# The Jewelled Jaguar

For
Tasha and Ross,
my daughter, my son – my best of best friends.

# The Jewelled Jaguar

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# 1
# CRASH

When a hole in the earth opened up and swallowed my mum, everything changed.

It started on such an ordinary day. It was Sunday and sunny for the first time in weeks. We were weeding the flesh-eaters.

'You do the cobra lilies, Griff. I'll sort the monkey cups,' Mum said. 'Then we'll work on the Venus flytraps.'

I tapped at the soft soil with my trowel. It was too hot to put in much effort. And I didn't like those plants. They ate live creatures. Mum loved them because Mum hated flies. In our house there

was a can of insect spray in every corner of every room. Her hungry flesh-eaters were just the first line of defence in her war against all the flies on the planet. If a fly survived them and flew into the house, it got zapped.

That night, after my shower, my skin buzzed from the day in the sun. I was tired and fell asleep quickly and deeply.

#

The crash, like thunder, jolted me awake. I was thrown from one side of the bed to the other. The house shook. With a crack like gunfire, the window shattered and glass exploded inwards.

'Mu-u-um!'

My bed tilted and I clung to the headboard to stop myself rolling off. It must be an earthquake.

My wardrobe rocked, juddered forward and toppled with another crash.

'Mu-u-um!' I yelled again.

In the dawn light, I could see my door swing open and twist on its hinges. The whole room sloped to one side. I watched my duvet curl and slither off the bed as if it was alive.



'MU-U-UM!'

Finally everything stopped, except the screaming car alarm. Its headlights flashed on and off on my bedroom wall in rhythm with my heartbeat.



# 2
# HOLE

I don't know for how long I clung to the headboard. When I got the courage to move, my legs shook so much I couldn't stand. Dust swirled in through the door like smoke. I coughed and rubbed my eyes.

The floor sloped downwards so I had to crawl on my hands and knees to reach the door. There was another deep boom and my bedside table slid towards me, thumping into my side. With a groan, I pushed it away.

The dust was thicker in the hallway, and there was a stench like dirty water, like drains. It filled my



nose and throat, and I heaved. Mum wasn't in her bedroom. Sobbing with fright, I lurched through the chaos, shouting for her. Stuff had fallen out of cupboards and off shelves. Cans rolled across the kitchen floor. Boxes of cereal had spilled on to the counter tops. The kitchen table was on its side, cups and plates smashed beneath it.

What was happening?

Nothing made sense.

Mum wasn't in the kitchen, lounge or bathroom. Another boom and shudder: pictures and photographs dropped from the walls with a crash of breaking glass. I curled up in a ball with my arms around my head until the tremors stopped.

A cold draft blew up the hallway towards me. The front door swung on its hinges, creaking like old timbers. I crawled towards it, yanked it open and stared into … nothing.

The garden was gone.

The garage was gone; the lawn was gone; the trees were gone. Even the flesh-eating plants were gone.

Inches from the doorstep, where the garden should have been was a massive hole.

A tree twisted with a loud crack. It bowed, thrashed its leaves, and was sucked down into the seething mass of earth and rubble. The ground rippled, and more earth twisted in on itself like a dark whirlpool. Land was sliding slowly into the pit. Everything was being sucked down. The back end of Mum's car stuck out of the hole, lights flashing and its alarm screaming.

And then I knew: my mum was down there, too.

I leapt into the swirling mass.

The soil dragged at my body, trying to suck me under. I scrabbled desperately at the earth and rubble, screaming, 'Mu-u-um!'

My mouth filled with dirt. I gagged and spat. Something above me snapped and fell, smashing into the side of my head. I didn't feel the pain. I kept on clawing at the earth – digging, digging, digging.

Then I saw the flash of purple. Mum's dressing gown.

I reached for her, just as arms grabbed me from above and hauled me out.



I tried to fight them off, swinging my fists, wild with terror and rage.

'My mum's down there! My mum's down there!'

But they were too strong for me. I was dragged away still screaming, 'Mu-u-um!'

#

I was in an ambulance, and all around were noise and people and flashing lights. I shook so hard my teeth rattled. A paramedic put his arm around my shoulder and said something. He dabbed at my head. The white cloth came away bright red with blood. I couldn't work out what he was saying. I watched his mouth move, but he didn't make any sense.

Nothing felt real. Through the doors of the ambulance, I saw everything in snapshots. A police officer waved people away, another cordoned off our home with a reel of tape. Neighbours hovered in silent groups just behind the hedge. They peered into the ambulance at me, their eyes wide with shock. If I turned towards them, they looked away again.

Another officer stuck his head round the door. 'Griffin? We're doing our best to get your mother out. We're not exactly sure what happened here, it's a bit of a mystery. Hang on in there, son. Okay?'

I nodded. When I lifted my arm to pull the blanket around me, a pain like a bolt of electricity shot from my neck down through my back.

The police officer patted my shoulder. He raised his voice, 'Is there any way we can shut off that bloody car alarm?'

A man climbed in and sat beside me. He wore dirty jeans and a ragged t-shirt covered in dust, and he smelt of oil. I thought he was one of the rescuers.

He swept the thick blond curls from his eyes. 'Griffin, isn't it? I'm a doctor. Dr Blyth Merrick. I've sent someone to tell Rhodri, your uncle, what's happened. He can meet us at the hospital.'

I wasn't sure if my uncle would want to meet us – or if I wanted him there. Mum had fallen out with her brother – they hadn't spoken in years. I didn't really know him. Before I could say anything, the doctor took my hands in his and I saw, with surprise, that mine were covered in thick, black mud – and blood.



'Looks like the paramedics have taken good care of you, but we need to get you to the hospital to make sure there are no bones broken. There's that cut on your head, too. They're still trying to get to your mum.'

We avoided each other's eyes and sat in silence.

There was a triumphant shout. 'We've got her!' The doctor shot out of the ambulance. I tried to follow. But as my feet hit the ground I felt the world spin in on me and everything went black.



# 3
# HELICOPTER

I came to, leaning against the garden fence with my head between my knees. The paramedic had his arm around my shoulders.

'S'okay, son. Breathe. Breathe.'

The doctor ran over and knelt in front of me. He lifted my chin and looked into my eyes. 'Are you okay?'

'Mum, is she? Is she…?'

'Alive? Yes, Griffin. Just. But she's alive. God knows how.'

I felt hot tears burn my eyes.

'She's in a bad way though. I've called the…'



The rumble of an engine and the *twop twop twop* of helicopter blades interrupted him. Above us the vivid red and green of the Wales Air Ambulance swung into view.

Dr Merrick jumped up. 'They're here.'

I tried to stand, but my legs wouldn't work.

As the helicopter descended, we could see the dark glasses and helmets of the pilot and paramedics inside. The down blast set a small tornado of dust, leaves and twigs swirling through the air. The helicopter hovered for a moment like a giant dragonfly, then made a sudden tilt left and dropped down past the hedge into the field. We heard the blades slow to a stop and in seconds three men dressed in red ran past us carrying a stretcher and a bag.

'Where is she?' one shouted.

The men returned, two carrying the stretcher between them. The other held a bag of clear liquid above his head – it was attached to my mother's arm by a plastic tube.

'Mum?' I grabbed the side of the stretcher. As I looked down at the still body of my mother, my stomach churned. There was a blanket up to her neck, but I could see her battered face was swollen out of shape and coated with mud.

'It's Dr Merrick, isn't it? Are you coming with us?' one of the helicopter men asked.

'*I'm* going with her. She's *my* mum.' I tried to sound determined but my voice wavered.

The paramedic gave the doctor a warning look and shook his head. 'Not the lad,' he said.

I got a tighter grip on the stretcher. 'She's *my* mum!' I wailed.

The doctor gently but firmly uncurled my fingers. 'Let her go, Griffin. We have to get her to the hospital immediately. I'll be with her. You'll follow in the ambulance.'

He tried to put his arm across my shoulder to lead me away but I shrugged it off.

The ambulance smelt like chemicals and as we sped through the streets drips and bottles rattled. Every bump we hit jarred. We pulled up at the hospital. My muscles ached and my head pounded.

They lowered me down on the stretcher from the back of the ambulance and the paramedics pushed me through automatic doors into the hospital.

A nurse hurried up to us. I grabbed her hand. 'Please, where's my mum? Is she okay?'



'You're Griffin Tudor? Your mother's in surgery. Let us take care of *you* now and I'll get you an update as soon as possible, I promise.'

'We'll need X-rays and some sutures in that head wound,' someone behind me said.

The next few hours were a blur. I remember the X-ray machine standing at the centre of a large room and wincing with pain as the nurse helped me into a stiff, green hospital gown. The mud and blood were bathed gently from my face and hands. There were clicks and whirs and flashing lights, and whispered instructions from the radiographer.

'Turn on your side, please, Griffin? I know you're hurting. I'm sorry. Almost finished.'

In a different room, the sharp smell of antiseptic. The buzz of hair clippers and tight sting of a needle as stitches sewed up the gash in my head. I didn't feel scared. I didn't feel anything. Just numb, like stone.

They pushed me to a hospital room in a wheelchair and helped me into a bed of crisp white sheets. Somewhere, in another room, a muted television played a game show. People laughed and applauded.

There were kind words everywhere but no one answered the one question I was afraid to ask. 'Is my mother still alive?'

#

Uncle Rhodri looked like Jesus. He burst into my room, his long, dark hair flowing over his shoulders. He was carrying a bunch of weeds.

'My God, Griffin, what happened? They said a hole opened under the house. But how? What…?'

I shook my head.

'How is she? Have you seen her?' He dropped on to the chair beside me. His hand trembled as he stroked his beard. 'And you? You're hurt too.' He reached out to touch my head.

I flinched away.

'Sorry.' His eyes brimmed with tears. 'They said you jumped in after her. Tried to get her out. My God, Griffin,' he said again.

Just then, the doctor arrived. I almost didn't recognise him. He'd showered and his hair hung in damp curls. His lab coat was so clean and white it glowed.

The two men hugged.



'Blyth and I have been friends for years,' Rhodri explained. 'He's a friend of your mum's as well.' He looked down at the floor. 'Well, *was*,' he mumbled.

The doctor sat at the foot of my bed. 'She's out of surgery, Griffin, but she's got several broken bones and massive contusions.'

'Cuts,' Rhodri whispered to me.

'Yes, sorry. Cuts. She's still unconscious. We'll know more tomorrow.'

'Can we see her, doctor?' I asked.

He smiled at me. 'Blyth, call me Blyth. Tomorrow would be better. Griffin, we're keeping you in overnight – just in case. Then you can go home with your uncle here.'

Rhodri saw the look of surprise on my face. 'Yes, you'll be staying with us for a while, Griffin. Until your mum is well again. That'll be fun, won't it?'

He didn't sound too sure about the fun bit and neither was I.

'I can stay with my friend,' I tried. As I said it I remembered that my best friend would be flying out to Spain to spend the summer with his dad.

'Wouldn't dream of letting you go anywhere else. We're family, aren't we? Family sticks together in tough times,' Rhodri said, forcing a smile.

I was too tired and in too much pain to argue. I turned away mumbling, 'I s'pose.'

We spent an awkward afternoon trying to find something to talk about until I dozed off.

Rhodri gently shook me awake. 'I hate to leave you here but I'll be back first thing tomorrow to pick you up.'

'Mum?' I asked.

'Still unconscious but doing okay.'

He realised he was still grasping the bunch of weeds. 'Oh, these are from your Aunt Opal.' He dropped them on the end of my bed. 'It's lemon balm and valerian. She says they might help calm you.'

As Rhodri left, a fly crept from inside the bunch of herbs, crawled across the blanket, and zig-zagged into the air. I gave the dead flowers a toe punt and kicked them off the bed.





# 4
# SLEEP

My body hurt all over. A nurse gave me pills and I think they made me drowsy. I tried to get comfortable in the strange bed and thought, How could things have changed so fast? Last night everything was fine, everything was normal.

*We'd finished weeding the garden and were sitting outside in the evening sunlight. With a smile, Mum took a card from her dressing-gown pocket and passed it to me. It said:*