FIRE GIRL, FOREST BOY

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This book is dedicated to anyone who needs
a little inner fire.

If you catch the light right you can get the look on someone's face. The look that comes and goes in the bazillionth of a second.

The one you had the day the letter came. The one that promised to change our lives forever. That's as much as I saw before you shut it and yourself away in the study. 'Cept you came back out.

And it never did.

Ever.

If I had a camera –

CLICK –

I could've got it.

That look.

That and the one you had yesterday.

Before *they* came.

The people I trust as much as green mambas. (No offence to the mambas.)

And you disappeared.

If I had a camera I could've shown everyone what

their faces look like at 5 a.m. this morning when they walk into my room and tell me that you've gone. That you've left me alone. Lost in the Land of the Sun.

And if I had a camera I could show you what they look like right now when I'm hanging out of a tree in the cloud forest with a sloth. And light balls are falling out of the sky.

Maya

I don't have a camera but I do have my brain.

CLICK.

And that can take pictures no one can rub out.

And no one can make it stop.

CLICK CLICK CLICK.

I'm Maya Anderson and I've taken pictures that way since forever.

My head's like an iPhone I can scroll through. I can flip it back to playgroup, or the sandwich I had on Monday, then forward to now – and all those shots that I took are there, frozen in time.

I have memories I don't know what to do with and ones I like to visit, like an album. It's handy for faces, and for moments like when you're in the middle of the jungle in the midst of an unnatural phenomenon.

Moments like now.

Maybe if I can freeze-frame fast enough I'll find out why it's happening.

Maybe if I look close enough I can find out where you are.

And maybe if I could use my eyes like projector lenses, I could show everyone all the light that's inside me that no one ever seems to notice. And I could burn so bright I'd put a hole right through the wall and toast the feet of the lantern flies lined up on the other side.

Raul

In my life I dream of what's on the other side. Over the border from the hairy eyebrow of South America. Peru.

The Sacred Valley.

Ollantaytambo.

That's where I live.

But it isn't who I am.

The land of the Incas. We're on the Urubamba River. The town with the wild dogs who chase plastic bags in packs, and the water running in channels down the streets. Our house is on the hill. We live where the water starts to run.

Ollantaytambo's like a labyrinth, a grid of cobblestone roads. Walk around and you'll see dark open doorways, chickens wandering in and out, and plants twisting their way up and over walls, pushing their way through everything.

I wasn't always a townie – we moved here two years ago. I'm still not. In my heart.

My body disagrees though. *Call that a jump?* it

says. I can't even spring a wall. I used to shimmy up banana trunks no problem. I lived with the trees. Brick and stone and roads are new to me. Still. Even after two years it still feels weird.

The day we moved here I dreamt of escaping it. Like a frog out of a wet fist.

BOING.

Now that's a jump.

The feeling still burns inside me. My legs twitch. For the past two years they've wanted to run back home to put things right. Things that went so wrong no one thinks they can.

At night, while Mami and Papi wash dishes and dance to the radio, and my little brothers go wild in the streets, I climb out of the town and sit on the mountain staring at the stars, dreaming of how to do it, how to turn the world inside out and jump in.

Sometimes you're born knowing there's a destiny inside you. Something to take you away from where you are and into something

BIGGER.

I didn't know the answer was going to fall into my lap like a hot stone spat out of a fire, bright and strong and burning a hole through everything.

Maya

Lantern flies?

Yeah, right now we're in the Amazon Basin, Peru. Not we. Used to be we.

Now I guess I mean me.

Maya Anderson. Daughter of Dr Handi Anderson. The Light Man. That's what everyone calls him.

Everyone who knows.

Which is the world. The science world anyway.

Not that they know about me. To them I'm just a shadow, sitting at the back of the lecture hall while Dad works, lighting up the faces of everyone in the room, talking physics and particles and mysteries of the universe, and I watch with my homework (undone), an apple and a camera brain.

Seeing what everyone else doesn't.

Which is a lot.

It's amazing what people don't notice.

Sometimes I flip the pictures in my head back to my cot as a baby with my mum gone. She left when

I was three. Don't ask. No one else does. Not any more. And when no one talks about her the gap she's left gets bigger.

We have one picture of her in the flat. Just one. I think she looks like me. As I get older I think it more. I think Dad thinks so too. The way he stares at me. The way he never talks about her. The way he backs off into his work if I try to ask.

When I was little Dad put up cardboard animal mobiles that hung over candle lanterns in all the rooms of our flat. When they caught the light they danced on the walls. I used to stare up at the mobile shadows dancing, wondering where she went, like someone just snuffed the light out, like a candle.

Light.

Light is Dad's thing. It's what he researches. He believes that in its centre is 'catan' – a kind of nectar for the soul, affecting moods and dreams.

People think he's stupid.

People think he's a genius.

Fifty/fifty?

I dunno.

I think he's Dad who burns fish fingers and forgets to wash gym socks. And whose research means we

get to travel all over the world, poking at ideas. Soaking up stories and sunshine. Last year it was Norway, before that the Arctic. It's how I got to meet Inuits and icebergs and Vikings.

And it's how we're here in the Amazon in the cloud forest, with dragonflies as thick as your thumb and trees with teeth spikes.

And it's how there's a woman outside my door who knocks. A woman who arrived yesterday with a man with a red face and sweat patches, who I trust as much as a bag of pit vipers. No offence to the vipers who can kill you with their sixth sense. A woman who comes in and asks me to sit down. I don't.

Who tells me that Dad's gone.

POOF.

In his own batch of cloud smoke.

And gives me a note that says he isn't coming back.

Raul

Dad works as a trail leader, bird spotter, cook. Whatever gets us the work, whatever gets us the money. It didn't used to be that way. We didn't used to need money. Not much. When we lived in the rainforest we grew and found and hunted what we needed, and traded for the rest.

We weren't cut off behind bricks and streets with light switches and taps and bills. We were free. Till we weren't. Till we were sliced apart from the jungle like a blade cutting the stone out of an avocado.

POP.

And everything changed.

These days we work and buy.

Lots of people buy.

Tourists come to the village and buy the food in the restaurants, the cloth people weave, the jewellery they make. They walk the Inca trail. Camping in the mist on mountains so high you can hardly breathe, in orange pup tents like cocoons. Standing in Inti

Punku, the Sacred Valley's sun gate, at 5 a.m., walking into Machu Picchu, the city in the sky, walking into the past.

We show them the way, how to stand aside for the porters running the paths with the tents and the food on their backs, how to tape their blisters and fill their bellies with rice and hot bananas.

Sometimes I go too, if I can help out. If I keep my head down, don't get in the way and don't cost anything.

If I keep invisible.

School doesn't like it, but school can't hold everyone. Everyone needs money and some kids I know make stuff and sell it. They'd rather have the money than the facts. What's the point of learning stuff you'll never use, about places you'll never go, things you'll never see.

Money gets you places.

Money gets results.

I like walking the trails, passing through the valley of orchids and up into the ruins, the town above the clouds. I like the way the mountains open out and the condors come. Birds as big as boats that can keep six kilos of food in their throat sack.

I learned that from the other guides. Condors are the birds of the gods.

People come here from all over the world. Last summer a walker called Rick from Idaho gave me his watch.

We were sitting round the campfire, looking at the sky.

He told me his daughter had died. 'What's the point in time?' he said. 'It just makes us feel in control of things we have no control over at all.' He unclicked it off his wrist and we stared at the moon.

The watch has a moon on it. It moves round with the time and the days.

When I look at the watch I think about Rick and I think he's wrong.

Days help us count down to something.

Days move us forward.

With days we can make plans.

With plans we can change who we are and who we want to be.

With plans we can escape.