



## The Dark Wild (The Last Wild)

By Piers Torday

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## **The Dark Wild (The Last Wild) By Piers Torday Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #398194 in Books
- Published on: 2016-01-05
- Released on: 2016-01-05
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 7.81" h x .81" w x 5.06" l, .25 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 368 pages

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## Editorial Review

Review

### Praise for *The Last Wild* series by Piers Torday

"A hugely inventive adventure."

—Eoin Colfer, *New York Times* bestselling author of the *Artemis Fowl* series

"A whimsical yet thoughtful tale that brings to mind the smarts and silliness of Roald Dahl and Norton Juster." —*The New York Post*

\* "Alternately somber, thrilling, and silly, filled with eccentric human and animal characters with distinctive voices."—*Publishers Weekly*, starred review

"Should have broad appeal. Recommend this book to readers who like the *Books of Ember* series by Jeanne DuPrau."—*VOYA*

"An enchanted adventure with a message of empowerment and hope that ought to sweep readers along."—*Booklist*

"A winning combination of science fiction and animal adventure: noble animals fighting for just causes—reminiscent of Brian Jacques's "Redwall" series."--*School Library Journal*

"When ninety-nine pigeons smash through the windows of Kester's prison and carry him North to the last of the animals.... it's a moment as thrilling as when James flies off in the Giant Peach. Highly recommended" —*The Times* (UK)

"Combines a great fondness for animals with an appreciation of the freakish.... The reserved narrative tone and tender yet peculiar view of animals give this piece its own offbeat flavor."—*Kirkus Reviews*

"Splendid stuff." —Eva Ibbotson

### About the Author

**Piers Torday** was born in Northumberland, which is possibly the one part of England where more animals live than people. After working as a producer and writer in theatre, live comedy and TV, he now lives in London – where there are more animals that you might think. *The Last Wild* is followed by the sequel (and concluding volume) *The Dark Wild*. You can find out more about Piers and follow his blog at [www.pierstorday.co.uk](http://www.pierstorday.co.uk).

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### FIRST, A HELICOPTER

In the shadow of our apple tree, looking out across a river at a city full of glass and whispers, I take my dad's hand and watch our enemy fly toward us.

The black dot of an enemy, which is getting closer all the time, leaving Premium far behind as it slices over the water, the blades whirring *whup-whup* in the air above. The sun is setting beyond the dark towers, and the sky has gone the colour tangerines used to be, the last rays of orange light bouncing off the flying dot.

The dot that is now no longer a dot, but a large flying metal machine.

A helicopter. A purple helicopter with a large “F” painted on the side. And that’s all you need to know for now.

(Although I should tell you where we are as well.)

The apple tree we stand under is in Dad’s garden, behind our house in the Culdee Sack. No one’s been out here for six years, and everything is overgrown and tangled. Dad grips my hand tight, which is his way of telling me not to worry. Like that’s an easy thing to do when there’s nowhere to run.

On my other side is a girl holding a large toad in her arms. The girl from the deserted house in the north, who cured me when I was ill, who saved my life once already. She turns her tousled head up at the sky, twigs trapped in her hair, shivering in her T-shirt.

Polly. My best-ever friend.

And standing behind us, my other friends, the ones I can talk to. The great stag, his ears trembling. A wolf-cub, his side still all bandaged up, and a harvest mouse on his back doing her special Dance of the Flying Metal Machine. (It involves a *lot* of spinning.)

Last but never least, on my scarf, the General of all the cockroaches, his massive orange shell shining like it has just been polished, his antennae flicking like crazy.

All around us, in the dusk, are nearly a hundred other animals of all kinds. An otter, polecats, pine martens, rabbits, and a very jumpy red squirrel. Birds in the trees, bees on the bushes, and—under our feet in the grass—too many bugs and insects to count.

“Hide them,” says Dad, not taking his gaze off the helicopter.

I look at him for a moment, not understanding.

He turns to me and Polly, eyes blazing. “If you want your animals to stay alive, hide them now. Go!”

And we do, me yelling orders to my wild as they dive under bushes, disappear behind trees, some even burrowing into the soil of the flower beds, Polly grabbing armfuls of fallen branches to cover them. Even the brave General leaps off my scarf and into my shirt pocket, folding his antennae away out of sight.

None of the animals says anything. They’re too used to running, too used to making themselves invisible, and all we can hear is *WHUP-WHUP*—

Now there’s no time to even think anymore, we just have to hope they can’t be seen in the dusk, camouflaged behind overgrown plants and creepers. The last to find a hiding place is the red squirrel, running round and round in a panic, until at the final moment he shoots under a withered rose bush.

Then twigs and leaves are swept up into the air, swirling around us, clouds of grit choking my throat and making it hard to breathe.

Cold spotlights beam down, blinding us. The rush of air forces us back. It flattens a circle in the grass, and Dad is ducking, pulling Polly and me out of the way.

The helicopter sways lower and lower, and I can just hear the wolf-cub growling at the back of his throat. We can no longer smell the garden or the river, only oily fuel, the hot rotors making my eyes water as they grind past each other. The rivets in each panel look close enough to touch now . . .

I am a Wildness, a leader of animals. I wait, facing up to the light and the roar and the wind.

The helicopter lands. Slowly the spinning blades judder to a halt.

Polly clutches my hand.

For a moment the dark helicopter is silent, and then—

A door is dragged open on rails. Folding steps tumble down onto our grass. In the dusk behind us, Polly's toad gives a little croak.

We peer into the shadows of the cabin, shrinking back as men thunder down the steps and into our garden. Cullers, clanking in helmets, padded uniforms, and boots. Without a word, they raise their long dart guns and point them. At Dad. At Polly. And at me.

Nervously glancing at one another, we raise our arms in the air.

Then, in the darkness of the night, comes another man. A small man in a grey suit, skipping down from the helicopter light and fast.

A man whose picture I have seen once before, in the Doctor's room at Spectrum Hall.

The man looks down at his feet and rubs his hands together for a moment. He adjusts his cuffs and smooths his fine hair down over his head. Then, his eyes hidden behind a pair of shiny glasses, he clears his throat and smiles. "I'm sorry to drop in unannounced like this, Professor Jaynes," he says to Dad, who doesn't say anything.

In fact, I think Dad is shaking. I've never seen Dad shake before, but his hands are definitely trembling. It only makes me want not to shake at all. Which, it turns out, is much harder than it sounds.

The man turns to me instead. He takes off his glasses and pulls out a handkerchief to rub away a grease spot. "Do you know who I am?" he asks.

I nod.

He smiles again and puts his glasses back on. "Good. Do you know what I do?"

Where to begin. Spreading viruses that kill the world's animals so you can make us all eat your fake replacement food, culling the creatures who survived, lying to everyone that humans could get the virus when they couldn't, locking my dad up just because he invented a cure . . .

"You may think differently," says Selwyn Stone, his voice all quiet and controlled, like a wire that could snap at any moment, only it won't because it's made of steel, "but what I do is keep order. I make difficult, unpleasant decisions on behalf of everyone. I prevent starvation, I keep the money going round and round, and I protect every single one of us from a hostile planet." Mr. Stone clasps his hands in front of him like a

priest. “The only thing I ask from you in return is a little bit of help.” Then he steps forward, his polished shoes sinking into the grass. Polly and I shrink back.

“For example,” he continues, “I might ask you not to waste time designing a cure for a virus that we are eradicating from the face of this earth. Or I might ask you not to illegally bring infected animals right into the centre of our capital city. Things like that.”

I’m shaking now too, my legs wobbling, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Polly has gone super-quiet, as if she hardly even dares to breathe.

In the night sky, the moon is full and high behind us, showing the shadows of the skull under the man’s skin. Mr. Stone sticks a hand into his jacket pocket and pulls out a small object.

A pistol version of the cullers’ dart rifle.

“And if you were still protecting those animals, I would expect you to tell me. Is that so very much to ask?”

*\*No one move a muscle,\** I order the creatures behind us in the dark.

Stone turns toward me with the pistol. I swallow hard, hoping he couldn’t tell I was talking to them. “So. Kester. Tell me. Are you concealing any animals in this garden?”

“No,” I say. It’s the only word I can say out loud to other people.

He nods, and places his free hand on my shoulder. His voice is friendly. “I understand that you might not want to tell me. I know you’ve been through so much. You probably think you’ve been very brave—escaping from Spectrum Hall, rescuing your young friend here after we took her parents in, finding all those animals and bringing them all this way, setting your father free . . . I know I’d be exhausted!”

He smiles like it’s a joke, except no one laughs.

“But don’t worry, because you don’t need to tell me straightaway. There’s no rush. We can just wait. Because even the best-trained animals in the world can’t stay still forever.”

I want to punch his stupid smiling face and tell him that they’re not trained, they’re wild animals, and it’s just that we *understand* one another, something he will never ever be able to do—but I don’t, and instead, we wait.

Mr. Stone’s one hand lying on my shoulder, no heavier than a leaf, another holding a gun. Polly next to me, trying not to cry, only sniffing a bit. Dad a bit farther along, his head bowed.

We wait . . .

The cullers with their guns raised around us in a circle of helmeted silhouettes looking like giant plastic soldiers.

We wait . . .

The helicopter, the big metal bird that dropped onto our lawn, just sitting there dull and lifeless. Beyond it, the towers of the city, casting their long shadows over us all. Reflected on the river, I see the moonlit sky above filling with clouds faster than I can count them.

Still there is silence in the garden.

We wait . . .

And then—with a squeal of panic, the red squirrel streaks out from under the rose bush, quivering with fear.

*\*What's happening?\** he yells at me. *\*Are we—\**

His voice falters as he sees the cullers and Mr. Stone. He freezes on the spot with terror.

*\*Run—\** I start, but it's too late.

Without taking his eyes off me, Mr. Stone points his gun and fires. A dart speeds through the air, and the squirrel falls with no sound but the thump of his body hitting the ground. The cullers move forward and bundle him into a net, clambering back into the helicopter.

The lights fire up, and the blades begin to whirl round again.

Dad lowers his arms slowly. Mr. Stone puts his gun back in his pocket. "We can come back for the rest later," he says calmly. "And we will."

He moves, as if he is about to walk back to the helicopter, and then stops. My heart nearly stops too.

"Oh, I nearly forgot," he says. "There is another option. I might be persuaded to let you keep your animals. On one condition."

The helicopter's big light turns onto the garden, like a giant eye searching something out. It hovers over Dad, who buries his face in his hands. It seeks out the stag behind the tree and the wolf-cub in the bush. It blinds me for a moment, making me turn away, feeling the General burrow as deep into my pocket as he can.

Then it moves on. To the girl next to me, her hair beginning to blow around her as the blades whirl faster and faster, ready for takeoff. Like her hair is burning in the light.

Mr. Stone walks over to Polly. He reaches into his jacket once more, and this time I prepare to go for him. I don't care how rich and powerful he is, or how many armed cullers are in his stupid helicopter. If he touches one hair on her head—

And he pulls out some flowers. Like a magic trick.

A big bouquet of black flowers, which he forces into Polly's hands, raising his voice for the first time to be heard over the machine. "Polly Goodacre. Your parents have told me everything. If you really want to save the animals, give it to me. Give me what you have."

He waits for a moment, but she just stares at him. "Give me what you have," he repeats. "You have forty-eight hours—or I will return, and I *will* kill all of these animals."

Then without another word he turns and climbs back into the helicopter, slamming the door shut behind him. The craft's engines shudder and roar as it begins to accelerate up into the velvet sky, the white belly lifting farther and farther away, the spotlights fading to a dull orange glow, until—as if it had never even meant to come near us—the Facto bird is swooping out across the river and back upstream.

Which is when, clutching her black flowers tight—

My best friend begins to cry.

## PART 1

### POLLY'S SECRET

My story begins again with me waking early in my bed, then tossing and turning, unable to get back to sleep.

And if you think that sounds like fun, you should see my bedroom. It's just as I left it six years ago. My duvet has some cartoon on it, and the bookshelves are full of stuffed animals that I would never play with now. (I have real ones for that.)

In other words—*nothing* in here is for a kid of my age.

(Days away from being thirteen—and even skinnier than I was.)

The room is at the top of our house, which is all white and modern, at the end of the Culdee Sack in the part of Premium where hardly anyone lives anymore. If you went outside you would see lots of other houses, with electric gates and cameras, but there wouldn't be any people living there. They all live in the glass towers on the other side now. And there definitely wouldn't be any animals like the ones in our garden.

All of which means it's dead quiet. In fact, the only noise you can hear right now is a slow, vibrating hum, which could be a tank rolling down the street. But it's just Dad snoring in the room next door.

Farther down the corridor is Polly. She's sleeping on a camp bed Dad made up for her in Mum's old study. At least, I *think* she's sleeping. After last night . . .

Who knows what she's doing after last night. After the helicopter left, she dropped the flowers on the lawn and ran to her room. She wouldn't talk to me or answer any of Dad's questions.

It doesn't matter. I don't care what Selwyn Stone said. I'm not going to let anything happen to my wild.

Not after what we've been through together.

I brought the animals all the way from their home at the Ring of Trees—far away in the north of the Island—to the city. I brought them here for a cure, which Dad invented, which Polly and I helped him make. We were chased by wolves, shot at by cullers, half drowned, and nearly burnt alive. We saved the animals and rescued Dad. I sent a flock of pigeons back to the Ring with supplies of the cure for the animals who couldn't come with us.

Along the way Polly saved my life. Twice.

I first got to know her at her house, Wind's Edge, right on the farthest edge of the Zone. I broke in looking for help, because I thought I had the red-eye virus. She pointed a gun in my face and called me "Kidnapper." And then, in the dirtiest kitchen I'd ever seen, she made me a cup of herbal-medicine tea for my fever.

She made me feel less scared of things.

Although if you think not being scared of things makes you braver, you'd be wrong. Everything we did that



everyone calls being brave didn't feel like being brave at the time. It felt like the only thing to do, and I can't imagine myself doing anything like that again. Not now, when I'm lying here in my room full of toys and piles of comics on every surface.

"Can't or won't?" Mum used to say. I don't know. Reaching for the green watch she gave me, just repaired by Dad, I press the side button and squint at the brightly glowing screen.

It's getting-up time.

But after what happened last night, I don't want to get up. I feel a knot in my stomach and turn over for the hundredth time to stare at the wall, wishing it all had been a bad dream. The helicopter, the men inside—the squirrel I couldn't save from them. And the flowers they left behind.

They being Facto.

Factorium, the biggest company in the world. The company that made all the food until the red-eye virus killed nearly all the animals, and then tried to cull all the survivors to "stop the virus spreading to humans." But they lied about that. They lied too about there being no cure. When Dad first developed one they locked him up, sent me away, and destroyed all his work.

All so that Mr. Stone could get rich making us eat his disgusting fake Formul-A food, which only ever tastes of prawn-cocktail crisps.

He is not a man who makes threats for fun.

I'm not surprised he's cross with us. We broke every law in the land bringing diseased animals into the city, which is meant to be an infection-free zone. We defeated his chief culler, Captain Skuldiss, in a battle on the street right outside my window.

Skuldiss.

When we were first captured by Captain Skuldiss, Facto's head culler, he told us that Polly's parents had been arrested for trying to get formula (what everyone normally calls it) in the northern city of Mons. Perhaps she is just trying to be brave for them, like she was for me.

But I'm tired of us all having to be brave.

We were just starting to be a family again back at home: everyone making breakfast together, Dad working downstairs in his pyjamas, Polly and me looking after the animals in our garden.

This is my home and they are my family. And no one is ever going to take them away from me.

Suddenly there is so much to be scared of that I don't want to think anymore. I pull the duvet over my head and sink down underneath it.

Just as I finally start to doze off again, my door swings open, and the duvet is dragged onto the floor. Polly is standing there, arms folded and head cocked, her fierce eyes studying me. She doesn't look scared or tired, and she definitely isn't crying.

In fact, she looks at the room like it said something to annoy her. She flicks on the light, sweeps the comics from my bedside table, and puts in their place a vase holding one of the flowers Stone gave her last night.

There is a croak, and I look down to see the toad staring up at me from her feet.

“Come on, Kidnapper,” Polly says, rubbing her hands together. “The Professor wants to see us. In his lab.”

As if nothing had happened.

I blink in the light, confused—

“It wasn’t an invitation,” she says, disappearing back out of the door with a toss of her hair, the toad hopping quickly after. “It was an order.”

Downstairs in Dad’s lab, under its glass roof, I can hear the chatter of the city from across the river, the water lapping at the edge of the lawn. The lab is full of the black flowers that Selwyn Stone gave to Polly. They are laid out in rows across every surface. On the white worktops Dad has dissected their leaves, their stems, their heads—and in true Dad-style, everything has gone everywhere. There are leaves stuck to the soles of our feet, and just from touching my face, my hand comes away with a petal on it, like a slick of black paint.

I look at Polly, who picks up her toad and places him carefully on Dad’s chair. She goes to the plants piled high next to a large microscope, turning over the thin flowers in her hands. She’s gone very pale.

I don’t get it. They’re only *flowers*.

If Dad notices, he doesn’t show it. Instead he leans against the big window wall of the lab, folding his arms. “So . . . you’re the expert . . . what can you tell me about Mr. Stone’s gift?”

“I don’t know what he meant, Professor; I don’t have anything that belongs to him. You have to believe me.”

Dad nods his head. “I’m not talking about that. Just tell me what you know about the, you know . . . flowers.”

Polly knows her plants. Her parents were natural historians; they taught her everything she knows. Still white as a bone, she pulls herself together, staring hard at the flowers.

“Well . . . they’re irises. These are special black ones, I think, only they’re not really black if you look close up, just a very deep purple.”

The colour of everything Facto, from vans to helicopters.

Dad waves his hand like he’s swatting away a fly. As if it was a signal, the butterflies and bees covering the bushes outside begin to hover near the windows as we talk.

“Yes, yes, I know they *look* like iris chrysographes, but of course they, you know . . . can’t be, can they? You’re not thinking hard enough.”

She rubs her brow, confused, and looks at me, as if perhaps this is some game of Dad’s that I know and she doesn’t. And then at the flowers again, peering at the purple-black velvet petals.

“Because they’re—” she starts, but Dad interrupts her.

“No! Nothing to do with the flowers themselves. It’s the flowers that are the problem, though.”

A thought begins to rumble into my head. It's like a riddle, but . . . Dad must see me concentrating. "You should know this too."

I look at the flowers around us, their scent nearly choking us, it's so strong. I look at the animals outside, the bees buzzing round the glass, the only ones left alive in the world that we know of—

Polly beats me to it. "There can't be any flowers, Professor. We didn't see any on our way here, not through the whole Quarantine Zone. Because . . ."

*\*There aren't any insects left to pollinate them!\**

"There aren't any insects left to pollinate them!"

We both say the same thing at the same time in our different voices. The toad croaks with excitement, leaping about at Polly's feet. At all the noise, the rest of the wild also start to move up from the lawn, noses, ears, and whiskers crowding in at the open lab doors.

"Exactly," Dad says, beaming. "The only, you know . . . things left that could spread enough pollen for this many flowers are"—he waves his hand at the insects outside the lab window—"buzzing about in our garden. Whoever grew these knows something we don't."

But Polly isn't smiling. She's frowning hard again, looking at the irises. Taking a couple, she places them under Dad's microscope and peers through the lens at the petals—and the leaves, and the stalks. Again and again.

I'm just about to give up and go and find someone (or something) more interesting to talk to outside when she lifts her head. "There's something else strange, though, isn't there, Professor?"

This time Dad isn't smiling. "Your friend is a very clever girl," he says to me. He looks at her. "Go on."

Polly holds out a sheaf of irises to me. "Look at them, Kidnapper."

I do. They just look like plants to me, a bit wilted now, but a load of plants. There's nothing special about them, they're just . . . all the same.

Our eyes meet. "You see, don't you?" she says. "They're all the same. And I mean *exactly* the same. They're identical. Every single one."

"Yes! Not just the way they look," says Dad. "I ran some tests last night. They're identical on the inside as well as out."

*\*Which means Facto just . . . made these flowers?\** I say. *\*In the same way they make fake food for us to eat?\**

He holds his palms up, speaking to me alone in the animal voice that we share. (Which is what freaks me out the most, as he still hasn't explained why.) *\*Perhaps.\**

*\*And so giving them to Polly means what?\**

*\*I don't really, er, know, dear boy . . . This is all very new, you see.\**

I take a deep breath, trying to control myself at his vagueness. *\*She must have some idea what they mean.*

*Ask her again.\**

He puts his hand on my shoulder. *\*Kester,\** he says. I brush him away. *\*She's your friend—\**

*\*No! I want to know.\** I turn to face her, grabbing a handful of flowers off the table. *\*Ask Polly what they mean. She must have some idea.\**

Dad looks at my friend, pale and trembling, and scratches his head. There's a pause—and then before he can say anything to her, the wild are pouring into the lab, crowding round us and butting in.

*\*Yes, why did that metal bird come and take the squirrel?\** says the wolf-cub, his paws scattering a pile of Dad's paperwork across the floor. *\*Did I scare it off? I know I am the best at scaring off giant metal birds ever.\**

*\*Are we safe here? That's what I'd like to know,\** says the mouse, shaking her tail from side to side over a computer keyboard in a Dance of Typical Mouse Anxiety About the Future.

*\*Yes!\** says a skinny rabbit, up on his back legs. *\*Are we safe yet? We want to know! The metal bird took our squirrel. That ain't right . . . I just want to be safe.\**

Then suddenly all the animals are shouting and yelling, the rabbit worrying if they're safe again, if we shouldn't find somewhere to hide from a machine that brings flowers, and the stag telling them to be quiet, and the toad croaking when—

*\*SHUSH, all of you!\** bellows Dad. The rabbit dives under a desk, his ears twitching with fear. *\*I know you all have many questions you want answers to.\** He picks up one of the identical irises off the worktop and holds it up. *\*Questions . . . that I want answers to as well.\**

He takes us all in with a sweep of his bushy-eyed gaze and turns to Polly, translating for the animals as he goes along.

“The man who gave you these flowers is very powerful and very dangerous. He wants us to be scared; he wants us to be confused. So we need to be one step ahead of him.”

Polly looks down at her feet. “How do we do that, Professor?”

Even though it's a sunny day outside, it feels as if a cold wind has just blown through the room. Every animal that I rescued, that I brought hundreds of miles to be here, turns its head and wide eyes up to my friend, waiting to hear that they will be safe. Dad stretches out a wilting flower toward her.

“I've told you what I know about these. You've spotted that they're all identical. These are your animals too. You brought them here as much as Kes did.” He lowers his voice, softer, sounding a lot less like Professor Jaynes and a whole lot more like a dad. “Polly. You need to tell us the truth.”

She steps back. “No . . .”

He shakes his head gently. “You've got to tell us before they make their next move. It's up to you to save these animals now. Tell us what you have.”

For a moment Polly just stares at my dad. Then she drops the irises all over the floor, leaning on the worktop

to steady herself.

I put my hand on her arm. I don't want her to worry. I'm sure she'll work it out. She always does.

Then Dad is bustling over too. "Oh dear . . . I didn't mean to, you know . . . You don't have to tell us straightaway. Take your time and all that . . . Look, why don't you do something useful, take your mind off things, eh? It's time to give your pals their medicine."

He picks up a tray full of glass vials and thrusts it into her hands. Vials of purple Laura II—the prototype cure for the virus that we helped my dad make, named after my mum. The animals seem to be getting better, but Dad wants to keep on administering small daily doses for a while to be absolutely sure.

Polly gazes down at the tray for a moment, and then I take her hand and lead her out through the glass lab doors and into the garden, the wild trotting behind us.

They are used to the ritual now, and line up in a row as Polly and I pass along with the tray.

We start with the small animals like rabbits and polecats, who still wriggle and jump as we try to put a few drops of the cure in their mouths. By contrast, the stag takes his medicine obediently, his mouth open and ready. The toad leaps around from flowerpot to bush, Polly running after him till she is exhausted. But he takes it in the end.

Then we test the animals' blood, for things like their sugar levels. You get a microscopic pinprick of blood with a super-thin needle and drop it on a strip of really tiny dots called "microdots," and a handheld meter measures the strip and the blood-sugar level straightaway.

The only unhappy animal is the wolf-cub. His side is still bandaged after being shot by Captain Skuldiss, and he needs a different special drug to help the wound heal. So after the cure and blood test I also have a small bottle of painkilling pills for him.

He doesn't like swallowing them. *\*I only take these because you are the Wildness,\** he growls.

*\*I know,\** I say, tipping three chalky tablets into his mouth. *\*You are the best at taking pills in the world!\**

To my surprise he doesn't reply but crunches the pills up and slinks off—as if I said something to upset him. I was only talking to him in the way he likes to speak.

The cure always makes the wild sleepy, and as they drift off afterward to doze in the shade, Polly flops down behind me on the concrete steps to the lab. She sighs, chin in her hands, the toad for once sitting still at her feet.

I slowly put down the tray of discarded vials and sit next to her. I put my hand out, on top of hers—but she snatches it away.

"I don't want to talk about it right now."

My face suggests that we, and my animals, don't have the option to anyway.

She nods, picking at one of the long creepers trailing over the steps before beginning to twist it round and round in her hands for a while. When she speaks again, it's in a voice so small I only just notice—the voice I haven't heard her use since we lost her cat, Sidney.

“Kester . . . do you have any secrets?”

I wish I did. Not that I can think of.

“You and the animals—there’s nothing that you all know but I don’t know, is there?”

Well . . . the animals have their secrets. They have their dreams, which are stories about their animal ancestors, passed down from beast to beast over the generations. I learnt from the pigeons that the dream they tell one another the most is the one about my gift. I know it begins at the First Fold, the first ever sheepfold that we passed on our journey down here.

But I am not allowed to hear it, as they consider dreams sacred and for animals only.

All I know is that it foretold everything that happened since I met the wild. The stag knew things were going to happen before they did. It made me feel safe even when we were in terrible danger, knowing that everything was happening for a reason. But he only tells me what the dream says once it has happened.

So it’s not really *my* secret.

“No.”

Polly picks up the creeper again, threading it over and over till I think I’m going to scream. Then she just says it straight out.

“Would you mind if I did?”

We both stare at each other for moment, as a long cloud passes overhead, casting a shadow across the whole garden. Then Polly shoves the creeper in her pocket. “It doesn’t matter. Pretend I didn’t say that.”

She’s not getting away that easy. I put a hand on her shoulder.

“OK,” she says with a sigh, pulling the creeper out of her pocket. It seems to be getting longer and longer, strands twisted together. “You have to understand that there were things I couldn’t tell you until I could trust you—”

Until she could trust me? The girl I saved from going over a waterfall?

“I’m sorry, but Mum and Dad made me promise not to tell anyone. *Anyone.*”

That’s not good enough. We’ve been through too much together. I kick at the ground between her feet until she waves the creeper in the air, like a flag of surrender.

Then she’s fierce, leaning forward and looking around her all the time.

“All right! But you must promise not to tell your dad. I don’t want to get in trouble. It’s not my fault, you see.”

That’s going to be really difficult.

“Swear!”

She sticks her hand out. I place mine over it. “Swear on the Professor’s life that you won’t tell him,” she

says. “Even if you can’t speak out loud, I’ll know if you’re lying.”

I swear inside. Our eyes meet for a moment over our bound hands. I feel red-faced and jerk my hand away.

“OK, OK.” Polly looks around again. Then she takes a deep breath and begins to tell her secret. “You thought you and your animals were the first ever to take on Facto. But you weren’t.” She glances away at the animals lying all over the lawn. “There was already a rebellion against them.” This isn’t news. We’d met outsiders on our journey who hated Facto. “And my mum and dad are leading it. Or at least they were . . .”

That makes me sit up.

Polly holds her palm up as if to silence me.

“Why do you think I had a gun when you found me? What do you think Skuldiss was really looking for at Wind’s Edge? Not just one sick cat, that’s for sure.”

Suddenly my mind is jumping back into the past, trying to piece together parts of a puzzle I’ve only just discovered. Sidney was Polly’s cat, who had the virus. I thought Polly was coming with us to the city to find her a cure, but when we jumped in a river to escape Captain Skuldiss, she was swept over a waterfall. I rescued Polly, but I couldn’t save Sidney.

But Polly didn’t go back home after that. She stayed with us.

“They started when Facto made the countryside a quarantine zone. Mum and Dad didn’t see why they should leave their home when no people had actually caught the red-eye. They thought Facto wanted to put the countryside out of action so everyone would have to eat their disgusting formula. So they decided to stay and fight.”

I still don’t see what any of this has got to do with flowers.

“They formed a whole network with the others who stayed. Why do you think I went with Ma so quickly by the river? She didn’t force me. She was one of them.”

Ma was a farmer we met who’d lost everything to Facto and the virus. We thought she was on our side at first, but she only wanted to feed my wild to her starving workers.

“Facto called us all outsiders, like we were the losers, the ones left with no formula to eat and no nice cities of glass towers to live in. But it’s not the name we called ourselves.”

Polly twists the creeper over and over in her hands again, threading it tighter and tighter.

“We had a secret name—so secret we weren’t even allowed to say it to each other, in case anyone was spying on us.”

She stretches the creeper taut between her hands and won’t look at me.

“The name was secret because Facto didn’t know what we had.” Polly has wound the creeper into what looks like a noose. “Mum called it our secret weapon. It wasn’t a gun or a bomb. Mum said it was more powerful against people like Selwyn Stone than things like that.”

She pulls the noose tight, making a fat knot in the creeper.

“Hope. We had something that gave us hope, Mum said. It could change everything. We could defeat Facto and start again with it. Just the thought of it made me feel safe and happy. Until I got those flowers last night.”

The cogs click into place in my head—

“I swear to you on my life. They asked me to look after it, and so far I have. It’s the one small thing they gave me that I did manage to bring safely from home.” Sidney flickers briefly into my mind. “But you have to believe me—I still don’t even know what it is. They said I would be in danger if I knew anything more than . . . the name.”

Brought it with her? Confused, I half expect Polly to take a concealed test tube out of her pocket or show me a hidden locket hanging round her neck. But instead she just tightens another creeper knot and gazes down the garden at the dull white glow of the afternoon sky on the river.

“But as soon as I saw those flowers, I realized he must know our secret. Because . . .” She cups her hand over my ear and whispers in it, “*Because the name was Iris.*”

We sit still on the steps. I feel like a ticking time bomb, without knowing what’s making me tick. The clouds press down on everything, making it feel hot and sticky.

I look at Polly, with her bare knees—still covered in bruises and scratches from our journey—drawn up under her chin. I have to know more.

But to my surprise she leaps up, winding the creeper round and round her hand. “I’m sorry, Kidnapper, I shouldn’t have told you. I don’t want to put you all in any more danger than I have already. It’s just that . . . I promised Mum and Dad, you see.”

Her eyes flick to the wild still dozing at the bottom of the garden, and back to me. “I promised them, swore on their lives, that whatever happened . . . I wouldn’t let Facto get the Iris.”

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