OPIE
JONES
TALKS TO ANIMALS

For Yasmine

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ÖPIE JONES

TALKS TO ANIMALS

NAT LUURTSEMA

Illustrated by Fay Austin

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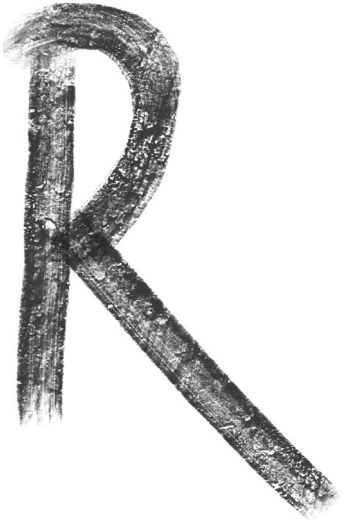
“I hate books that start with quotations.”

Margot Von Catton



In this story I come off as a bit bad-tempered. I am AWARE. You don't need to point it out. But what you have to remember is, there was adventure and action and peril, all during a heatwave.

I am a long-haired cat.

I was UNCOMFORTABLE.

I don't mind being a hero, but someone should have warned me about the sweatiness.

CHAPTER ONE

That morning, Opie Jones ate breakfast with a vampire and a NASA astronaut.

Her parents were actors who believed in dressing for the part when they auditioned. "It's professionalism," they would say.

It's the reason the postman doesn't look you in the eye any more, Opie thought but didn't say. She was very polite, so didn't stare as her mother popped out her fangs to eat toast.

"If you worked for NASA would you wear a NASA T-shirt?" Opie's dad, Harvey, was worried. "Or is it a bit Captain Obvious?"

Harvey was Indonesian, a trim, handsome man with unruly eyebrows that he kept in place with a toothbrush covered with hairspray. He'd rather no one knew this, but Opie had once cleaned her teeth with the hairspray-covered toothbrush and his secret had come out, loudly, with lots of spitting.

Opie's mum, Violet, was white, tall and striking with long black hair. She was very funny but she got sad because she didn't work as much as she wanted. Violet was a brilliant actor. She once played a witch on stage and Opie had been so terrified she wet herself. She was three at the time. Ten-year-old Opie handled fear better. Which is good, because scary things were just around the corner.

A year ago Harvey started working on a daytime

show called *Highland Docs*. He played Dr Ahmed, a brooding Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist from Asia. Harvey had asked where in Asia, but the writers couldn't be more specific. So Harvey gave Dr Ahmed an accent that travelled from China to India, and sometimes went to Wales. Violet said whenever you messed up an accent it went to Wales. No one knew why.

Once she'd eaten her porridge, Opie kissed the vampire and the astronaut and headed to school. It was a ten-minute walk and her parents let her go alone. Opie was a very responsible, sensible ten-year-old, and if that makes her sound a bit boring, then fine: she was. But that's why she got to walk to school by herself and more 'exciting' kids did not.

As Opie walked, she felt in the pockets of her dungarees for everything she needed: school ID card, library card, house keys, emergency phone, lip balm.

Opie liked order and routine. She already had a Walking To School routine, with friends she said hello to every morning.

There was the slim older lady who watered her front garden every morning. As Opie passed, the lady was

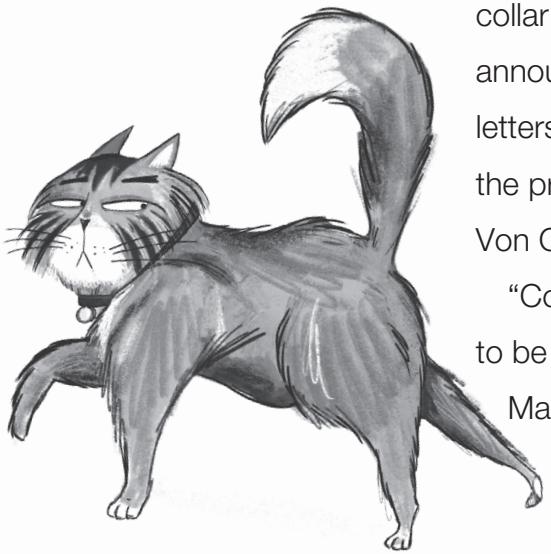
flicking slugs off her precious tomato plants.

"Good morning!" Opie waved and in return got a cherry tomato tossed her way. She discreetly checked it for slug slime before popping it in her mouth.

There was a young police officer who was always leaving his house as Opie was passing and they had got in the habit of giving each other a salute. Once he'd cycled off, Opie stopped by a brick wall and waited a moment.

She checked her watch. *This* friend was always late.

Finally, a gigantic tabby cat with furry tufts on the ends of her ears emerged from a bush and strolled towards Opie, yawning and scattering dry mud. A collar around her neck announced in swirling letters that you were in the presence of Margot Von Catton. Lucky you.



"Come on, I'm going to be late!" Opie said.

Margot never hurried.

She hopped up on to the wall and inspected Opie's hands, checking they were perfectly clean before she allowed her head to be scratched.

Once Margot got bored of her, Opie carried on to school, the sun already hot on the top of her head. She walked down a street dominated by large buildings that gave her some shade and trotted past the Varling cinema, the Varling supermarket and the Varling bowling alley.

Soon she reached the Saint Francis of Assisi school gates. Opie stood in front of her school and sighed. Even being *near* her school made her feel anxious and shy.

Opie had joined the school a year ago, when they'd moved to be near the studio for *Highland Docs.* She was a little quiet in her first week at school. Most people would have been. It was perfectly understandable. But on the Thursday of that first week, a boy called Cillian Keogh had embarrassed her in front of the whole class by saying, "You're really quiet. Is it because you're shy or are you too clever to talk to us?"

Everyone stared at her as Opie blushed a hot red.

"Oh, okay," Cillian said, pointing at her like she was a science experiment. "Shy."

Cillian was an Irish boy with a sweet face that did *not* reflect his personality. Opie had disliked him from that moment. And when, a week later, he started calling her 'Dopey', her dislike hardened into hate.

Thanks to Cillian, her classmates were now convinced she was shy and left her alone. She felt like she had a big sign on her head that said, "SHY! DON'T TALK TO ME PLEASE. SHY!"

Only one person talked to her. Cillian's best friend, Jackson Sato. Jackson was special. He was tall and half-Japanese with dark hair and grey eyes. He was also funny, cool and cheeky. Jackson seemed to glide through life on charm and bending the rules. He never listened properly to anyone, so was unaware of the OPIE IS SHY message.

He couldn't have been more different to Opie, who was hard-working and serious and never bent the rules. She was small and solid, hidden behind long dark hair with a fringe to her nose.

Jackson only chatted to Opie when they were at their lockers, which were next to each other. But at the beginning of term, Cillian came down with mumps.

Opie wouldn't wish mumps on anyone, but it did mean Cillian was off school. She had sat at the back of the class and watched a bored and lonely Jackson fiddle with his hair. At break time she'd wandered over and offered him a crisp. They'd started chatting about his dad's failed attempts to grow potatoes, which had led to the family eating an uncomfortable amount of turnips. This had really made her laugh.

As the days passed, they became friends. Jackson was skilled at making people feel good about themselves. He was never shy about complimenting your brains or shoes or anything in between. Jackson gave Opie confidence and Opie helped Jackson with his schoolwork. (okay fine, she did his schoolwork for him, but it was just quicker that way.) Every morning, Opie anxiously watched the classroom door, expecting Cillian to come in and reclaim his friend, but he was off all week.

On Monday morning, Opie had bounced into school

and stopped dead in the classroom doorway, seeing Cillian and Jackson in their usual seats. But Jackson had spotted her and pulled a chair towards their desks. They had been an awkward three ever since: two frenemies fighting over one charismatic boy.

This was the first problem in Opie Jones's life. The second problem was the strange things that kept happening at her school.

Up until this point, the strangest experience she'd had at Saint Francis of Assisi was when a pigeon had got into assembly. The Deputy Head had run around the hall waving a broom and students got poo in their hair. (Pigeon poo, not Deputy Head poo.)

But in the last couple of weeks, break times had been strange and scary. Kids kept fighting. Sometimes the yard was full of brawling bodies and shoes scattered on the ground. Every time they fought, more of Opie's schoolmates were excluded or expelled. Every week there were more empty chairs in classrooms and kids upset because their friends had gone. It was like an angry plague was running through their school.

Opie started avoiding the yard at break time, preferring to read in an empty classroom. She tried to persuade Jackson and Cillian to join her, but it was not easy in the middle of a heatwave. Especially when she couldn't give them a good reason why.

It was like the *air* was full of rage. She couldn't explain it better than that, and she knew it sounded daft. 'I have a nasty feeling' is not a strong argument. People don't take you seriously. They offer you indigestion tablets.

Opie took a deep breath and headed through the school gates for another day.

Yeah, I'm big into fitness, mate, very big into it. Healthy body, healthy mind. Great stuff.

I eat about three bites of a tomato before that lady chucks me off. Doesn't hurt when I land; I tuck and roll, stay loose, there's a technique. Do all my own stunts.