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Opening extract from

Rowan Oakwing: A London Fairy Tale

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LITTLE, BROWN BOOKS FOR YOUNG READERS

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PROLOGUE



They were finally inside the park.

Rowan's mum paused, closed her eyes and took a big, grateful breath in. She smiled for the first time that day, standing on the edge of that great, green sea in the heart of the city. An hour on the top deck of a big red London bus had brought them here, with Rowan pressing her face up against the window, arms outstretched,

pretending to fly through the streets. Rowan's little sister, Willow, had sat curled up in their mother's lap.

Now, they swung their hands together as they strolled towards their favourite spot in Kensington Gardens. An ancient tree trunk that had been carved with all manner of fairies, birds and fantastical creatures and painted in glorious colours. The Elfin Oak.

'Pick one, Rowan,' whispered her mum, as they drew close.

Rowan circled the Oak slowly, peering in through the black iron railings that protected the tree. Her eyes passed over the little blue mermaid hugging the bark, the wise orange owl standing watch, the green elf with his head poking out of a hollow. Finally, she pointed at a little blue fairy with tiny shells for wings.

'Perfect,' said her mum.

Then, as always, the three of them sat on the bench beneath the little clock tower, and Rowan's mum wove a fabulous tale about the character Rowan had chosen. It wasn't from any book that Rowan knew. The story just seemed to spill out

as though it had been hiding inside her mum all along, waiting for the right moment to escape. Rowan craned her head back. There was a saying engraved beneath the clock above their heads: *Time Flies.* And it always did.

'Ice cream!' cried Willow suddenly, as she wriggled off the bench.

'But the story isn't finished!' protested Rowan.

'Then there'll be some left for tomorrow,' her mum said, smiling.

Rowan slumped back and folded her arms. Willow was always interrupting the story at the best bit.

'Shall we get a boat?' said her mum. Rowan unpeeled herself from the bench. She was secretly quite excited about the boats, but she wasn't going to show it.

'Bobbily boats!' cried Willow, doing an eager jumping-up-and-down sort of dance.

They bought three strawberry ice creams by the Serpentine Lake, and were about to climb into one of the little wooden rowing boats tied up by the shore, when dark clouds gathered in the sky. A breeze started whipping little waves across the

water. Rowan's mum closed her eyes and turned her face up to the rain.

'Come, quickly!' she said, her eyes snapping open again, as she tugged them away from the lake.

'Bobbily boats?' wailed Willow as she looked behind her.

They were looking around for somewhere to shelter from the rain when Rowan noticed a huge tree nestled on a sloping bank. It had a great branch right at the top that seemed to hold the rest of it up. It was almost like the tree was upside down. The branches and leaves all cascaded down from the top creating enormous sheets of foliage that made it look like a giant tepee.

'Tree crying!' said Willow.

'You're right, little one,' said their mum. 'It's a weeping beech.'

The rain was falling in big droplets now, splattering the dusty ground. Rowan's mum pulled back one of the branches like a curtain and ushered the girls inside. They sat safe and dry with their backs against the tree trunk as the summer shower fell all around them.

Now, Rowan could concentrate on her ice cream. Carefully licking all around it, she pounced on any stray drops that slid down the cone. Willow slowly licked one side of her ice cream, creating a dangerous overhang that was beginning to make Rowan nervous.

'Breathe in, you two. Can you smell it?' Rowan's mum said as she pulled them both close to her.

Willow took a big sniff and got a dollop of pink goo on her nose. Rowan took a deep breath in, but she had no idea what her mum was talking about.

'It's the most beautiful scent in the world. On a summer's day, when it begins to rain. You only catch it for a moment. But when you do? It's better than the biggest bunch of flowers.'

Rowan looked over at her mum. She was gazing beyond the branches, smiling as if she was remembering something. Rowan looked closer. Her mum's eyelashes were dewed with tears. She glanced at Rowan and shook the sadness out of her face.

'The rain's a bit lighter now. We could make a dash for the bus stop,' she said, dusting herself down.

'Bobbily boats!' wailed Willow, as her scoop of ice cream finally fell off its cone.

'Next time, Willow. Are you coming, Rowan?'

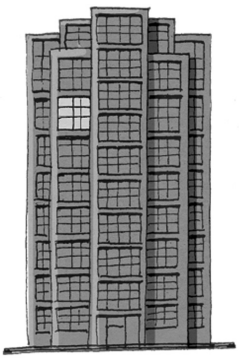
Rowan hung back. The afternoon had been perfect despite the rain, and she couldn't understand why her mum had become upset. She was about to ask when . . .

'We can come back, Rowan. We can always come back,' her mum said quickly. But they never did. That was the last time Rowan saw her mum in the park.

Because the next day was the day that Rowan's mum disappeared.

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HAPPY TUESDAY



Rowan always got up before everyone else. She'd sit with a glass of apple juice and gaze out of the window. High above the noise of London in their block of flats, watching the orangey morning light bouncing off the glassy skyscrapers in the distance. She liked to have a little time to herself before the day began. Time when she didn't have to worry about the others. Now that

Mum wasn't around, looking after the family was up to her.

Dad wasn't much help. He didn't do much of anything any more. He hadn't done a lot of smiling in the seven years since Mum had vanished. He'd done a lot of sitting. A lot of staring at the TV, even when it wasn't on. He went to his job during the day, though Rowan didn't really understand what it was. Something at the Council that involved computers and talking to as few people as possible. All she knew was that he wasn't really like other dads. Other dads took her friends swimming, or for bike rides in the park, or walked them to school. She would have been happy with any one of those. But Rowan still couldn't swim or ride a bike because her dad had never taught her. She had to get herself and her sister ready for school every morning. Dad could barely look after himself, let alone his two daughters.

Rowan heard alarm clocks ringing in other parts of the flat, and the banging and thumping sounds of two people not really wanting to get up. She took a deep breath and headed into the kitchen to start getting the breakfast ready. She opened a

cupboard to pull out a box of cereal but her hand clutched at thin air. 'Oh, Dad,' she sighed. She closed the door, and noticed the calendar hanging on the wall. Her eyes widened as she saw the date. In one quick movement, she grabbed it off the wall, stuffing it beneath a pile of tea towels.

Willow yawned her way into the room, making Rowan jump. Her little sister was wearing pink from head to toe, and had a pair of gauze fairy wings attached to her back with elastic.

'Did you sleep in those?' Rowan asked.

'So. Hungry,' Willow said, ignoring the question.

She flopped down into a chair, staring at the space in front of her, as if she was waiting for a bowl of cereal to magically appear. Instead, Rowan slid a plate with two pieces of limp, dry toast in front of her.

'Dad forgot to go to the shops on the way back from work,' said Rowan.

Willow sighed.

'Happy Tuesday,' said Rowan.

Something banged against the hall wall. 'Ouch!'

Rowan and Willow looked towards the kitchen

door as their dad stumbled in, rubbing his head. He looked like a schoolboy who didn't know how to dress himself. He'd knotted his tie, but it was yanked off centre. One collar was up, the other down, and a lock of his hair was stubbornly sticking up at an angle. He had at least shaved, but he'd cut himself a number of times and had little pieces of toilet paper stuck to his face to stop the bleeding. Rowan nodded over at Willow, who immediately put down her toast, wet some kitchen roll under the tap and climbed on to a chair. She reached up and plastered down her dad's unruly lock of hair. Meanwhile Rowan straightened his tie and arranged his collar, before rattling a plate of toast on to the table in front of him.

Without a word, their dad sat down and began eating. Then he froze with a piece of toast in mid-air as he stared at the wall. 'Something's missing,' he said.

'No, no I don't think so,' said Rowan, managing to catch Willow's eye and nodding urgently towards the stack of towels.

'It's the calendar!' Willow piped up. 'Rowan put it under the tea towels!'

Rowan rolled her eyes. Willow whipped out the calendar and handed it over to their dad.

'Nooo, Willow,' Rowan hissed at her sister. 'Put. It. Back!'

Rowan tried to wrestle the calendar away, but she was too late.

'Oh,' said Dad, as his finger traced across today's date. The twelfth of August. The day that Mum had disappeared seven years ago. The day she'd decided to go to Hyde Park on her own. The day she never came back.

There was an awkward silence around the table. Dad made an odd face. Willow looked back and forth from Dad to Rowan. But neither of them said a word. Dad stared down at his toast.

Rowan broke the silence. 'It's time to go, Willow.'

Dad's head jerked back up. 'I thought school had finished for the summer?'

'It has, Dad. You're taking Willow to Gracie's house on the way to work, remember?'

'Oh. Yes. Of course.' Dad rubbed a hand over his face. 'Come on, Willow, let's get going.'

He wrestled Willow and her wings into a

shabby coat she was too big for and bustled her out of the kitchen towards the front door, with Rowan following. He stopped as if he had forgotten something, turning back to look at her. 'What about you? What are you going to do?'

'Don't worry, Dad,' Rowan replied with a half-hearted smile. She was used to fending for herself. 'I'll find something.'

'Right. That's . . . good.'

The silence grew between them, then he stepped out into the corridor.

Dad closed the door behind him as Willow's shouts echoed down the stairwell. 'See ya, Rowan Snowman!'

'Bye bye, Willow Pillow!' Rowan called after her.

She turned back into the flat. Their home suddenly seemed much bigger and quieter. A baby started crying a couple of floors away. Rowan looked at the clock. It was still only 9 a.m. She wandered back into the living room and picked up a picture frame from the sideboard. It was a photograph of her mum in happier days, playing a violin in an orchestra. As she looked at the

picture, Rowan could almost hear the music. How beautiful it was too. 'It's not just a violin,' her mum would tell Rowan. 'It's a machine for making your heart sing.' Once, the flat had been filled with her mother's music. The violin had been almost the only thing that could stop baby Willow from crying. Though sometimes the hairdryer would also do the trick.

Rowan looked more closely at the photo, her finger tracing across her mother's neck where a necklace seemed to be. It was hard to make out, but the wooden charm looked like a miniature tree. Rowan raised a hand to her own throat, pulling out a necklace from beneath her T-shirt – the charm was a wooden acorn.

A thought suddenly occurred to Rowan. She strode into her dad's bedroom. Climbing on top of a chair, she opened a cupboard above the unmade bed. She pulled out a few old rolls of Christmas wrapping paper, a pile of raggedy towels, and some shoeboxes with high-heeled shoes spilling out. Right at the back of the cupboard was a dusty black instrument case. Lifting it gently down, she put it on the bed and popped the locks,

to carefully open the lid. Nestled in the case's velvet-lined interior lay her mother's violin. She gently lifted it out, as though she were cradling a newborn baby. She held the polished wooden instrument to her chin, then realised she didn't have a bow. She scrambled back up on the chair and, standing on tiptoes, saw that in the corner of the cupboard was another case. She stretched as hard as she could to reach for the box, finally grasping it and prising it open to reveal . . . a long, wooden bow strung with horse hair.

Rowan climbed back down. She held the violin to her chin, and poised the bow above it. She closed her eyes and drew it across the violin's strings. *Screeech*! This was not how she remembered it sounding. Rowan winced and tried again. The second time was even worse. Now it screamed even louder, like the foxes that sometimes woke her up at night. It was no use. Her shoulders sagged as she carefully set the violin back in its case, and hid everything back in the cupboard. She worried what Dad might say if he knew she'd been in there.

She padded back into the living room and

slumped down in the chair that used to be her mum's favourite. It was an old armchair that had seen far better days, and had belonged to Rowan's grandfather. Dad had kept the chair just as it had been when their mum was with them. It didn't face the television like the sofa and her dad's chair, but looked out of the window instead. Their block of flats wasn't the loveliest place in the world with its cold concrete stairwells and peeling grey paint, but by far the best thing about it was the view. From high up in their tower, they could see all the way across London. Past the London Eye, over the great winding River Thames, through the ocean of brick and glass, to the little green desert islands beyond of Hampstead Heath and Primrose Hill. Rowan's mum had loved nature. She'd grown up in the country and had never stopped missing it. That was why Rowan and her sister were named after trees. When she couldn't visit the parks, this is where Mum would sit and gaze at them from afar.

As Rowan sat in her mum's favourite chair, she realised what she needed to do. Today of all days.