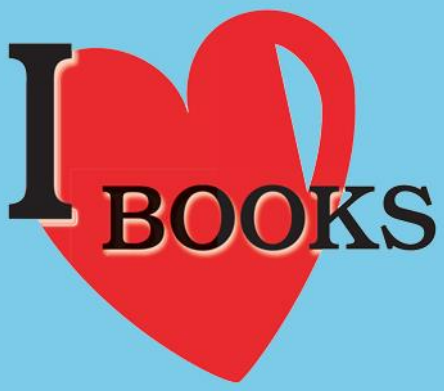



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Opening extract from

# Moonlocket

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*For Hannah, who read this first.*

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# MOONLOCKET



PETER BUNZL

USBORNE




Jack stepped through the crack into the night. Outside the yard was quiet and thick dark clouds hid the moon from view.

Squatting beside the door, he scooped handfuls of muck from a puddle and plastered it through his white hair. Muddy lumps dripped down his scarred face, oozing odorously into his eyes, nose and mouth, making him want to retch.

A spotlight swept past, outlining the barred windows. Jack crouched low to the ground and scanned his surroundings. The prison yard, the cells, the watchtower, the tall perimeter fence, the gatehouse, the iron gates, the high stone wall tipped with iron spikes – all

unbreachable. In its long illustrious history, no prisoner had ever escaped the 'Ville…

But he'd conquered worse. After fifteen years in maximum security, under constant surveillance, it had been a mistake for them to transfer him here to Pentonville and a regular cell. This past week the screws had barely looked in on him; they'd even let him out to exercise. They should've known better. Now, because of their stupidity, he'd be The World's Most Infamous Jailbreaker as well as its Greatest Escapologist!

He crawled towards the fence and pulled himself onto its wire surface, scrambled upwards, vaulted nimbly over the top, and dropped down the far side. Landing with a squelching thump, he raced towards the main gate and exterior walls.

A drainpipe snaked up the side of the gatehouse. Jack brushed his muddy palms against his chest, took a deep breath, and began to climb.

Reaching the top, he hauled himself over the gutter onto the slippery roof and across a patchwork of tar and tiles, the exterior wall looming above him in the dark. Mounds of leaves and globules of green moss gathered in the crevices up here, creating perfect hiding places for small items someone might wish to stash.

Jack rummaged in one such crevice and pulled out



a tarry tangle of ropes. They'd been bartered and bargained for outside the oakum shed over the past seven days, and were the makings of a secret escape kit. He began fastening them together, checking each knot carefully and pulling them tight.

Long ago he'd taught Fin to do this. A good knot can be the difference between life and death, he'd told the boy. Especially for an escapologist, or a hanged man. Luckily he'd never yet been threatened with that final rope.

Thoughts of the old times led Jack to remember his wife and the plan they'd made long ago to hide his greatest treasure – the Blood Moon Diamond. Artemisia might be gone, but soon, very soon, that big beautiful stone would be his once more. And, oh, what a diamond day that would be!

Jack checked the last knot and fastened a heavy stone to the rope's end. Then he stood and began whirling it around his head like a lasso, feeding out lengths of line until the stone picked up speed. When it was finally making a wide circle about his head, Jack released his grip.

The stone flew through the air, arcing over the exterior wall. For a second the rope wriggled, trying to snake free, but Jack kept a tight grip on its end, and

the stone hit the ground on the wall's far side with a clunk.

He waited a moment, listening…

*Awhoo! Awhoo!*

An owl hoot – the signal that the line was secure.

The searchlight was fast approaching once more.

Jack dropped flat against the tiled roof and, when it had passed, jumped up and pulled the rope taut, testing his weight against it.

His knots held – as he knew they would.

He scraped the soles of his boots in the roof tar to make them sticky.

Then he began to climb.

The cracks between each stone made strong footholds. The top of the wall was fifteen feet above, but he took mere seconds to reach it and hop nimbly over a row of spikes that guarded the parapet, before lowering himself down the far side into the street.

Finlo stood beneath him wearing a battered bowler hat. He was a little taller than his father, though that wasn't saying much – all the Doors were short. As a teenager, fifteen years ago, he'd been a skinny disappointing runt, but since then he'd added a few inches, filled out into a man. Perhaps, Jack thought, he might be useful on this mission after all.



Jack dropped to the pavement beside his son and embraced him, sniffing the air. "Get a whiff of that peppery smell, Fin. I haven't smelled that in fifteen years!"

Finlo took a deep breath. "What is it?"

"Freedom!"

Jack flashed him a scarred smile. As he strode towards the prison entrance, a few feet away along the wall, a loud alarm bell began to wail.

"Da, please," Finlo called softly. "We have to go."

"Quiet! I've one more trick up my sleeve…" Jack pulled a playing card from thin air, and pinned it to the jail door.

When he lowered his arm, Finlo saw what it was: the Jack of Diamonds.

"And now," said Jack, slipping into the shadows, "we disappear."




In her short life Lily Hartman had come back from the dead not once, but twice. Neither time had been particularly pleasant. The first she didn't like to recall; the second she wished every day she could forget.

Her first near-death occurred when she was six years old. She'd been in a terrible steam-wagon crash, which had killed Mama and left her mortally injured.

Her second near-death took place last winter – barely three months past her thirteenth birthday. On that cold November day Lily was shot by someone she trusted dearly; and it was only thanks to the bravery of her friends, Robert and Malkin, and the enormous strength



of the Cogheart – an amazing invention of her papa's – that she'd survived.

Though it had brought her back to life, the Cogheart made Lily different. She was a hybrid, with a clockwork heart that might tick for ever. A girl with untold secrets – for who could she tell when, outside her family, everyone regarded hybrids and mechanicals as less than human?

Not that Lily liked to dwell on such things. This morning her troubles felt truly behind her. She lay with her back on the warming earth, enjoying the fizzing feeling of being alive, and let her mind drift to the promise of the long hot summer ahead.

Malkin, her pet mechanical fox, was curled at her side, one black beady eye open, watching. Tall stems of corn towered over him.

"Oughtn't we to be indoors?" he snapped, gnawing disdainfully at a burr-covered leg. "It's practically breakfast time."

"You don't eat breakfast, Malkin," said a second voice.

Robert, Lily's other best friend in the whole world, was picking dandelion clocks a few feet away. He stuck one in his buttonhole. It looked almost as good as the crown of daisies garlanding Lily's flame-red hair. Almost, but not quite.

Malkin spat out a mangy hairball with a sound like

an engine misfiring. “But I can smell breakfast,” he persisted. “Chiefly Mrs Rust’s lumpy porridge. It’s the most important meal of the day – you wouldn’t want to miss that.”

They probably would miss it, because they’d risen early and gone out to spot the night-mail zep on its morning flight from London, as they often did. When it passed over Brackenbridge, at half past seven or thereabouts, Lily knew all was right with the world. Then she and Robert would dash for their bicycles and race pell-mell through the village, over hill and dale, and on to the airstation, to collect the mail for Papa.

This morning, however, the night-mail was very late indeed. They’d been sitting a good forty-five minutes in the lower field, waiting for the zep’s arrival.

Lily took a sixpence from her pocket and turned it over in her hand. “Heads we stay. Tails we go.”

She flipped the coin, letting it land in the curve of her dress.

“Heads. We’re staying.”

“You didn’t let me see,” Malkin groused. “It could’ve gone either way.”

“Well, it just so happened to go my way.”

“It always does,” he huffed.

“Malkin,” Robert said, “you’re so easily wound up.”



Lily laughed. “Yes, anyone would think you were made of clockwork!”

She settled back on her elbows, getting comfortable. The sky had turned bright red over the roof of the house, and she could see the sun and moon simultaneously. If she glanced over her right shoulder there was the sun, slowly rising, and if she gazed to her left, there was the moon. With a large slice of its ghostly white face in shadow, it looked like a bent penny dropped in a wishing fountain. Lily held her sixpence up against it and squinted, making a lunar eclipse.

“The man in the moon looks awfully like Victoria today.”

“She should be called the woman in the moon then.” Robert snatched the sixpence from Lily and performed the same trick.

“The coin-Queen’s got a bigger nose,” he declared thoughtfully.

Lily chewed a stem of grass. “But you have to admit, they do look alike.”

“How would you know?” Malkin was still quite cross; he gnawed at his other paw. “You’ve never met the Queen.”

Robert handed the coin back and Lily replaced it in her pinafore, beside her pocket watch and a stone with a small ammonite in the centre – a gift from her mother

that she always carried. "Did you know," she said, "the Queen has two birthdays, like me. What d'you think of *that*?"

"You don't have two birthdays," Malkin snapped.

"Yes, I do." Lily adjusted her crown of daisies, which had slipped to one side. "My real one, and the time Papa brought me back from the dead. Three if you want to count the time I was shot. I'm unique."

"Birthdays don't work like that," Robert said. "Not even if you're…" He whispered the word: "A hybrid."

Lily's hand jumped to her chest, feeling for her scars. "Please don't call me that."

"Why not?"

"I don't like it."

A grasshopper settled on the corner of her dress. She watched it idly. It seemed so real and yet so mechanical at the same time – just like her. She hated the word hybrid; all she ever wanted was to be normal.

Malkin snapped at the insect and it hopped away between the ears of corn.

"What did you do that for?" Lily cried.

"You think too much," he grumbled. "Besides, I missed it, didn't I?"

"Because you're not fast enough." Robert picked another dandelion clock.



"How's this for fast?" Malkin nipped at the fluffy seeds, scattering them.

"Hey!" Robert cried angrily. "Why don't you—"

But before he could finish, a loud *tuk-tuk-tuk* of turning propellers interrupted him. An immense zeppelin, decorated with the insignia of The Royal Dirigible Company, bobbed overhead.

"The night-mail! Finally!" Lily whooped above the din. "I knew it would arrive!" She took out her pocket watch and flipped it open to consult the time. "An hour behind schedule."

"Better late than never!" Robert said, wedging his flat cap onto his head. "Come on, let's go meet it." He snatched up his bicycle, which lay nearby in a flattened ring of corn, and wheeled it to the edge of the field.

"On your feet, Malkin." Lily dusted the earth from the front of her pinny.

"If you insist." The fox leaped up and shook the burrs from his fur as he watched Lily grab her bicycle.

The two of them trotted though the tall grass. By the time they reached the gate, Robert had already pushed it open and was in the lane, sitting on his saddle, waiting.

