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POLLY HO-YEN

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First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road London WC1X 8HB

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Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-4711-9354-5
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-9355-2
eAudio ISBN 978-1-4711-9996-7

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Typeset in the UK by Sorrel Packham

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



RULES FOR SURVIVAL

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- | | | |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| 1. Always be prepared | – | have everything you need ready and with you at all times |
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|------------------|---|---|
| 2. Pay attention | – | keep constant observations of your surroundings |
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| 3. Trust no one | – | you may only be able to rely on yourself |
|-----------------|---|--|
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| 4. Master your fears | – | through practice, planning and taking action |
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| 5. Never stop trying | – | you must never give up! |
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PROLOGUE

No one believed us at first.
They didn't think it could be true.
But now we're running for our lives . . .



PART 1



HOW TO MAKE A FIREBOW

It's the week before Christmas, the kind of pinprick cold where you can feel it needling into the tips of your fingers. I don't know what Sylvia told the school office but just before we are about to go out for break, Mrs Tombo the school receptionist comes in to say that my mum is here to collect me.

We're playing a game Miss Browning made up called 'Blankets'. One of the class has to go out of the room and then someone else hides under a blanket, completely covered, so you can't see any part of them. Then the person who went out comes back and has to guess who it is.

We're playing games because it's the last day of term. After break we're going to watch a film and then there's a party in the top hall this afternoon. There's going to be *every* kind of party food and I can't wait.

It's my turn to guess who is under the blanket so I'm looking at the lumpy mass in the middle of the room. All the other children's faces are staring at me with big bug-eyes which makes it harder to think, somehow.

I'm concentrating so hard on the game that I don't even notice the classroom door opening but then, in a quiet voice, I hear my name.

'Billy,' Mrs Tombo says. 'Um, your mum's here to collect you. Do you want to get your things together?'

There's a groan from someone in the classroom. I look round to see who it is, surprised that anyone would miss me. I've never felt like I settled at this school even though I've been here for about six months now, which is almost as long as I've been at any school in the last couple of years.

Dean has tugged the blanket off his head and looks over at me crossly.

'I was going to win then,' he splutters, red-faced and sweaty. 'Billy was never going to guess it was me!'

I try not to look at him, or at the exchanged glances between Miss Browning and Mrs Tombo, or at the eyes of everyone else which look wider and glassier all of a sudden. They think I can't hear them whispering to each other.

Why's he going again?

What is it with his weird mum?

I quickly go to get my bag and coat and follow Mrs Tombo. I try not to look surprised; Sylvia didn't mention picking me up early when she dropped me off this morning.

Sylvia's my mum. I always call her by her first name. She prefers it that way.

As we get closer to the school office, through the window I can see the dark shape of her, prowling like a shadow.

When I walk into the room, she doesn't give me an explanation of why she's here, simply reaches towards my hair as though she is going to touch it but then stops herself just before she does.

'Let's go,' she says and marches out of the glass doors.

I mumble to the receptionist as I leave, 'Happy Christmas, Mrs Tombo.'

'Happy Christmas, Billy,' her voice rings back. 'Hope you have a good holi—' She's cut off by the doors closing as I hurry out to catch up with Sylvia.

She marches ahead of me to the train station that's close by. I almost have to break into a run to keep up with her. I want to ask where we're going and did I really have to leave school early today of all days. This morning I'd told her about the fun things that we were going to do because it was the last day of term but I had known she hadn't been listening properly. I can feel the disappointment of missing out humming around my head but I keep it all on the inside. It's something I've learned is best to do.

The train doors have already started bleeping when we get to the platform. Sylvia darts forward and rams her body in between them.

'Quick,' she says, pulling me into the carriage as the doors close behind us like a jaw.

Now, I feel so far away from school, from the other children, from Miss Browning and Mrs Tombo, from the station and the train,

from anybody else in the world, in fact. We got off at the last stop and walked briskly to these woods, about half an hour's walk away. Now we are here, I recognize that it's somewhere we've been a few times before. Sylvia always seems to bring us here a different way, so it took me a little while to remember, but as we walk deeper into the woods I know where we are.

A breeze whistles through the trees above us. Their black branches, stark against the pearl of the sky, make me think of hands with long, beckoning fingers, or claws.

'Matches,' Sylvia says. She holds out a hand for them without even looking down.

She's not impatient, at least I don't think she is. Yet.

I pat my pockets (although I know they are empty) and then I rustle through the plastic bag she brought but they're not in there either. I even look in my school bag although I know it's pointless.

I check my coat again, feeling Sylvia's eyes hotly on me now, but my fingers only close around the tiny scraps of white fluff that line my pockets.

'Don't we have any?' Sylvia asks. She likes to be direct, she doesn't like what she calls 'waffle'.

'I don't think so,' I say and look away from her stare, holding my breath.

'What's the number one Rule, Billy?'

'Always be prepared,' I mumble quickly. Sylvia has been drilling the Rules into me for so long now that the words feel like they have almost lost their meaning.

I start to try to explain why I don't have the matches on me. 'I didn't know that today—'

'That's okay.' She cuts me off. I breathe again and for a tiny moment I want to crawl into her lap like I used to when I was little. It's silly, because it's not something I have done for years. I try to brush the feeling away but I can still feel it there, niggling me.

The last time we were in these woods, we forgot to bring the penknife with us and Sylvia got upset. She didn't shout or yell but her face seemed to crumple in on itself, like a piece of paper being screwed up into a ball. Then she had stalked off through the trees, leaving me alone for what felt like ages, although it was only twenty minutes when I checked my watch.

I'm glad she doesn't react like that today. But I'm on edge, worrying I might do something that will make her leave me here alone again.

There's another voice in my head that whispers to me too; it tells me that I'm supposed to be in school enjoying the last day of term with everyone else, that I wasn't meant to be remembering things for an adventure – not today. I feel myself blink, willing the voice away.

'It's best that we learn other methods, too,' Sylvia says. 'Our matches might be limited. Or we might not have any at all.'

She turns towards me and this time she does place her hand very lightly on my head, so she's only just touching the outer strands of my hair.

We have similar colour hair that sometimes looks brown,

other times blondish and in some lights, can look a little bit grey. Sylvia's is long, silky and straight. It snakes around her neck and down her back, but mine is tufty and wiry and sticks up in all the wrong places. Sylvia told me once that I get the tuftiness from Steve, my dad.

She doesn't talk about him very often – my dad – and when she does I've noticed that Sylvia seems to look over her shoulder as though she's worried she's being overheard. The details I've gathered about Steve feel dustlike: scattered and insubstantial. I can't seem to bind them together to make him feel like a real person. They split up when I was really small, and after that he used to come and see me, not that much but at least sometimes, but I haven't seen him for over two years now. I remember the last time because it was just before Sylvia stopped going to work. Steve came to where we were living at the time but Sylvia wouldn't let him inside, so he took me to the park instead. He asked if I wanted to go on the swings and when I didn't reply he said something about how fast I'd grown up and how much I loved them when I was very small and would shriek with laughter each time he pushed me.

I used to ask Sylvia when I would see him again, but whenever I did I could tell she didn't like it. When I mentioned Steve's name, her mouth went in a line, pinched and taut, and shadows gathered across her face.

So I stopped asking.

I've learned the things to say and not to say to keep things calm. Almost normal. And right now, I know to keep my mouth

shut about Steve – even if I'm thinking about him.

'Right. What shall we do? Let's try . . .' Sylvia's eyes look a little misty as she mentally works through a list in her mind. 'Firebow!' she proclaims. 'Let's make a firebow!'

I nod, my neck almost jarring from the movement. I feel glad she's not thinking about the forgotten matches any more.

'What do we need?' Sylvia asks and hands me the slightly tattered book from her coat pocket. It's thin, with paper that has yellowed and dimpled like skin. The title on its cover reads *How to Survive*. It doesn't look like anything special. But to Sylvia it's everything.

The book has a musty odour, not horrible, but the sort of smell that you notice immediately. A previous owner has underlined words here and there. A few of the page corners have been bent over in neat triangles.

I like these traces of others but none more than the name written into the book's front in a curly, looping scrawl.

Sylvia Weywood.

My mum wrote her name here when she was my age, when she first owned this book, years and years before she was my mum. When she was just Sylvia, and I didn't even exist.

I look up 'firebow' in the index and then turn to the right page and read aloud what we need.



Fig. 1. – How to make a firebow

‘Why don’t you find a stick that will do for the bow?’ Sylvia says, handing me her penknife.

It’s heavy in my hand. I don’t tell her that I’m a little afraid of its sharp blade, that I don’t find it very easy to use. When I find a suitable branch, I snap out the saw blade from the penknife – it only takes four attempts this time – and cut away a piece. I take care to close the jagged teeth of the blade before I walk back to her.

‘Perfect, Billy,’ she says when she sees the wood. Quite suddenly she kisses me on the head and leans into me. ‘Perfect,’ she says again. I start to press into her half-hug, making the most of the unexpected closeness, but in the following moment she pulls away.

‘We need some cord,’ she murmurs. ‘Your shoelace would

do,’ she says, with a small, barking laugh.

I bend over immediately, without even really thinking, and untangle the lace from my trainer. I try and do it as quickly as I can, but when I look up, I see that Sylvia isn’t hurrying me, instead she’s staring out into the distance. She takes a deep breath and exhales slowly, as though she’s enjoying the taste of the outside air.

When I hold out the shoelace to her, she doesn’t even notice, she’s so lost in her stare. It’s been happening more and more, these moments when she seems to be in a different world to the one I am in. These moments when I feel that although she is right beside me, she is somehow slipping away, between a crack, to a completely different kind of place entirely.

I can’t remember exactly when it started happening but I think it was around the time she left her job. She used to work as a scientist but she doesn’t do that any more. Since then, sometimes, she just seems to turn inwards and disappear, even though she is standing right there in front of me. They build, these moments, as Sylvia drifts away. It’s like darkness at twilight, creeping in so gradually at first that you don’t realize it’s turning dark but then when you look outside again, you see that night has dropped all around you.

‘Sylvia,’ I whisper and then, as if something inside her snaps, she breaks off from staring and looks over to me and the shoelace dangling in the air. I try to ignore the look that flashes across her face; the one which for just a fraction of a second does not seem to recognize me, the one that’s unsure of what

we're doing. She gives her head a shake and then the moment is over – she's reaching for the shoelace and tying it to one end of the branch that I found.

She works quickly, placing a stick here, looping the shoelace there, and then she leans back with a satisfied sigh, finished.

I look at the arrangement of sticks and can't understand how we are going to make fire from this.

'Get ready with that tinder when it starts to catch,' she tells me, pointing to some dried-out moss we collected earlier. She takes a leaf and places it carefully at the bottom of the arrangement. 'This will catch the embers,' she explains.

Then she begins, moving the bow from side to side as though she is sawing a piece of wood, making the pointed stick spin from the movement.

Her breath is heavy. I look for a flame but I see none, only a thin trail of smoke.

'There,' she says, through a half-breath. There's a small pile of black, smoking powder on the leaf. She takes a bundle of the dry moss and places the tinder on top of it.

'Come here, Billy,' she says. 'You need to learn how to do this. Blow very gently.'

I do as she says and blow on the moss in little puffs of gentle breath.

It smokes.

It smokes a little more.

It looks like it's breathing.

I blow a little harder and then smoke builds and builds until

I see it.

A flicker.

Something as slight as a flutter of eyelids.

It's that small.

But then the flame licks around the moss hungrily – the handful of moss is consumed by it and I can't stop myself from squealing in delight. We feed it dry pieces of bark and very small twigs. The fire devours them all and grows bigger still.

'We did it,' Sylvia says. She leans into me once again and we are both quiet for those few seconds, watching the flames grow, dance and flicker.

Just then, there's a ripple in the sky overhead. The clouds hang grey and low.

There's a flash.

Lightning.

It seems to come from nowhere.

Sylvia looks up to the sky as the first raindrops fall. I see them land on her forehead, making wet circles that trickle down her pale face. But in the next moment she turns suddenly as though she's spotted something I haven't and then she's up, grabbing our things, filling her arms. I look all around us, thinking of our second Rule: *Pay attention – keep constant observations of your surroundings*. Sylvia tells me that's the one I particularly need to practise because I'm always missing the things she sees. But as my eyes travel over the trees, trying to see what Sylvia has spotted, she says: 'We've got to go. Help me pack everything up – quick!'

It's a scramble to get everything together.

Though she's carrying the bags, Sylvia still has a hand free to hold mine and I'm glad of it as she pulls me away. It feels warm and dry and strong in mine.

'It's not safe here,' she says and we start to run. It's difficult to keep up with her: my trainer doesn't have its lace any more and with every step I feel like it might come off completely. But she seems so worried that I don't want to have to tell her that I don't think I can run, so instead I keep it all inside and try and make my foot hold the trainer in place.

'Don't stop, don't look back,' Sylvia says and her pace quickens.

But as soon as she tells me not to, it's all I want to do. I can't help myself.

The fire we made has been transformed into a smouldering pile now, dampened by the rain, its heat extinguished. The hungry flames may as well never have existed.

And there is someone there; standing, where our fire had once been burning.