
THE
EXTREMELY INCONVENIENT
ADVENTURES OF
Bronte Mettlestone

GUPPY
BOOKS

THE EXTREMELY INCONVENIENT
ADVENTURES OF BRONTE METTLESTONE
is a GUPPY BOOK

First published in the UK in 2019
by Guppy Books,
Bracken Hill,
Cotswold Road,
Oxford OX2 9JG

First published in Australia
by Allen and Unwin in 2017

Text copyright © Jaclyn Moriarty
Illustrations copyright © Karl James Mountford

978 1 913101 03 9

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

The rights of Jaclyn Moriarty to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permissions of the publishers.

Papers used by Guppy Books are from well-managed
forests and other responsible sources.



GUPPY PUBLISHING LTD Reg. No. 11565833

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

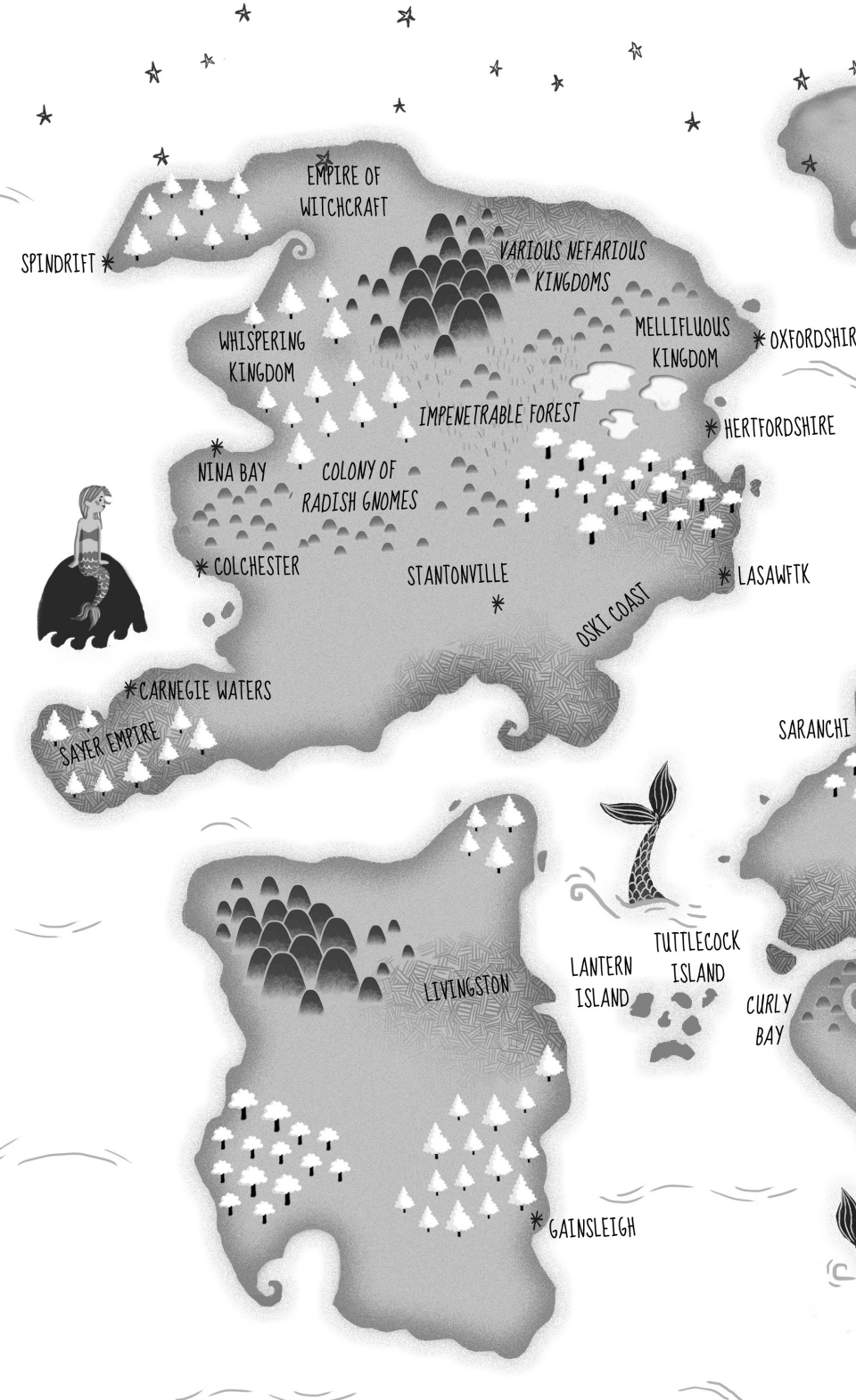
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

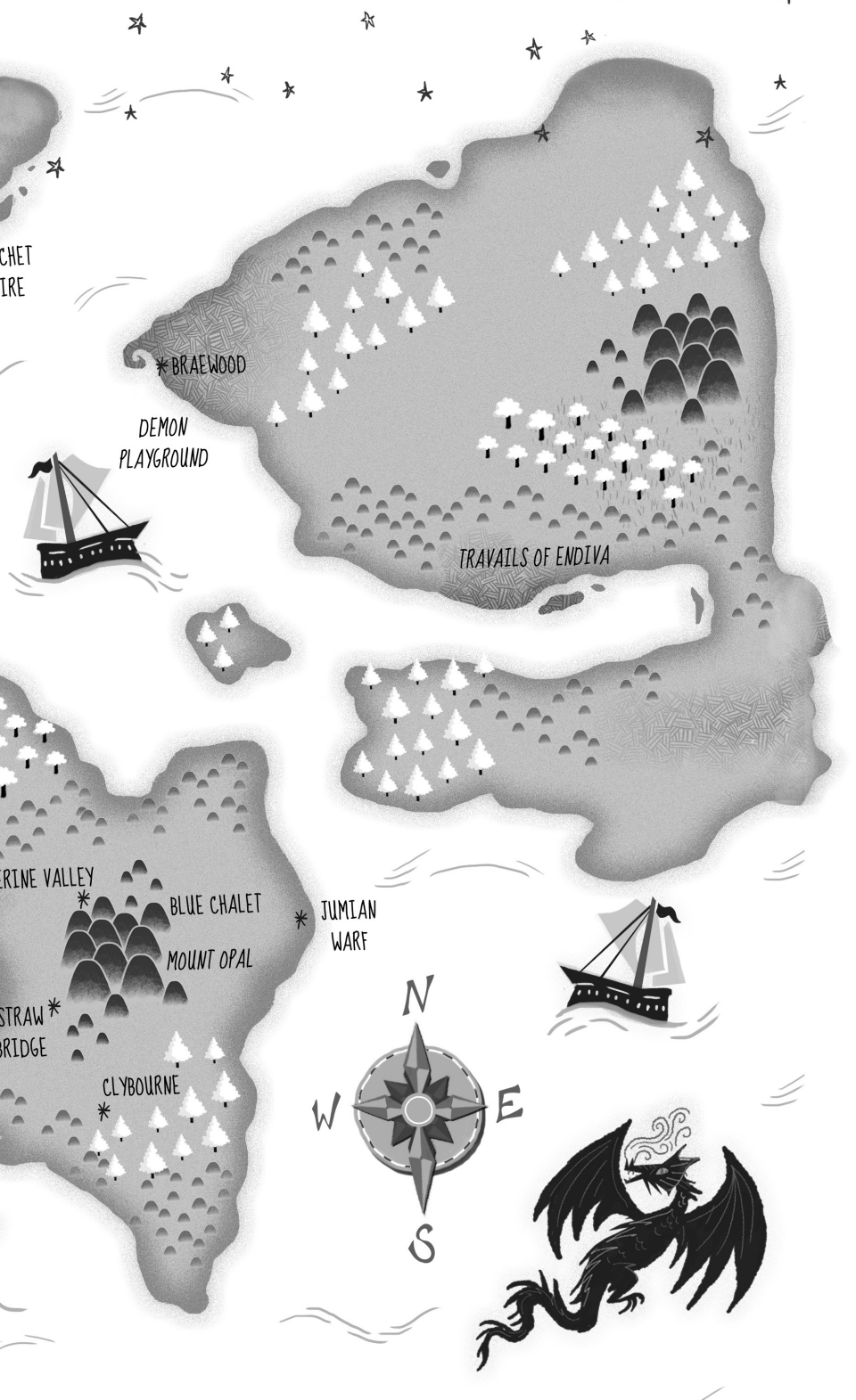


JACLYN MORIARTY

Illustrations by Karl James Mountford

GUPPY
BOOKS


EMPIRE OF WITCHCRAFT
SPINDRIFT
VARIOUS NEFARIOUS KINGDOMS
WHISPERING KINGDOM
MELLIFLUOUS KINGDOM
OXFORDSHIR
IMPENETRABLE FOREST
HERTFORDSHIRE
NINA BAY
COLONY OF RADISH GNOMES
COLCHESTER
STANTONVILLE
LASAWFTK
OSKI COAST
CARNEGIE WATERS
SAYER EMPIRE
SARANCHI
LANTERN ISLAND
TUTTLECOCK ISLAND
LIVINGSTON
CURLY BAY
GAINSLEIGH


CHET
IRE
BRAEWOOD
DEMON
PLAYGROUND
TRAVAILS OF ENDIVA
ERINE VALLEY
BLUE CHALET
MOUNT OPAL
JUMIAN
WARF
STRAW
BRIDGE
CLYBOURNE
N
W
E
S

To my boys, Nigel and Charlie, with my love



1

I was ten years old when my parents were killed by pirates.

This did not bother me as much as you might think – I hardly knew my parents.

They were a whirling pair of dancers in a photograph my aunt kept on her mantelpiece. There was a jazz band in the corner of that photo, and I'd always been more taken by the man playing the trumpet than my mother's gauzy scarf or my father's goofy grin. That trumpeter! His face like a puffer fish, his wild swing of hair, the light springing sideways from his trumpet rim!

But Aunt Isabelle was in a state about the news. She was my father's eldest sister and had taken me in when my parents set off on their adventures. She hadn't had much choice in the matter: she'd found me in the lobby of her apartment building, rugged up in my pram one frosty morning.

There had been a note, my aunt said, but that had been lost when her housekeeper did a spring clean. There'd also been a bottle filled with milk (for me) and a canister of cloudberry tea (for my aunt).

It was the cloudberry tea that she wept about most noisily when news of the pirates was brought to us. The Butler presented the news on a small

white card in the centre of a silver tray. This was unfortunate. White cards on silver trays generally said things like, WE REQUEST THE PLEASURE OF YOUR COMPANY AT OUR FANCY DRESS BALL, OF WHAT A SPLENDID TIME WE HAD AT YOUR GAMES NIGHT! WE SHALL RETURN THE FAVOUR SOONISH!

So my aunt and I smiled at one another over our afternoon tea when we saw the silver tray floating towards us. Then we read the card.

> WE REGRET TO INFORM YOU THAT PATRICK AND LIDA METTLESTONE HAVE BEEN TAKEN OUT BY CANNON FIRE FROM THE DECKS OF THE PIRATE SHIP *THISTLESKULL* (208 TON, 103 FT LONG, 24 FT AT THE BEAM).

At first, my aunt was simply incensed by the choice of diction.

"Taken out!" she exclaimed. *"Taken out!"*

Whereas I was confused. I had been taken out myself, on occasion, by one of the other aunts when they were in town, and also by my governess. If Cannon Fire, whoever that was, wanted to invite my parents out – to the Arlington Tea Room for lemonade and cakes, I presumed – what did it matter?

But then my aunt turned to the Butler and said, "Did you *read* this?" and the Butler stepped forward, affronted: "Of course not!"

He leaned over my aunt to read it now.

"Oh my!" he said, and shook his head slowly, with a "tch, tch," as if he disapproved. He looked down at my aunt, and his face became rueful.

"Taken out!" my aunt said to him. "Can you believe it? Could they not have chosen a less *flippant* turn of phrase?"

"In the circumstances," agreed the Butler.

"They should have said 'murdered'!" exclaimed my aunt. "Murdered by pirates!"

So then I understood that my parents were dead. I widened my eyes.

The Butler assumed a thoughtful expression. "Perhaps," he said, "it was an accident? Perhaps Patrick and Lida were simply in the *line* of cannon fire at the wrong time? In which case, it would not be murder so much, would it?"

"Manslaughter?" my aunt wondered moodily. "*We regret to inform you, they've been manslaughtered.* Sounds wrong, doesn't it?"

The Butler was still studying the card. "Odd," he said. "The level of detail about the ship. Perhaps there are a number of pirate ships called *Thistleskull*, and they needed to distinguish this one somehow?"

"It's scandalous!" said my aunt.

"It's rather as if they think you might want to run up an outfit for the ship on your sewing machine and require its measurements."

"Ha!" said my aunt. She and the Butler smiled. Their smiles settled down.

There was a long silence. I took a sip from my chocolate and the sun poured through the French windows. It sparked against the silverware and lit up the white linen tablecloth.

"Oh!" cried my aunt suddenly, making both the Butler and me jump. "Ohhh! They gave me cloudberry tea and now they're gone!"

She began to weep noisily.

She had been moved, you see, by the gift of cloudberry tea that my parents had left in my pram (along with me). It was her favourite tea, and they must have remembered this. "It is touches like that," she often told

me, "the little thoughtful touches. *Those* are what distinguish the *gracious* from the rest."

She used to tell me I should aim to be just as gracious as my parents. So, for a while, I carried about a little notebook and took down the favourite hot and cold beverages, fruits, sweets, and ice-cream flavours of everybody I encountered. That way, when I myself grew up and abandoned my only child in the lobby of somebody's building, I would be sure to add a sample of their preferred treat to the pram.

At other times, my aunt told me that my parents' approach to life was "as chaotic as a barnyard fire".

Now, however, we sat at the table in the afternoon sun and listened to Aunt Isabelle sobbing about the deaths of her brother and sister-in-law, and especially about the cloudberry tea.

2

The next day, my aunt telephoned the family's lawyers, and they invited us to their office for the reading of the will.

A will is what people leave behind when they die. It's also the name of my dog (only with a capital *W*), and it's what Aunt Isabelle always told me that I had.

Only mine, she would say, was very strong. "You've a strong will there, haven't you, Bronte?" she frequently observed, sometimes irritably, and sometimes with a smile that seemed proud.

"Yes," I always replied, trying to be agreeable. "I have."

*

Aunt Isabelle was surprised that my parents had a will. "Don't you think," she said to the Butler, "that they were too *chaotic* for a will?"

The Butler agreed. "I'd have thought they'd be more likely," he said, "to have a *won't*!"

Aunt Isabelle and I laughed at that, and the Butler looked pleased and laughed too. Then my aunt's laughter stopped suddenly and she stared out the window at nothing. So the Butler and I stopped laughing and stared at the same spot.

I wore my white dress with the blue sash to the lawyers' offices, and I felt very excited because my aunt had said that afterwards we would stop for an ice-cream soda.

There were two lawyers, both men with skin as white and damp as the flesh of an apple.

"You will find the lawyers rather old," Aunt Isabelle had informed me earlier that morning. "Even though they are not."

I thought about that, but it made no sense.

"They're old for their age is what I mean," she explained. "It's because they're lawyers. Now, if they'd chosen different careers – circus performers, say, swinging from the trapeze—"

"Or zookeepers," the Butler suggested, "frolicking with the friendlier of the lions?"

"Exactly. If they'd done that, they might be quite youngish for their ages. Do you see what I mean, Bronte?"

"No," I had replied.

But now I stared at the two men. They hunched in their chairs and in

their double-breasted suits, peering through their spectacles and chewing on nothing, and I saw what Aunt Isabelle meant.

Their chairs were huge and soft, the kind that swivel and make squelching noises whenever you shift your behind. Aunt Isabelle and I had regular, hard-backed chairs. So at first, I didn't concentrate on what the lawyers were saying because I felt too angry about this. Why didn't *we* have the soft, fun, swivelling chairs?

Then I realized that the one on the right – Mr Crozer – was speaking to me.

"Bronte, isn't it?" he said. "If I know anything about little girls like you, you'd rather we got this over with fast as a flash, so you could be out of here and off to your afternoon tea! What do you say? Am I right?"

I said nothing. I looked down at my feet and tried to see if they could reach the floor if I pointed my toes. I *was* keen to get out of there to my ice-cream soda, it was true, but I was not going to delight Mr Crozer by agreeing with him.

"Bronte," said the other one – Mr Ridgeway – fixing his spectacles on me, "the testators have stipulated that you must carry out a number of preconditions, after which your inheritance will crystallize."

I stared at him.

There are certain adults who speak baby-talk to children, making their voices rise up at the end of sentences. Your job as a child is either to giggle or nod your head and smile. Mr Crozer, the first lawyer, was one of those. Then there are adults like Mr Ridgeway, who address children as if they are mini-adults. They do it with a proud smirk, and with a glint of their spectacles. I'm not sure what the child's job is. I suppose I was

meant to gaze back in wonder, or to burst into tears and say, *"I don't understand!"*

I crinkled my nose at him.

"Good heavens!" said Aunt Isabelle. "What *are* the pair of you on about?"

The leather chairs squeaked as Mr Crozer and Mr Ridgeway leaned back.

"It's like this." Mr Crozer addressed Aunt Isabelle now. "They've left instructions for Bronte. A treasure chest has been placed in the vault at the bank. It's filled with gifts. Bronte is to *deliver* these gifts to various people. She must start the journey in exactly three days. Oh, and she's to do it alone."

"Alone! She's ten years old!"

"Perhaps her parents didn't expect to die until she was older?" suggested Mr Ridgeway, shrugging carelessly.

"They've been very thorough," Mr Crozer added, resting his elbows on the desk and flipping through pages. "They've listed not merely the names and addresses but also the forms of transport Bronte is to take. There are even some recommendations for restaurants and cafés where she might like to dine. Some of those are optional."

"She's ten years old," Aunt Isabelle repeated, more mildly. "She doesn't *dine*. In any case, how is she expected to *carry* a chest full of gifts?"

"Pack it in her suitcase," Mr Ridgeway advised.

There was a pause while Aunt Isabelle pursed her lips at him. Then she frowned. "Who *are* the recipients of these gifts?" she demanded. "I assume they all live here in Gainsleigh?"

Here both lawyers laughed aloud, and I got a glimpse of how they

might have looked had they spent their days joking with the lions.

"No, no, certainly not! They're scattered throughout Kingdoms and Empires!" Mr Crozer handed Aunt Isabelle a piece of paper, and she angled it towards me so I could read it too.

It was a list of names.

They were the names of my ten other aunts.

At the bottom of the list, in tiny scrawl, was an "Addendum". My parents had initialled it.

No gift to be delivered to Aunt Isabelle — she got the cloudberry tea.

3

Aunt Isabelle cleared her throat. Her words, when she spoke, were like the thuds of falling books.

"Cloudberry tea," she said, "is all very well."

I knew what she meant. She meant that she had taken care of me since I was a tiny baby, and deserved a little treasure of her own. She meant that all this time the cloudberry tea had seemed like the sweetest gesture, a token of affection, but now it was nothing but a scrawl, an "addendum".

She squared her shoulders. "But Bronte," she continued, "is certainly not taking this journey alone. Far too dangerous for a child! There could be Dark Mages anywhere! If she must traipse around delivering treasure, the Butler and I will accompany her."

The lawyers tipped forward and both tapped the paper excitedly, as if playing a lively duet on the piano.

"It's quite clear," Mr Crozer said.

"She *must* travel alone," Mr Ridgeway added.

"Piffle," said Aunt Isabelle. "There has to be a way around that. The Butler and I will buy our tickets separately. We'll sit *behind* Bronte and keep an eye on her. You lawyers are the loophole experts, are you not? Figure it out and get back to me."

Now the lawyers looked sideways at each other.

"Ahem," said Mr Crozer.

"Madam," said Mr Ridgeway. "Look closely at that paper, if you please."

Aunt Isabelle sniffed. She lifted up the paper and studied it.

"Well?" she asked, after a moment.

"Do you see the border all around it?"

"Yes."

"Do you see that it has been cross-stitched?"

"Very pretty," Aunt Isabelle said. "Very fine."

"Look more closely," Mr Crozer instructed her.

"*Very* fine cross-stitch. Yes, I see that. But I do not see how—"

"What colour is the cross-stitch?" Mr Ridgeway asked.

Aunt Isabelle was growing impatient. "It's a sort of silvery-blue, I suppose, but quite honestly, I can't—"

"And touch it with your fingertips."

Aunt Isabelle sighed, and did so. "Very soft," she said. "Extremely soft."

"Yes," said Mr Ridgeway.

"Yes," said Mr Crozer.

There was a long pause. A clock ticked.

Aunt Isabelle looked up slowly. "It's not…" she breathed, and stopped. "It's not *Faery cross-stitch?*"

Both lawyers nodded firmly, cheerfully. "It is."



4

Here, I should interrupt my story to say that I am now twelve years old.

I am writing this in a hammock, while my dog, Will, sleeps in the hammock's shade. Back then, however, I was only ten. I knew plenty about good manners and cakes with lemon icing, but nothing about Faery cross-stitch – or practically anything, really. And I didn't even *have* a dog then.

The only thing I knew about magic was a passage from *A Children's History of the Kingdoms and Empires* that my governess, Dee, had once made me memorize: