

First published 2019 by Macmillan Children's Books
an imprint of Pan Macmillan
20 New Wharf Road, London N1 9RR
Associated companies throughout the world
www.panmacmillan.com

ISBN 978-1-5098-7421-7

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1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

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

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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‘So comes snow after fire, and even
dragons have their endings.’

J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*



# Seven Months Earlier

## Eastern Healing, Chinatown, London

When the last patient had left, ducking out into the drizzle, Kai helped his father tidy up. He placed the acupuncture needles carefully in the sharps bin, mopped the floor and dusted the walnut cabinet that held Dr Liu's store of Chinese herbal medicine.



Most days, he enjoyed working at his dad's practice after school. Dr Liu was a legendary Chinese healer, renowned for the life-changing treatments he offered his adoring patients. One famous client had told the *Sunday Times* that Dr Liu could just about 'bring folks back from the dead'. Kai hoped to do the same when he grew up.

Today, though, all he cared about was fighting dragons.

'*Hǔ zǐ*, I have to go out on an errand. Put your game away and do your homework.'

'Dad, I'm not your Little Tiger Cub any more,' Kai complained without looking up from his screen. 'You have to stop with the baby nicknames. I'm almost thirteen.'

'That's not how parenting works, *Hǔ zǐ*. You'll still be my Little Tiger Cub when you're fifty. Put that phone down and lock the door after me. We're closed.'

Kai tucked the phone into his pocket but returned to his game as soon as his father was gone. He'd summoned the dragon using a cheat. Now it was circling. His adrenaline spiked as it sent a plume of purple dragon's breath his way. If he could capture it, he'd be able to—

The shop bell clanged, almost giving him a heart

attack. Absorbed in his battle, he half shouted, 'We're closed! Come back tomorrow.'

'I don't think so.'

The door swung open, letting in a whiff of rain. Shiny black shoes advanced. Irritated, Kai dragged his eyes from the dragon. Dread shot through him. The owner of the shoes was masked. Black leather gloves protruded from the sleeves of his long, black coat. A hat was pulled low over his eyes.

'Where's your father?'

Kai thought frantically. If he told the stranger – most likely a robber – that his dad would be back any minute, would it scare him off or make the situation worse?

'Sorry, Dr Liu is out,' he hedged. 'Can I help you?'

His phone was in his hand, invisible below the countertop. Glancing down quickly, he tapped nine twice. Before he could tap it a third time and summon the police, the phone was plucked from his grasp. He watched in shock as it was smashed to pieces with a tyre iron.

'No more bright ideas if you want to live to see tomorrow,' the stranger said pleasantly. 'Now, where does your father keep the miracle cure?' He pulled open a couple of drawers and dashed their contents

to the ground. 'Don't play dumb – you know the one I mean.'

Another drawer smashed, shooting pink 'five-flavour' powder everywhere.

'Stop!' Fear gave way to fury as Kai saw his father's life's work being trashed by the thug. 'I don't know what miracle cure you're on about. If you're sick, make an appointment. I'm sure my father can help you. He's the best.'

The man gave a dry laugh. 'We know he's the best. That's why I'm here.'

The door jangled and Dr Liu walked in, shaking an umbrella. 'Can you believe it, *Hǔ zǐ* – I forgot my wallet—' He froze, taking in the ransacked drawers, the masked stranger and the tyre iron. 'What's going on! *Hǔ zǐ*, are you hurt?'

'Nobody's hurt, and if you have the good sense to cooperate, Dr Liu, no one will be. Give me what I need, and I'll be gone in five minutes.'

Before Kai could run to his dad, the stranger, so tall that his hat brushed the low ceiling, moved to stand between them.

Dr Liu's grip tightened on his umbrella. Then, thinking the better of it, he laid it down and lifted his hands in surrender. 'My wallet's on the desk in my

consulting room. Please take it and go.'

The stranger smirked. 'It's not your money I'm after, Doctor – it's your medicine. Not for me, mind. I'm asking for a friend.'

'What's wrong with your friend?'

'My friend's dying, but you are going to fix that.'

Dr Liu gave a nervous laugh. 'Dear sir, it appears you've been misled. I am a simple herbalist and acupuncturist.' He jumped as the tyre iron destroyed a tray of glass jars, sending splinters flying. Shakily, he went on: 'If I can assist in easing any symptoms or suffering, it would be an honour. But first I would need to see the patient.'

'That won't be possible. You'll have to make do with medical records.'

A sheaf of documents was slapped down on the counter. Kai noticed that every mention of both patient and physician had been removed.

He also tried to spot details about the stranger that he could later describe to the police, but, apart from his height and English accent, there wasn't much to go on. His eye, skin and hair colour were hidden by his hat, gloves and mask, and there were no visible clothing labels or scars. The only oddity was his shoelaces – sky-blue against glossy black leather.

His father scanned the medical records of the unknown patient with growing horror. He thrust them from him. 'What you're asking is beyond the power of any doctor! It is in the realm of gods.'

The stranger was unmoved. 'Here's what's going to happen, Dr Liu. You're going to give me your finest miracle cure. On the first day of every month, you will leave a fresh batch in Hyde Park. We'll tell you where. For every month the patient survives, your son gets to stay alive. If Patient X dies, the kid dies too.'

'No!'

'I'm afraid so.' The intruder glanced at the clock on the wall. 'We're out of time. Give me what I need, or face the consequences.'

Dr Liu didn't hesitate. He went directly to an unlabelled drawer at the bottom of the cabinet and unlocked it using a key he'd told Kai was lost. Lifting out a pouch, he tipped misshapen lumps of brown, purple and grey on to the counter.

The stranger nodded approvingly. 'Is that what I think it is?'

'*Long chi*. Dragon's teeth.'

It was as if Kai had been parachuted into a real-life version of his game. His father selected two

'teeth', crushed them into powder and added them to a tincture of herbs, ginger and ginseng. 'Tell the patient to take six drops under the tongue at the stroke of twelve, twice a day.'

A black-gloved hand spirited the bottle away into a coat pocket. 'Your cooperation is noted, Dr Liu. If you value your son's life, you'd be wise to keep up the good work and tell no one about our . . . arrangement.'

The shop bell tolled and the man stepped out into the rainy dark. Kai clung to his father the way he hadn't since he was five. Dr Liu's heart pounded against his ear.

'Dragon's teeth?' Kai burst out. 'But dragons aren't real, Dad. Those fossils in the pouch, where did they come from?'

His father seemed to have aged ten years. 'That's a tale for another day, son. All that matters is that the *long chi* tincture helps his patient.'

Kai felt cold to the core. 'Will it?'

'There are stories . . . We have to hope they are true.'

'And what if they aren't?'

His father gripped his hand. '*Hǔ zǐ*, you're going to have to trust me. I will do anything on earth to keep you safe. Anything at all.'



# 1

# Aftershock

## Bluebell Bay, Jurassic Coast, England

'Are you *sure* this is a good idea?' asked Kat Wolfe.

'Positive,' puffed Harper Lamb, struggling up the cliff path. 'How else would I get to see the mystery mansion I've heard so much about? Didn't you say that this is the only way up to it?'

'Yes, but –'

Kat stopped in shock as Harper suddenly tripped on the most treacherous section of the climb – the part where the railings ended, and the cliff edge

was exposed. With nothing to stop her, she pitched head first towards oblivion. Leaping to grab her best friend's arm, Kat caught a dizzying glimpse of waves foaming round the rocks in the bay far below.

'Let's come back next week, or the one after that,' she suggested, steering Harper to the safe side of the path and getting scratched by brambles for her efforts. 'We have the whole of the summer holidays. It's not as if Avalon Heights is going anywhere.'

The American girl polished sea spray from her glasses before answering. Three and a half months after breaking both legs falling off her racehorse, Charming Outlaw, she was still weak and she tired easily. But, though her heart was pounding practically out of her chest, and her long-unused thigh muscles were burning, she refused to admit defeat.

Throughout the solving of their last case, Harper had been confined to the sofa in Paradise House, the home she shared with her palaeontologist father and their housekeeper, Nettie. The girls had met soon after Kat, whose mum was the seaside town's resident vet, started a pet-sitting agency to make extra pocket money. Harper's dad had hired her to exercise Charming Outlaw while his daughter was in plaster.

Around the same time, Kat had been asked to

take care of an Amazon parrot then living at Avalon Heights. Harper vividly recalled Kat describing her first visit to the house. She'd clambered up the cliff path in freezing fog, only to find the front door ajar and the parrot agitated and gibbering, his owner missing. A series of strange events had convinced Kat that the bird's owner was the victim of foul play. She'd turned to Harper for help solving the mystery. It had been the start of an adventure that had almost cost them their lives.

Today, the sky was a cheerful blue, scrubbed clean of cloud. The July sun felt toasty on Harper's skin. Even so, a chill rippled through her as she gazed up at the steel and glass house, its deck jutting like a clenched jaw over the ocean.

'Earth to Harper. Want to turn back?' Kat was saying.

'Why? Are you scared?'

'What? Of course not! Why . . . ? Are you?'

Harper grinned. 'Not today. For ages, I was so creeped out by your stories about Avalon Heights that I'd have been petrified to set foot in it. But I don't feel that way now. I'm super excited. I can't wait to see if it's how I pictured it.'

And with that, she set off up the final steep stretch

of path, wincing but determined not to complain. Kat hurried after her.

A minute later, they were on the steps of the futuristic house. A swinging 'For Rent' sign screeched forlornly in the wind.

Kat rang the doorbell.

Harper stared at her. 'I thought you said the place was empty.'

'It is. The estate agent came into the clinic yesterday to buy puppy food. She told my mum that it's taking time to find the right tenant. I'm just checking that there's no one else here. The agency might have sent in a cleaner or handyman.'

She jabbed the bell again.

Harper was now having second thoughts. 'What happens if we're caught? Do you think we'll be arrested?'

'I doubt it.' Kat tapped the entry code into a security panel. 'Everything that made the house secret and special is gone. But it's still private property. We'd get into trouble for trespassing. We'll have to be quick. In and out. A peek is all you get. And *don't* touch anything.'

She frowned at the lock and tried different combinations.

A sharp gust sent another shiver through Harper. Why in the world had she told Kat that she'd die of curiosity if she didn't get to see inside the house that had figured so powerfully in their last mystery? Right now, she wished she was safely on the sofa at Paradise House. Up close, Avalon Heights had a chilly, unwelcoming air.

'I've changed my mind. Let's go.'

Steel bolts snapped back. The heavy door swung open. Kat ignored her and disappeared inside. Harper followed reluctantly, leaving her trainers beside Kat's in the hall.

The minute she walked in, she forgot to be nervous. Forgot that just because the previous tenant had given Kat the door code, didn't mean it was OK to use it. Forgot everything except the mind-bending house, with its all-glass front and eye-popping views. The glittering indigo sea seemed to spill in through the windows in a sunlit wave.

'Oh, Kat, it's even better than I imagined! My dream house times ten. I'd move in today if I could. Look at the home cinema and – omigosh, is that a gym? Uh, what's wrong?'

Kat was at the foot of the steel staircase, staring up, her face alert. She put her finger to her lips and

mouthed: '*Did you hear that?*'

'*Hear what?*' Harper mouthed back.

'*A sort of tortured groan.*'

Harper heard only the muffled crash of waves. Now that she was inside it, the house didn't seem scary in the least. 'Could be a bird in the roof, or maybe the water pipes,' she said, not bothering to lower her voice. 'That can happen if a place has been empty for a while. Stop being a scaredy-cat, Kat, and show me around.'

She began to twirl around the vast living room, wobbly as a newborn foal.

Kat cast one more glance up the stairs before deciding she was worrying about nothing. She skated across the polished floorboards in her socks, skidding to a halt and taking a bow. Harper danced her way into the kitchen, singing as she went.

'Careful!' Kat laughed, jumping to save a vase that Harper almost swept to the floor. 'If we break something, it'll take a lot of explaining.'

She peered under the breakfast bar. 'Remember me telling you how I found an army-type briefcase here? I'm sure it came from a hidden compartment in the kitchen. I still have it, you know. There's nothing interesting in it. Just some old—'

There was a crash. Kat sprang up, nearly bashing her head. 'Oh, Harper, what have you done!'

A shelf lined with dinosaur mugs now had a glaring gap. *Tyrannosaurus rex* was in pieces. Harper was aghast. 'It wasn't me – I promise! I was nowhere near it.'

'A poltergeist did it – is that what you're saying?'

'Probably the exact same poltergeist you heard moaning and groaning upstairs,' retorted Harper. 'Seriously, Kat, I was standing right here when *T. rex* sprang into the air as if it was jet-propelled. But don't worry. I've seen those mugs in the deli. I'll buy one with my pocket money and we'll figure out—'

She clutched the kitchen bench. 'What's going on?'

The floor and shelves had begun to shudder. Pots clattered against saucepans and the row of mugs clinked madly. In the living room, the chandelier tinkled like a wind chime in a gale.

As abruptly as it had started, the shaking stopped, but not before the shelf had ejected another dinosaur.

'The poor stegosaurus!' Harper poked at its shattered remains. 'I love those.'

Kat was wide-eyed. 'Never mind the stegosaurus. What just happened?'

'Last time I felt vibrations like that was in San

Francisco during an earthquake. By California standards it was barely a blip, but I wouldn't want to go through another.'

'We don't really have earthquakes in the UK – not serious ones anyway,' Kat reassured her. 'West Dorset had a tremor last year, but Mum says it wouldn't have cracked an egg. Maybe they're holding a parade or a drill at the military base across town? The soldiers are forever practising blowing stuff up. If it was a big enough blast, we'd feel the aftershock.'

'Up here? At the top of the cliff?' Harper looked doubtful. 'Kat, what if the house really is haunted?'

'Don't ghosts prefer gothic ruins?' joked Kat, although in truth she *was* spooked. She fetched a dustpan and swept up the mess. 'Let's get out of here before anything else is destroyed and we get the blame.'

'We can't leave before I've been out on the deck!' cried Harper. 'Oh, please, Kat. That's the part I've been looking forward to most.'

Kat glanced at the chandelier. The last time she'd visited, a craftily concealed CCTV camera had recorded her every move. It was gone now, but she couldn't shake the feeling they were being watched.

'All right, but hurry.' She put on her trainers, ready to leave.

‘Hurrying,’ said Harper, pulling on her own shoes and limping across the living room. ‘Moving faster than the speed of light.’ She slid open the glass door and stepped out on to the deck. ‘Wow! Double wow. Imagine filling that hot tub with bubbles and sitting gazing out to sea.’

Kat said, ‘Can we go now?’

‘In a second.’ Harper put her eye to the telescope and rotated it slowly. She took in the snaking gold line of the Jurassic Coast, the lush green fields and the razor wire and guard towers of the army base, before turning to the turquoise cove that gave Bluebell Bay its name. The pretty pastel town formed a crescent around it.

‘Kat, I never knew it was possible to see the whole of Bluebell Bay. There are no soldiers on the firing range, so it can’t have been a bomb drill that shook the house. And it wasn’t a quake because Edith, our favourite librarian, is chatting away to some kids outside the Armchair Adventurers’ Club. None of them seem bothered. Nor do the newlyweds arriving at the Grand Hotel Majestic in their Rolls Royce. Dad was invited to an event there last month. He says the place is spectacular, and he’s never normally impressed by anything newer than a hundred million years old.’

Kat was hardly listening. She wished they'd never come. 'I'm counting to three and then I'm going – with or without you.'

'OK, OK – keep your wig on.' But Harper stayed where she was, transfixed by the view.

'One . . . two . . .'

'Hey, what's that?' The telescope tilted sharply.

'Don't know and don't care,' said Kat, losing patience. 'I'm leaving.'

'There's a dog. I think it might have fallen down the cliff.'

'A dog? Let me see! Is it hurt?'

Kat flew to Harper's side and pressed her eye to the viewfinder. A brown-and-white blur was moving behind a gorse bush on the old cliff steps. She adjusted the focus, but the creature had lain down. All she could make out was an ear.

She leaned over the railings in an effort to get closer to the steps that zigzagged down the cliff. The minutes ticked by with no further movement. 'Do you think it's climbed up on its own?'

'I'm sure it's fine,' replied Harper, more with hope than conviction. 'Probably scampering around Bluebell Bay by now, stealing sausages.'

A howl of pain cut through the air. From that

moment on, Harper knew that nothing short of a nuclear disaster would convince Kat to leave without the dog. Nor did Harper want her to. It's just that there were two ways of rescuing it, and she was already sure that she was not going to like the Kat Wolfe way.

'Kat, wait!'

It was too late. Kat was already halfway down the fire ladder on the side of the deck. She ran along the cliff and leaned past the warning sign at the top of the crumbling steps.

'There it is!' she shouted over her shoulder. 'Looks like a Border collie. Seems to be trapped. I'm going down to try to free it.'

'Are you nuts?' demanded Harper from the deck. 'Those steps are closed to the public for good reason. Any second now, they might fall into the sea. And if the dog is hurt, it could bite you. What if it has rabies? Don't move. I'm on my way!'

Harper left the house via the front door and rushed to Kat's side. 'Let's call your mum. She'll know what to do.'

'Mum will be operating now. By the time she gets the message and calls the fire brigade or whoever, it might be too late – especially if the dog is bleeding or

severely dehydrated. In emergency situations, every minute counts.'

'What about Sergeant Singh?' persisted Harper. 'If he's not out chasing burglars, he could sprint up here and lend a hand.'

Kat shook her head. 'If the dog is nervous, more people will only make it worse. Harper, these steps have been shut for years. There are whole gorse bushes and hay fields growing up through the cracks. They're not going to collapse in the next ten minutes. The quicker I go, the quicker I'll be back.'

Without waiting for a reply, she squeezed past the warning sign and started down the steps. She rounded the bend and was gone.

Left alone, Harper suddenly felt fearful. What if Kat fell? Fifty metres below, the waves steamed up to the rocks with unnerving force. She tried to comfort herself with the knowledge that the cliff had stood for millions of years and survived marauding dinosaurs. It didn't help. She kept envisioning Kat being crushed flatter than a tortilla by falling boulders.

'Kat! Come back! Please, let's call the emergency services!'

Invisible, Kat responded in the calm, patient voice she used around frightened animals. 'Harper, I'm

close to the dog, so I'm going to go quiet in case I scare it. Don't panic if you don't hear anything.'

*Don't panic if you don't hear anything.*

Easier said than done.