNA JAMES

Illustrated by Paola Escobar



HarperCollins *Children's Books*

First published in Great Britain by HarperCollins *Children's Books* in 2019
HarperCollins *Children's Books* is a division of HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd,
HarperCollins Publishers, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

The HarperCollins website address is
www.harpercollins.co.uk

1

Text copyright © Anna James 2019
Illustrations copyright © Paola Escobar 2019
Cover design copyright © HarperCollins *Publishers* Ltd 2019
All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-0-00-822991-7

Anna James and Paola Escobar assert the moral right to be identified as the
author and illustrator of the work respectively.

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

Typeset in Aldus 12/19 pt
Printed and bound in England by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

Conditions of Sale

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade
or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the
publisher's prior consent in any form, binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition
being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.



MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC™ C007454

This book is produced from independently certified FSC™ paper
to ensure responsible forest management.

For more information visit: www.harpercollins.co.uk/green

*For my mum and dad, who have always let me find
my own path.*



A LITTLE MAGIC

Five people proved to be far too many to fit inside a wardrobe.

‘Remind me again why we had to bookwander from in here?’ Tilly asked, face squished uncomfortably close to her grandad’s shoulder.

‘As I rather think you know,’ he replied, ‘we don’t *technically* have to bookwander from inside a wardrobe – but it adds effect, don’t you think?’ But he sounded decidedly less sure than when he’d first suggested the idea half an hour ago.

‘I mean, if the effect you’re going for is a much closer relationship with each other and our personal hygiene choices, then, yes, it does add effect,’ Oskar said, voice muffled by Grandma’s scarf, which was

simultaneously tickling his nose and getting fluff in his mouth every time he spoke.

‘I bet the Pevensies didn’t have to deal with this,’ Tilly said.

‘Yes, but they were emptying straight out the other side of their wardrobe,’ Grandma said. ‘Which does rather give them an advantage.’

‘Yes, yes, okay,’ Grandad admitted. ‘It has become abundantly clear that my attempts at a little poetry and whimsy weren’t entirely thought through.’ He shuffled his way back towards the door and shoved it open. Tilly, her best friend Oskar, her two grandparents and her mother all fell gasping into the cinnamon-scented air of the bookshop.

‘I mean, it isn’t even a wardrobe,’ Oskar complained. ‘It’s a stock cupboard.’

‘Honestly,’ Grandad huffed. ‘I was just trying to add a sense of adventure. Mirror the journey into Narnia, have some fun. Goodness knows we could all do with a generous dollop of fun at the moment. A little magic.’



‘It’s already literally magic,’ Tilly pointed out.

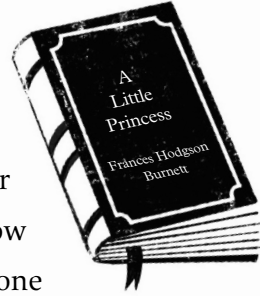
‘I’m wasted on this family, I truly am,’ Grandad said. ‘Shall we try again from out here? We’ve still got an hour or so before we need to go to the Underlibrary for the Inking Ceremony.’

‘Actually, Dad, I think I might pass on this one,’ Tilly’s mum, Bea, said quietly, smoothing down her crumpled clothes. ‘The shop is so busy before Christmas, and I’m sure an extra pair of hands wouldn’t go amiss. You know how it is . . .’ She tailed off, smiled wanly, and headed out to Pages & Co., the bookshop the Pages family lived in and owned. Tilly sagged a little.

‘She hasn’t bookwandered once since we got back from *A Little Princess*,’ Tilly said, trying not to sound petulant.

‘I know, sweetheart, but try not to worry,’ Grandad said. ‘I’m sure she’ll get back into it soon enough. It’s no surprise after being trapped inside one story for nearly twelve years. Imagine how frightening that must have been for her.’ As always, when he thought about his daughter being imprisoned inside

a tampered-with copy of *A Little Princess*, a look of distress swept across his face. 'But we've got her back for good,' he went on. 'And now that we know Enoch Chalk was the one who trapped her, he won't be able to get away with anything like that ever again.'



'If he's ever found,' Tilly pointed out.

'Did Amelia manage to find out anything about the book he escaped from before she was fired?' Oskar asked.

'Amelia wasn't fired,' Grandad said. 'She was asked to step back from her position as Head Librarian at the Underlibrary, while the situation is investigated properly.'

'I mean, that sounds a lot like getting fired to me,' Oskar said under his breath.

'And, in answer to your question: no, frustratingly not,' Grandma said. 'She barely had any time before the Bookbinders started poisoning the other librarians' views about her capabilities. They'd been looking

for a reason to get rid of her as soon as she was first given the job, and her handling of Chalk was merely an excuse. Those hardliners, with their silly self-important – not to mention self-appointed – name, blustering around pretending they were focused on anything other than their own power and influence.’ Grandad laid a hand on Grandma’s arm and she took a deep breath. ‘Sorry,’ she said. ‘Now is not the time, and here is not the place.’

‘Should I know who the Bookbinders are?’ Oskar said, and Tilly was glad, not for the first time, that he didn’t mind asking about what he didn’t know.

‘They are a nonsense!’ Grandad said. ‘A group of librarians who push for stricter rules and for more control for the Underlibrary over the lives of bookwanderers. They rallied around Chalk – although they must be red-faced now everyone knows he was a renegade Source character. But embarrassment often pushes people several more steps down the path towards hatred, and I worry that their championing

of a colleague who proved to be fictional is fuel for their witch hunt for Amelia.'

'A nonsense they may be,' Grandma said. 'But they're bringing an alarming number of librarians over to their ways of thinking. People are worried about how the role of the Underlibrary is evolving, and fear is another thing that pulls people towards hatred.'

'Aren't the librarians worried about where Chalk is?' Oskar said. 'Isn't it dangerous for him to be out there somewhere?'

'I think they're torn between concern about what he is up to, and wanting to sweep it under the carpet so the other Underlibraries don't find out.'

'The other Underlibraries?' Oskar asked. 'In other countries, you mean?'

'Yes,' Grandad said. 'There are Underlibraries in most countries, although not all of them have Source Libraries. But I think that's enough politics for now; we have a long afternoon ahead of us, which will likely be even more draining than an eternal winter ruled over by an evil queen. Let's have something to eat.'



A lunch of scrambled eggs and sliced avocado on hot buttered bagels passed in tentative silence. Although they initially tried to maintain conversation, Grandma and Grandad were firmly inside their own heads, and a vague sense of impending doom hung over the table. The squeak of knives on plates and the sound of the dishwasher whirring in the background was all that could be heard for some time.

‘Is it really that bad?’ Oskar asked nervously, trying to break the silence. ‘I feel like we’re about to go to a funeral.’

‘Well, it’s certainly a funeral for our dear Amelia’s career,’ Grandad grumped. ‘Not to mention potentially the death of the future of British bookwandering as we know it.’

‘That does sound *quite* bad, then,’ Oskar said.

‘Come now, Archie,’ Grandma said. ‘Leaving aside our personal sadness for Amelia, this is not quite so dramatic as all of that. Bookwandering will continue,

the British Underlibrary will continue. These things come in waves. You know that there was always going to be pushback against Amelia's approach – those old-fashioned cronies were always angry that someone with more forward-facing ideas got the Librarian job when several of them had been hankering after it. Life will go on as usual, it always does.'

'Until, of course, it doesn't,' Grandad said ominously. Grandma gave him a stern 'not in front of the children' look and he harrumphed, pushing his chair back with a squeal. He sullenly dumped his dirty plate by the sink, and turned to leave – before heading back sheepishly and washing it up carefully without making eye contact with anyone.

Once the rest of the lunch things had been cleared away, and everyone had checked for crumbs on their smart clothes, they traipsed out of Pages & Co., leaving Bea in charge for the afternoon.

'Are you sure you two want to come?' Grandad checked.

'Yes,' Oskar and Tilly chorused, not sure there'd

ever be a bookwandering scenario that they would choose to miss out on.

‘I haven’t explicitly checked with the Underlibrary that you’re allowed,’ he said, as if that thought had just occurred to him. ‘But they’re hardly going to turn you away if you’re already there, are they?’ he concluded, more to himself than anyone else.

‘I know it’s sad for Amelia,’ Tilly said. ‘But I do want to see what happens when a new Librarian is chosen.’

‘You said there was a vote?’ Oskar asked.

‘Yes,’ Grandma said. ‘Anyone who wants to put themselves forward for the position can make their case, and then it’s up to the other librarians to choose who they think is most suited for the role.’

‘So you were voted for?’ Tilly asked her grandad.

‘He won over thirteen other candidates!’ Grandma said proudly.

‘How many are there this time?’ Oskar asked.

‘Only three, I believe,’ Grandma said. ‘It would seem the situation with Chalk has rather cooled some people’s ambitions. Who would want to be in charge

A Little Magic

of that mess? So I believe there's Ebenezer Okparanta – who's worked at the Underlibrary since time began as far as I know, and a woman, Catherine Caraway, who's a bit of a wild card . . .'

'And then there's Melville Underwood,' Grandad said. 'He's an interesting character. Disappeared for decades with his sister, Decima, not long after I started working at the Underlibrary, and no one thought we'd ever see them again. They used to run fairytale tours for bookwanderers, and all sorts can go on in those stories. But he emerged again a couple of weeks ago, completely out of the blue, and without his sister. I'm sure he'll talk about his triumphant return in his speech, but he's a bit untested for the job. I'd put money on them electing Ebenezer. He's the safe bet, and I'm not sure this is the time for surprises.'



FAIRY TALES ARE FUNNY THINGS

Grandad had booked a taxi to King's Cross, and the sleek black car waiting on the street outside the bookshop did not help with the funereal atmosphere.

'You said one of the candidates used to run fairytale tours?' Tilly asked, wondering about the unusual phrase her grandma had used. 'What does that even mean?'

'Well, fairy tales are funny things,' Grandad said. 'Do you know where they come from? Who wrote them?'

'The Brothers . . . something?' Oskar tried.

'The Brothers Grimm,' Tilly said authoritatively. 'And Hans Christian Andersen. Lots of people.'

'You're right – but that's not the whole story,'

Grandad said. 'Those people did indeed write many fairy tales down, and put their own spin on them for sure, but they didn't make up most of the stories themselves – they collected them. Fairy tales and folk tales are born around campfires and kitchen hearths, they're whispered under blankets and stars. Where they really come from, who had the idea first, which version is the original, it's almost impossible to trace as we only have what was written down, which is rarely where they started.'

'And can you think about why that might make them more dangerous?' Grandma asked.

'Because . . .' Tilly started confidently, but to her frustration couldn't think of anything. Oskar sat deep in thought.

'Is it something to do with Source Editions?' he said. 'Usually when something is dangerous in bookwandering, it's to do with that.'

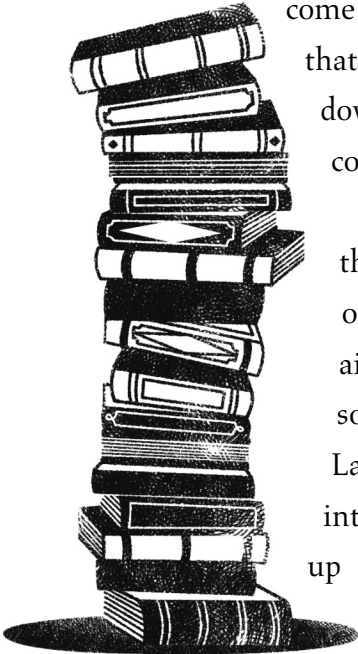
'Yes, you're getting warmer,' Grandma said. 'Keep going.'

'If there's lots of different versions . . .' Tilly said.

‘... And we don’t know where they came from ...’
Oskar continued.

‘... Then are there even Source Editions at all?’
Tilly finished.

‘Precisely,’ Grandad said. ‘We have Source Editions of many of the different versions of course, that act loosely like Sources, but these stories aren’t rooted in written-down storytelling. They come from oral storytelling, stories that are told out loud and passed down generations and around communities.’



‘And roots are what make things stable,’ Grandma went on. ‘Fairy tales are rooted in air and fire, not paper and ink, so the usual rules don’t apply. Layers of stories bleed or crash into each other and you can end up wandering into an entirely different version of the story’

with little way of getting out. It's incredibly dangerous to try and wander from inside one story to another; it's like trying to find a route on a map but you don't know where you're starting from. Not to mention, fables fade in and out of existence; we tell new versions and we lose old ones. So they're seen as a bit of a risk for bookwandering. Sometimes the Underlibrary would organise group visits led by someone who was a bit more comfortable there, and understood the risks and what to do to stay safe – or try to stay safe.'

'Have you been inside any fairy tales? Can you take us?' Tilly asked. Her grandparents exchanged a look and she couldn't help but wish they weren't quite so good at communicating without speaking. She wondered if she would ever be a team like that with someone and experimented by glaring at Oskar meaningfully.

'Are . . . are you okay?' he asked nervously. 'You look like you need to sneeze.'

'Never mind,' she said, blushing and turning back to Grandma and Grandad. 'You didn't answer my question.'

Tilly and the Lost Fairy Tales

‘Actually, your grandma is one of the few bookwanderers who does bookwander in fairy tales officially and safely,’ Grandad said, looking at her proudly.

‘How come?’ Oskar said.

‘Well, as you both know, I used to work in the Map Room at the Underlibrary,’ Grandma said. ‘And as well as looking after the plans of real-life bookshops and libraries, it was also part of my job to know as much as I could about the layout of stories themselves. I did a bit of fairytale exploring back in the day, but that project was abandoned after . . . Well, after a difference of opinion, let’s say.’

Tilly thought about her grandma, who always took everything in her stride, and was intrigued. ‘There’s got to be more to that story?’ she pushed.

‘But it will have to be told another time,’ Grandad said. ‘We’re here.’



SLIGHTLY ON THE OUTSIDE

To Tilly's eyes, the steady stream of people in matching navy-blue cardigans weren't doing a very good job of being inconspicuous inside the British Library. But despite the co-ordinated clothing and loud whispering, they didn't seem to be attracting much attention from the regular library users.

'They'll assume it's a tour group,' Grandad said as they walked through the 'Staff Only' door that led inside the King's Library, a glass-wrapped tower of books in the middle of the main hall. 'People are good at not noticing things that don't affect them. How do you think we've hidden a magical library here for decades?'



There was a queue to access the seemingly out-of-order lift that carried bookwanderers down from the main library and into the British Underlibrary. Tilly had expected the mood to be sombre, as it had been at Pages & Co., but there was a disconcerting buzz in the air, and lots of excited faces in the crowd.

‘Aren’t we supposed to be sad?’ Oskar whispered to Tilly.

‘We are,’ Tilly said, ‘because Amelia is our friend, but I guess lots of people are cross with her for keeping what she knew about Chalk a secret.’

‘We are . . . on the right side, yes?’ Oskar said.

‘Side of what?’ Tilly asked.

‘Whatever this is,’ Oskar said. ‘Because it is clearly something.’ And although Tilly was loath to admit it to herself, she had to accept that Oskar was right. A now-familiar panic rose in Tilly’s chest. The feeling of belonging and acceptance she’d experienced when she first found out she was a bookwanderer had been ripped

away when she discovered that she was half-fictional. She was of their world and yet removed from it, and sometimes felt like one of those children she'd read about in novels, who were forced to live inside a plastic bubble because they were sick and couldn't risk contamination – as though she had to keep parts of herself hidden and protected. And now there were all these complicated Underlibrary politics she couldn't quite grasp, and there was a tiny voice in the back of her head asking whether everything would be easier if she'd never found out she was a bookwanderer at all. Who wanted to be special anyway? All it seemed to mean was secrets, suspicious looks, and a feeling of always being slightly on the outside.

Despite this, and the strange atmosphere crackling in the Underlibrary, Tilly couldn't help but feel a sudden rush of wonder at the sight of the beautiful main hall that stretched high above her head, with its turquoise ceiling and sweeping wooden arches. A librarian rushed over to them and shook Grandad's hand vigorously.

‘Seb!’ Oskar said happily, recognising the librarian who had helped them learn how to bookwander a few months ago.

‘How are you all? Mr Pages, sir, Ms Pages, lovely to see you,’ Seb said. ‘Tilly, Oskar.’ He was speaking incredibly quickly, unable to stop himself being polite, despite clearly having something very important to say. ‘If you wouldn’t mind following me, Amelia’s waiting for you.’ He shepherded the four of them off into an anteroom, keeping an eye on who was watching them go. The room he took them to was lined with bookshelves and warmed by a large fire, and pacing in front of it was Amelia Whisper, the former Head Librarian, her long black hair pinned up into a formal hairstyle that robbed her of some of her usual warmth. Her skin, usually a glowing brown, looked paler and duller than normal. She nodded her head to them as they came in.

‘Thank you for coming,’ she said.

‘Of course, Amelia,’ Grandma said, rushing across the room and trying to wrap her in a hug, which

Amelia stopped with a firm hand.

‘Don’t be too kind to me,’ Amelia said. ‘You’ll make me cry, which is not very on brand for me at all. And I need to talk to you about something much more important than me and my feelings. Seb and I are worried about what’s going on here.’

‘Well, we all are,’ Grandad said. ‘Honestly, insisting you stand down, listening to these cliques and their hare-brained ideas.’

‘No, I mean something more than that,’ Amelia said. ‘Yes, I’m heartbroken that the Underlibrary is choosing to replace me, but, well, they’re within their rights to do so.’

‘Just,’ Grandad muttered.

‘But the issue is who they’re replacing me with. Or trying to.’

‘What do you mean?’ Grandma asked.

‘I don’t trust Melville Underwood at all, and I think there’s more to his story than he’s letting on.’

‘Ah, but they won’t go for him, surely,’ Grandad said. ‘He’s just got back from goodness knows where.’

No one knows anything about him. It'll be old Ebenezer.'

'I'm not so sure,' Amelia said. 'You haven't been here over the last week; Melville may have just got back but he's been darting around the Library whispering in people's ears and I'm worried about what he's saying, and what people are open to believing. I don't think it's a coincidence that the Bookbinders have stopped grumbling from the sidelines and started to get more organised.'

'If I could be permitted to chip in,' Seb said. 'I am a little concerned about where he has been all this time, as you say, Mr Pages – but others don't share our reticence. The Bookbinders, as they insist on calling themselves now, are lapping up Melville's tale because they are happy to gloss over all sorts of irregularities if it means having one of their own in charge. Ideologically, I mean. Better the devil you sort-of-know, and all that. But while he claims that he and his sister were attacked while leading a bookwandering group through a collection of fairy

tales, there are no records of this attack happening. If a group of bookwanderers were attacked or lost there should be some note or diary or even personal memory, somewhere in our records. He says he can't be sure what happened to the rest of the group, or his sister, and no one seems to be pushing him on it. Something smells fishy to me.'

'But there's no proof?' Grandad said slowly.

'Well, no,' Seb said. 'The lack of evidence or proof is just the issue. There's no way to corroborate his story. We're a group of librarians and archivists and storytellers; why aren't we more concerned that there's no record . . .?'

'I do worry that unfounded claims such as these will merely make us look like sore losers, especially today,' Grandad said slowly. 'Is there wisdom in waiting and watching for a while, do you think? I must admit, I never warmed to Melville when I crossed paths with him back when we were both young men here.'

'That's the other thing,' Amelia said. 'He's still a young man.'

‘Well, that’s nothing of note in itself,’ Grandma said. ‘Ageing works erratically in books as it is, and if he was in fairy tales then even more so.’

‘Yes, but he doesn’t seem to have aged a day,’ Amelia said. ‘He still looks to be in his late twenties.’

‘My dear Amelia, it’s easy to find evidence of what we already believe . . .’

Amelia brushed Grandad’s reassuring hand off her arm.

‘Don’t you dare patronise me, Archie,’ she said. ‘I am not some conspiracy theorist, I know the Underlibrary of today better than you do. I understand that we are dealing with little more than smoke and whispers and instincts here.’

‘You know what they say about no smoke without fire,’ Seb said sagely.

Amelia ignored him. ‘There is something else happening here,’ she said firmly, ‘and you would be wise to take my warning seriously.’

Grandad nodded, chastened. ‘You’re right,’ he said. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to . . . I just, well, Elsie and I

Slightly on the Outside

both care for you greatly as our friend and colleague and I don't want to see you get hurt more than necessary.'

'The hurt is already inflicted,' Amelia said, steely-eyed. 'And I can endure it. But I want it to be worth something, and it is time for some answers. Do you know, in recent weeks I have found myself wondering if I was ever really quite cut out for being in charge? Do you think I'd make a good rebel? I'm interested to see if I've got it in me.' There was a definite twinkle in her eye. 'Now, if only I can convince Seb to start disobeying some rules . . .'

'One step at a time,' Seb said, breaking out in a light sweat at the mere thought.

A LESS-THAN-IDEAL SITUATION

Seb led them back to the main hall. A table and a microphone had been set up on a sturdy platform at one end of the hall, and rows of chairs faced it. On top of the table was an enormous book bound in ruby-red leather beside an old-fashioned ink pot complete with a feathered quill. Librarians had nearly filled up the rows, but Seb ushered Grandad, Grandma, Tilly and Oskar to reserved seats near the front. As they sat down, Tilly couldn't help but notice the way everyone turned to look at them, undisguised suspicion on many faces. Was it her or her grandparents who were attracting such distrust? Or all of them?

'Considering our part in the whole Enoch Chalk

debacle, I'm surprised we're up here at the front,' Grandad whispered.

'All the better to keep an eye on us, I'm sure,' Grandma said.

'You know how it is,' Seb said. 'Tradition always wins out, and tradition states that any living former Librarians are guests of honour at Inking Ceremonies. And I imagine that if you don't bring Chalk up, no one else will. People are happy to let Amelia take the fall for this; it's easier to blame one person than to think about what's really happening.'

Tilly was distracted from people's suspicious glares when she noticed a young man emerge and stand just behind the platform, eyes closed, talking to himself under his breath. He had neat, white-blond hair and was wearing a navy-blue suit, with a librarian cardigan underneath the jacket. He looked very focused and Tilly could only assume it was Melville Underwood, the man that Amelia and Seb were so wary of. Behind him, talking to each other amiably, were a very old man with a silvery beard that curled its way down to

his shins, and a middle-aged woman in a wheelchair wearing all black. As Tilly watched, a librarian came up behind Melville, and startled him out of his meditations with a tap to the shoulder. She spoke quietly to him, gesturing at the microphone, and Tilly saw a flash of irritation cross his face, quickly replaced by a polished warm smile. She nudged Grandad.

‘That’s him, isn’t it?’ she asked.

Grandad looked up and nodded. ‘And the man with the beard is Ebenezer, and the woman is Catherine,’ he said, as the three candidates and Amelia came and sat facing the audience. Amelia kept her head held high, her brow furrowed.

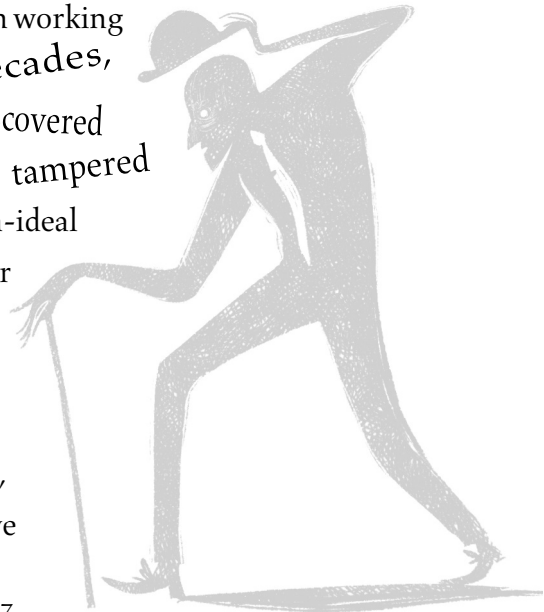
The crowd hushed as one, as if responding to an invisible signal, and only the occasional creak of a wooden chair echoed through the hall. A man who looked like he worked in a bank rather than a magical library climbed the steps on to the platform and tapped the microphone hesitantly, causing a shriek of feedback to bounce around the room. The audience grimaced, and the man blushed.

A Less-Than-Ideal Situation

‘That’s Cassius McCray,’ Grandad whispered to Tilly and Oskar. ‘Chief Secretary of the Underlibrary.’

Cassius didn’t apologise, just glared at the microphone as though it was personally trying to undermine him. He cleared his throat.

‘Right,’ he started. ‘Well, we are gathered here today for the Inking Ceremony. This is a slightly unusual situation due to the, uh, circumstances. As you all know, our former colleague Enoch Chalk was revealed to be a, well, a fictional character from a Source Edition. He had been working here undetected for **decades**, trapping anyone who **discovered** him in books that he had **tampered** with. It was a . . . a less-than-ideal situation. Ms Whisper, our former Head Librarian, had her suspicions about his true nature and decided not to share them with us, her colleagues. We believe



that decision makes her, well, unsuitable for that esteemed role, and she has been relieved of her duties. We thank Ms Whisper for her service to the British Underlibrary, and we have offered her another, more suitable, position here should she wish to remain and make amends by helping us discover the whereabouts of Mr Chalk. That investigation is ongoing, and we are confident it will be resolved satisfactorily. We will, of course, keep you updated. As is our duty.'

Throughout this, Amelia kept her chin in the air with no trace of penitence on her face. Tilly felt as though she wanted to applaud her, or run up and hug her, or do anything at all to show her she was on Amelia's side. And there it was again in her head: the idea of sides, and of having to be on one.

'Well,' Cassius continued. 'This of course means we must elect a new Librarian, and we have had three, uh, yes, three, candidates put themselves forward, and despite their, shall we say, current status, it is in our statutes that anyone who is eligible may speak to us. So, we will hear from all three and there will be the

opportunity to put questions to them and then, as is tradition, we will have a private ballot to determine Ms Whisper's successor. So, uh, shall we start with our dear friend Ebenezer Okparanta . . .?' A librarian behind him coughed and Cassius corrected himself. 'I mean, our colleague Ebenezer Okparanta.'

The old man with the long silvery beard took to the stage, a warm smile on his face.

'My friends,' he began. 'For we are all dear friends here. I stand before you an old man, but one who wishes to unite us all under the principles we hold so dear. We are in a time of confusion and tumult, but it needn't continue. We care for a magical and important thing here, and we are being distracted from our purpose by in-fighting and egos. We must continue our work to prevent the closure of bookshops and libraries while also working to protect ourselves and our community – two goals which can be achieved in harmony. I believe, at this juncture, my long past here at the Underlibrary and proven dedication to our goals make me the steady hand we need to steer

us through this time. I have worked with you all for many years, and I hope that my experience speaks for itself. Thank you, friends.'

'Any questions?' Cassius said, and hands sprang up.

'Ebenezer, what are you going to do about Enoch Chalk?' a voice said.

'I shall, of course, be working with Amelia to find out where he has gone, and—'

'But,' interrupted the voice, 'I think, or rather I *know*, there are others here who believe that librarians should be tested to ensure we are all who we say we are.'

'Why, no,' Ebenezer said, sounding surprised. 'I haven't heard that. What do we have without trust in each other?'

'Look where that's got us,' another voice said in a stage whisper, and Ebenezer started to look slightly flummoxed.

'Enoch needs to be dealt with, of course, my friends, but there are bigger things at play,' he said. 'The waning of book magic as bookshops and libraries close, the erratic readings we're getting from fairy tales.'

‘Let’s hear from Melville Underwood!’ a woman cried. ‘He’s been inside the fairy tales after all!’

‘Now, now,’ Cassius said. ‘It’s Catherine’s turn next. Let’s just leave it there with Ebenezer.’

Ebenezer walked off stage a little wobbily, clearly taken aback by the mood in the room, and was replaced by the woman wheeling herself up the ramp on to the stage.

‘That’s Catherine Caraway,’ Grandma whispered.

‘Fellow bookwanderers,’ Catherine said, sounding confident and warm. ‘For too long we have neglected our primary reason for existence and have been mired in bureaucracy. I want to lead an Underlibrary that is focused on bookwandering. What we need to do is contact the Archivists.’ Tilly could hear tutting spread through the room, and even a few derisive laughs. ‘We have abandoned them for too long,’ Catherine went on, her voice building in volume. ‘Why are we so surprised they have forsaken us? Let us give our problems to them to resolve, and get back to our true purpose.’

Tilly glanced at her grandparents and saw that they both looked deeply uncomfortable, as though

Catherine had suggested enlisting the Easter Bunny to help.

‘Who would you choose?’ Tilly whispered to Grandma.

‘Leaving aside the obvious fact that Amelia is considerably more suitable than any of them,’ she said quietly, ‘Ebenezer’s heart is in the right place, I am sure, but I worry he doesn’t have the strength to cope with rebel voices here. And goodness knows what Catherine is talking about. She’s showing her naivety . . .’

‘But couldn’t the Archivists help?’ Tilly said. ‘I thought they were, like, the most important bookwanderers?’

‘Trusting in the Archivists is like relying on a unicorn to come and grant you wishes to solve your problems,’ Grandma replied.

‘Maybe Melville will be better?’ Tilly whispered, stealing another glance at the man who was watching Catherine field increasingly angry questions with a look of sincere polite interest on his face.

‘We shall see,’ Grandma said, and then they were shushed by someone sitting behind them.

Catherine wheeled her chair down from the stage and Cassius took the microphone again, looking very unsettled. Amelia tried – and failed – to keep a slightly smug expression off her face.

‘Right, well,’ Cassius spluttered. ‘Let’s just remember we’re all colleagues, shall we? So, where were we . . . Yes, well, finally, we have our rather last-minute candidate. A long-lost wanderer has unexpectedly returned to us and has put himself forward, which he is absolutely permitted to do. Some of you who have been here a while will remember our colleagues Melville and Decima Underwood, who were bookwanderers in the field, putting their own lives on the line to explore the limits of our stories in fairy tales. When they vanished without a trace we believed they had made, well, the ultimate sacrifice for their work in some of our most dangerous stories. But . . . a miracle has occurred, and we are encouraged by the return of Mr Melville Underwood.’

Cassius climbed down from the platform, and Melville Underwood took to the stage. The silence in the room was absolute and Tilly found herself leaning forward, eager to hear what he would say.

‘My friends,’ Melville started. His voice sounded as though it had been dipped in honey. ‘I am so grateful to have found my way back to you. I have endured years balancing on the brink of survival in the fairytale worlds, alone in my grief for my poor sister, Decima. The thought of coming home, to my British Underlibrary family, has sustained me. Although I have come close to the most dangerous elements of bookwandering, my experiences have not diminished my love for it. Indeed, they have, if anything, deepened my respect and awe for the bookwandering magic we are so fortunate to use. But that magic is by no means guaranteed, and I have witnessed first hand, and learned from my esteemed friends here, that there are signs that this precious magic is becoming unpredictable. At this time, we need to band together and protect bookwandering while we still can.’ He

looked around the room, assessing how his words were going down, his eyes lingering just a second too long as he noticed Grandma and Grandad.

‘British bookwandering has long been at the heart of the whole global community, and we must keep it this way,’ he continued. ‘Now that the fairytale lands are increasingly unstable, I fear whatever is causing that will spread to our other stories. We must be vigilant! I, as we all should be, am grateful to Amelia for her work leading our community for the last decade, but the time has come for a different approach. We simply cannot allow incidents like the Enoch Chalk disaster to happen. It has threatened the very principles by which we live. I would ask us to unite! Unite in the face of instability and threats to the power and sanctity of our stories – and the British Underlibrary itself. I agree with both of my esteemed colleagues; Ebenezer is right that we must come together, and Catherine raises important points about our core purpose. I am grounded in both these principles, but I hope that my time in the fairytale lands – on the front line of our

storytelling – has given me the clarity and purpose needed at this moment in our history. We have such wisdom and experience among our fellow British Underlibrarians. As well as Ebenezer and Catherine, I understand that while I have been away, some of our colleagues have been diligent in their research into the best ways to preserve and protect bookwandering under the ancestral name of the Bookbinders. If I were so fortunate as to be elected, I would be honoured to work alongside them, and you all, to unite us on the most effective and efficient ways of ensuring characters – and bookwanderers – are less likely to go astray!’ He smiled to the crowd, like they were all in on the same joke. ‘Now, I’ll be happy to answer any questions you may have,’ he finished. ‘And I appreciate you will have many.’ A round of polite, appreciative applause rippled across the hall, and Tilly saw a flicker of anxiety run across Amelia’s face.

‘Thank you, friends,’ Melville said graciously.

Grandad raised his hand.

‘Tell me, Melville. Why are you the right person

A Less-Than-Ideal Situation

to lead now?' he said. 'When you have not been with us for so many years? Could you not stay, and learn, and observe, and look to take the helm in the future?' Grandad's voice was ice-cold, despite the politeness of his words.

'Well, Archibald,' Melville said, smiling at Grandad, 'I believe that I can offer much to the Underlibrary, as I have just set out. But there is one other thing, something that I had not planned to mention, as it should not have any bearing on the election here today. But as you have forced my hand, Archibald, and in answer to your excellent question, let me share something with you now. I come to you not just armed with information about how we can save our beloved fairy tales, but also with incontrovertible evidence as to

the whereabouts

of

Enoch

Chalk.'

