VOYAGE of the SPARROWHAWK

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For Jane, Eleanor, Matilda and Julia.

In memory of Dobby, a most excellent chihuahua.

'I ought to say,' explained Pooh as they walked down to the shore of the island, 'that it isn't just an ordinary sort of boat. Sometimes it's a Boat, and sometimes it's more of an Accident. It all depends.'

'Depends on what?'

'On whether I'm on the top of it or underneath it.'

A. A. MILNE

As wonderful as dogs can be, they are famous for missing the point.

JEAN FERRIS

PROLOGUE: BEN

Once, a long time ago, there was a boy called Ben. He lived in a big, grey orphanage on the edge of a big, grey town, where the orphans ate grey food and wore grey clothes and went barefoot even in winter – which was miserable but also quite lucky, because if Ben had worn shoes, most of the things in this book would probably never have happened.

Every Sunday, the orphans were made to go for a long walk along the canal that ran through the town. And one Sunday, when he was four years old, Ben cut his foot on a piece of glass and it hurt so much that he stopped right in the middle of the towpath and began to cry. Now you might have thought the other orphans would stop for him, but the orphanage had

strict rules about being late, and the orphans were scared of getting into trouble. They just carried on walking until Ben was quite alone except for one other orphan.

Sam was eleven years old, tough as the boots he didn't have, and really couldn't care less about trouble. In fact, the people who ran the orphanage said that, most of the time, Sam *was* the trouble.

'Stop crying and show me your foot,' he ordered. Ben, whose awe of Sam was absolute, did as he was told.

'I'm going to pull the glass out,' said Sam. 'Are you brave?'

'Yes,' said Ben, then howled at the pain.

Sam grinned, threw away the glass and crouched down so Ben could climb on his back.

'Jump on!'

They came to a bend in the canal. A new narrowboat had arrived, and a man sat in her hold, painting a lion on a wooden pub sign. Sam stopped to watch. Ben slid off his back and hopped to the edge of the water.

The boat was red and green, with her name,

Sparrowhawk, painted in gold on a scarlet panel. Above the letters, a bird of prey flew, tough and graceful, orange eyes glinting and blue-grey wings outstretched. Ben reached out to touch it.

'Careful you don't fall in,' said the man. 'What happened to your foot?'

The man's name was Nathan Langton. He walked with a stick, and he had a beard and a soft felt hat and an old dog called Bessie who farted a lot. He cleaned Ben's foot and bandaged it, then gave the boys tea and let Ben play with his paints while Sam explored the boat.

After the boys had gone, Nathan sat for a long time on the edge of the canal, thinking.

The following day, he visited the orphanage to bring the boys a paintbox. He saw that Sam's face was bruised from the beating he'd received for being late, and that the bandage on Ben's foot had come off.

He went back to his boat and thought some more.

Ever since his leg was crushed between the *Sparrowhawk* and a boatyard quay, Nathan had earned his living by painting. Shop signs, pub signs, planters, pots … whatever people wanted painted,

Nathan painted it. In fine weather, he worked outside in the hold. When it rained, he worked in the cabin.

'Could do with a change, anyway,' he muttered to himself.

He covered the hold with a sloping roof into which he cut two windows, he put in a door on to a small foredeck and laid a floor. He built a wooden bench with drawers beneath it for his clothes, a bookcase for his collection of Dickens novels, shelves for his pots and brushes, he put in a stove and set up an easel.

It was the first beautiful room Nathan had ever had, and he loved it.

After he had built the workshop, Nathan went to work on the cabin. When he had finished, he went shopping. And then he returned to the orphanage for the boys.

A month after Ben and Sam first visited the *Sparrowhawk*, they came back and called it home. In the cabin they found boots, soft with wear and almost the right size, socks to go with them, warm sweaters, trousers and jackets. Best of all, built into

the wall one above the other, they each had their very own berth, Sam on top and Ben below. Nathan had painted their names on wooden panels hung above the pillows, with a bird for each of the boys – a quick bright kingfisher for Sam, a robin with a bandaged foot for Ben.

'We can change it if you like, now your foot's better,' Nathan said.

But Ben adored the robin, just as he adored the *Sparrowhawk*.

Sam was freckled and sandy-haired and full of mischief. Ben was dark-haired, with big, grey eyes and a slow, shy smile. The two boys couldn't have been more different, but they loved each other like brothers and they loved Nathan as a father. As the *Sparrowhawk* drove out of town in the morning sun, Ben hugged Bessie close and felt his heart swell fit to burst.

PROLOGUE: LOTTI

About four years after Nathan adopted Sam and Ben, further south near the small town of Great Barton, a man and a woman in a smart sports car paused at the gates of their country estate.

'We should stay,' said the woman.

'My love,' her husband replied. 'Look at the sky!'

Their names were Théophile and Isobel St Rémy, and they were on their way to an airfield, to go up in an aeroplane. Théophile was French, with a head of wild curls and twinkly brown eyes. Isobel was English and fair, with creamy skin, which smelled of roses. They were like people in a fairy tale, these two, kind and loving as well as beautiful and rich, and blessed with an adored eight-year-old daughter

called Lotti, who had the wild hair and impetuous nature of her papa, and the blue eyes and kindness of her mama. It was the thought of Lotti that made Isobel hesitate now. Lotti would have loved to go up in an aeroplane, but she was stuck in bed with a streaming cold, being looked after by the servants and an old cat called Queen Victoria.

'She was so disappointed,' said Isobel in the car. 'Let's all go together when she's better.'

Théophile hesitated. He also hated to leave Lotti. But then he looked again at the blue, blue sky.

'It's just such a perfect day for flying . . .'

So they went. And a terrible thing happened, but . . . well, it's like with Ben's shoes. If they had stayed, there would be no story.

The storm came from nowhere, people said, which was stupid. Storms are created when a centre of low pressure develops with a system of high pressure surrounding it. They do not come from *nowhere*.

But still. Wherever it came from, the storm did for the aeroplane, and it did for Lotti's parents.

*

In their will, Théophile and Isobel left everything they owned to their daughter, and appointed Isobel's much older brother Hubert to look after both Lotti and her fortune until she was twenty-one.

Poor Lotti . . .

On the outside, Hubert Netherbury and his wife Vera seemed dull but dependable, which was why the St Rémys had chosen them as guardians years before, when Lotti was a little baby. But underneath their bland exterior they were snobs, who hated scandal but loved money. As a young man, Hubert had been ambitious, but the success in business that had made Théophile very rich had eluded him. He and Vera lived in a small house, with only one servant who doubled as a cook, and over the years even their blandness had faded. By the time Isobel and Théophile died, Vera's face had become mean and pinched, and Hubert's had the sly and sullen expression of a bully. They had disliked Isobel and Théophile, and disapproved of their lifestyle, but they were delighted to come and live in their house. Barton Lacey, with its eight bedrooms and string of reception rooms, its famous gardens and extensive

woodlands, was *exactly* the sort of home they felt they had always deserved.

The only problem was Lotti, who just by existing reminded them that Barton Lacey was not really theirs.

They might have tolerated a quiet child, but for weeks after the funeral, Lotti did nothing but cry. She had nightmares and screamed for her parents. She refused to eat. She locked herself in her room with Queen Victoria and would not come out. She informed her uncle and aunt that she hated them.

She gave them her cold.

Perhaps, if life had not disappointed them, Hubert and Vera might have been kind, but it had, and they were not. They did not hold Lotti while she wept or tell her that they loved her. They did not ask Cook to prepare her favourite meals. When Lotti finally came out of her room, puffy with tears, they made her take her meals alone in the kitchen and they banned Queen Victoria from the house. When this made Lotti cry all over again, they told her she was wicked. And when summer ended they sent her far away to a gloomy boarding school, just after the war had started.

In all of this, only one person had comforted Lotti: her French grandmother, Camille St Rémy, or Moune as Lotti called her. She came for the funeral, and for a few days Lotti clung to her. When she left, Moune promised that she would write every week, and that every summer Lotti would spend the month of August with her in France in her timber-framed house overlooking the river at Armande, as she had with her parents every summer since she was born.

But Moune's letters stopped when Lotti went to school. The war went on, and there were no holidays in France. There were, in fact, no holidays at all for Lotti. Her life, which had been so rich and full of love, was reduced almost exclusively to the grounds of her school, where she remained for the next four and a half years, homesick, lonely and absolutely friendless.

Then, in the spring of 1919, she got herself expelled.

Which is where our story begins.