

PARADISE ON FIRE

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Orion

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ORION CHILDREN'S BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Hodder & Stoughton
First published in the United States in 2021 by Hachette Book Group, Inc.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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

ISBN 978 1 510 10985 8

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

The paper and board used in this book are made from wood from responsible sources.



Orion Children's Book
An imprint of
Hachette Children's Group
Part of Hodder & Stoughton Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk

To Wildfire Survivors

Past, Present, and Future



Forever Mourning Those Lost

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FLYING BLIND





"There's always a way out," Grandma Bibi whispers. "Use your mind, your heart." Her arthritic fingers poke my chest.

Closing my eyes, I smell her red bush tea, the shea butter she rubs on her skin. Her spirit is alive, urgent.

But Grandma Bibi isn't here.

Here is a packed airplane. The plane is levelling off, engines murmuring steadily. Two bells. The seat belt sign blinks off. We're flying high.

I grab my pencil and notepad from my backpack and draw. I remember the flight attendant, walking the aisle, pointing at emergency exit doors.

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I quickly sketch row after row. (I block the front exit with an **X**.) The closest exits are ahead of me. Row 18. Exits on the left and right. These are my escape doors.

If the plane falls, drops through the sky, I need to rush from row 23 to row 18. I'm in the window seat. I need to get past the two kids sitting on my right. Should I go forward or back? If the aisle is packed, then what? Retreat to my seat? Cling, swing, window shade to window shade to safety? Climb over seats? What's the best path?

I underline **ESCAPE** three times.

"What's that?"

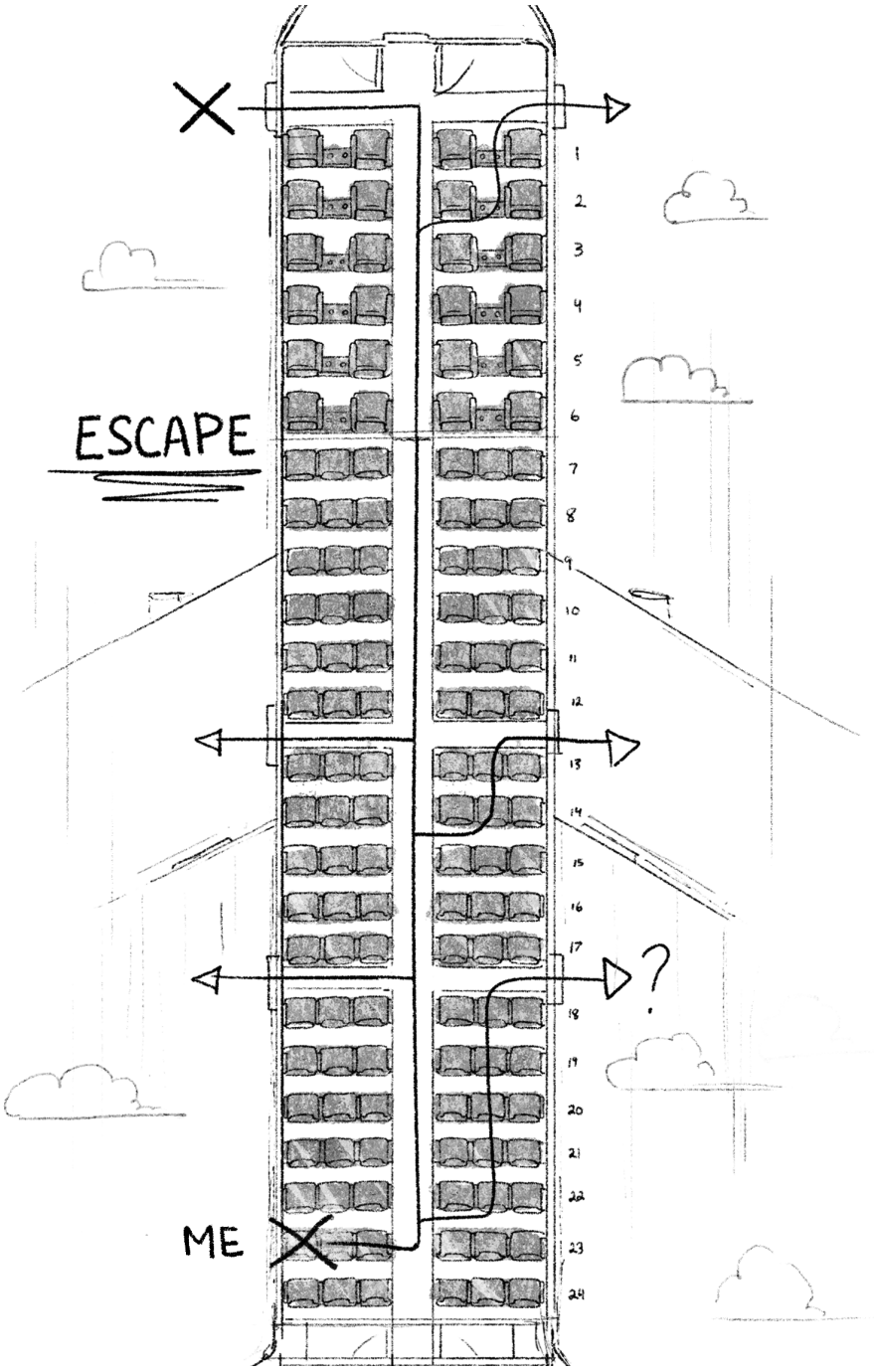
I roll my eyes. Press my pencil, snapping the lead. My new line is blurred, crooked. Blocking the path.

"I'm Jay," says the boy next to me. "Jay from Brooklyn."

Jay has a high-top fade with precision cuts on the sides. His brows bushy, his eyes brown, he's the cocky know-it-all type.

He doesn't know me. I keep drawing, mapping

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space, mirroring row upon row. Sketching arrows, leading to possible paths out.

"It's a maze, isn't it?" asks the girl in the aisle seat. "Where you have to figure a way in? Or out."

"Nope." I flip a page and quickly sketch. "*This* is a maze."

ESCAPE is in the centre. Around it, like it's a magical, hidden door, I twist and turn the seats, creating false starts, incomplete paths.

Even though Jay and the girl are watching me, I can tell I'm confusing them.

Broken lines. Dead ends. Incomplete openings. That's what a maze does. Disrupts progress, confuses direction. Complicates.

"Hey, I used to have a book of mazes." The girl reaches past Jay, takes my pencil, and tries to solve the puzzle.

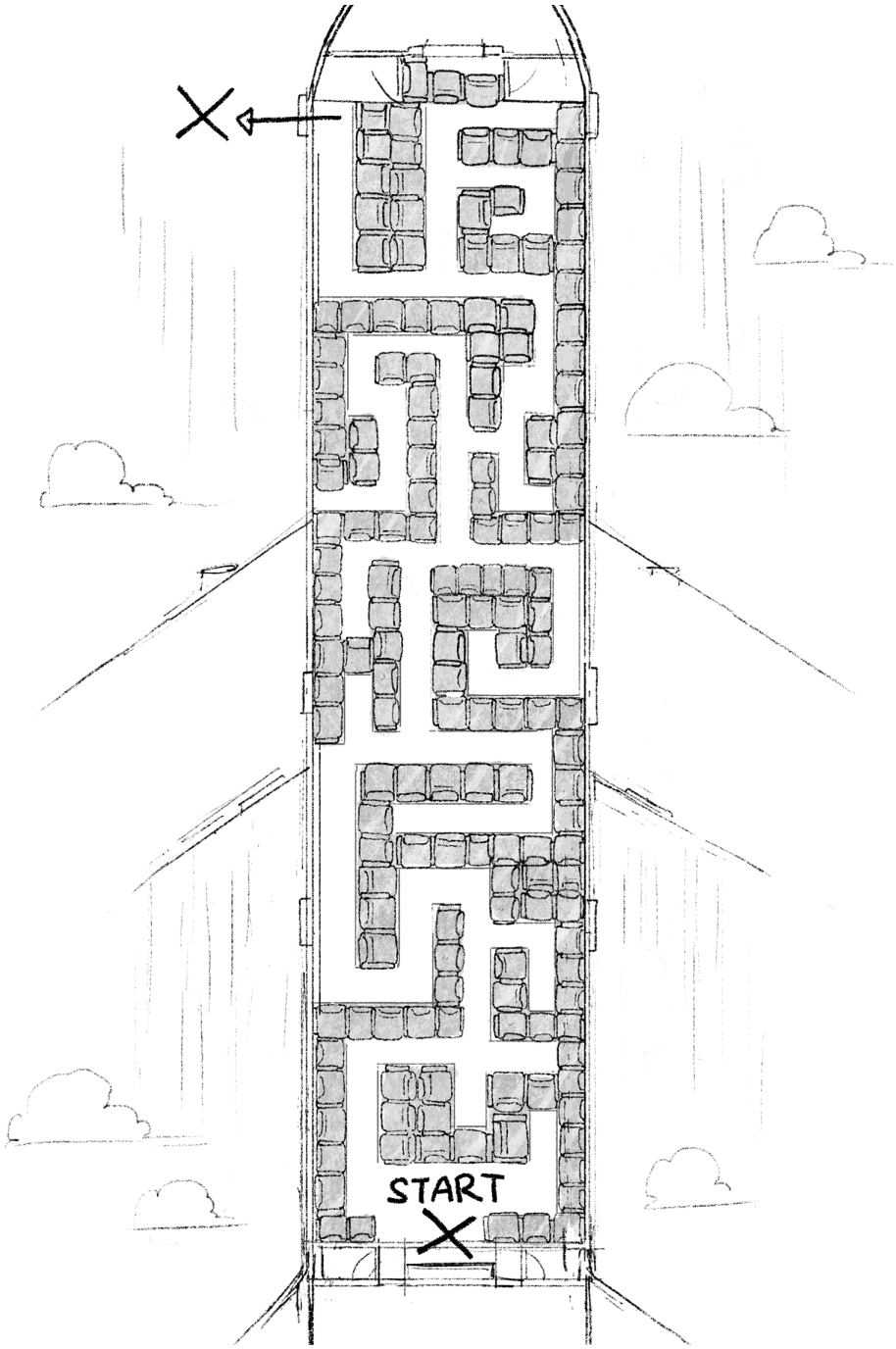
"Wrong way," Jay says excitedly. "Go left."

She hits a dead end. Again and again.

"Let me try."

Jay's blocked, too.

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START

The girl grabs the pencil, focusing, drawing the line in fits and starts.

She's trying hard. Intense eyes. Black braids. Her teeth scratch at her bottom lip.

"Show us," she pleads.

Like always, I solve the puzzle first in my mind. Then I move the pencil forward, zigzagging, no back turns, until I reach EXIT.

"Wow. You're good."

"How'd you do that?" asks Jay, surprised.

"There's a trick to it." It's easier to solve a maze from EXIT back to START.

(Besides, when you make the maze, you always win. You control the view.)

The girl extends her hand in front of and across Jay's belly.

"Jersey City," she says. "I'm from Jersey. Nessa for Vanessa."

I blink, saying nothing. I'm not used to kids reaching out to be friends with me.

I shake Nessa's hand. Jay's, too.

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We're sitting in the back, behind the plane's wings. Seats A, B, C, D, E, F – all filled with Black kids. We're supposed to bond. Be friends.

I want to return to the Bronx. To Bibi. But she made me go.

"To know yourself, you need to journey, Adaugo. Remember what's forgotten."

I love Grandma Bibi. Whatever she wants, I try to do.

"That's Kelvin, A'Leia, and DeShon." Nessa, the "social one," points across the aisle.

Kelvin and A'Leia wave.

"They're from Philly."

DeShon, eyes closed, not taking off his headphones, bobs his head, slapping his thigh to a beat.

Nessa frowns. "He doesn't talk much."

"You talk enough for everyone," Jay teases.

Nessa sticks out her tongue.

Kelvin and A'Leia wear glasses. A'Leia's are

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thick with black trim; Kelvin's glasses are thin purple squares. A'Leia wears an oversized varsity jacket. Basketball, I think. Jay wears orange track shoes and a T-shirt: JUST DO IT. Nessa wears colour-coordinated pink leggings and a skirt. Kelvin and DeShon wear black T-shirts and jeans.

Ordinary kids – smiling, chatting, laughing. They're not alert, scanning the plane, watching close when people clog the aisle. They're different from me. Relaxed. They fit in.

Maybe Kelvin, A'Leia, Jay, Nessa, and DeShon wanted to go to California? Universal Studios, beaches, movie stars. Los Angeles Lakers.

Maybe they were forced?

Nope. Get real.

They probably thought, *Ooooo, a plane ride. An adventure.* And it's FREE.

What's not to like?

No hot, city boredom. No same old, same old.

Still, I like sitting on the apartment's front steps, watching kids play pickup basketball, double Dutch. I even like listening to the girls gossiping

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about who's cute, who's not. Even though they don't include me, they don't mind me knowing who has a crush on Jermaine. They don't mind braiding hair, painting nails, while I sit one step behind them, drawing maps, studying mazes. They notice I'm different. Being an orphan is like being a crusted-over scab. Leave me alone. Don't touch.

I stare out the window. Pancake clouds float. Mountain clouds burst, scatter as the plane flies through them. Seeing the open air unnerves me, reminds me of something – what?

My heart races. I slam the shade down.

I look at my escape map, then lean forward, lifting from the seat pocket the laminated safety card. "Did you study this?"

Jay shrugs, acting cool. "Nothing's going to happen."

Like me, I think this is Jay's first time flying. Probably like all of us.

"If something happens, I'll follow you," says Nessa, giggling. "What's your name?"

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I don't want to say. Saying my name means I'm really here. Means this trip is real. I'm long gone. Far from home. Flying cross-country to Los Angeles. Six hours, 1,543 miles.

"Fate. No deny, Adaugo." The memory of Bibi's voice rattles me. *"Daughter of an eagle. You must go."*

I swallow. Funny, I draw maps but I don't travel.

Nessa watches me. Not mean, just curious.

"Addy," I say. "My name is Addy."

Jay's brows lift.

Nessa exclaims, "Pretty. Nice name."

In front of us, camp counsellor Jamie, a blonde girl, stands, turns. "Are we having fun yet?"

Across the aisle, lanky, curly-haired Dylan, his finger stabbing the air, talks down at Kelvin, A'Leia, and DeShon. DeShon ignores him. Kelvin and A'Leia, intent, listen closely.

Jamie and Dylan are college students, camp counsellors teaching in a summer programme: Wilderness Adventures.

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* * *

We're a special charity. Black city kids going west. Jamie and Dylan are going to show us how to live. How to be cowboys. Cowgirls.

I wonder: How come I can't show them how I live in New York, the Bronx?

Jamie has a happy smile. It bugs me. Happy people always bug me.

"If the plane starts falling, you going to lead us out?" I demand.

Jamie's smile slides off her face. "The plane isn't going to fall."

"But if it does. Are you responsible for us?"

Jamie blinks like she doesn't understand.

"In an emergency. Are you responsible for us in an emergency? Like a teacher?"

Me, Jay, and Nessa – we all stare.

Jamie, red-faced, answers, "Of course I am." Then she twists, slumps in her seat.

I'm disgusted. I stare at my map. Many pathways. But only one path that's best for escape.

Jay leans, whispers in my ear, "Not sure anyone survives a plane crash."

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I don't look at him. "I will."

Then I roll my sweater into a makeshift pillow and close my eyes. I don't open them when the attendant asks, "Drinks? Water? Coke?"

I breathe evenly, pretending sleep as Jay and Nessa munch on peanuts, pretzels. Jay shifts and I squint, watching him lift the safety guide from the seat. He studies it, his head bent, his finger drawing a path like I drew lines on my maze.

Maybe Jay isn't so bad after all?

I sigh and widen my eyes a bit, seeing Nessa slyly studying me. She's smart, too, I think.

I go back to pretending sleep.

I remember Bibi, at the airport, hugging me, murmuring, *"You're always journeying whether you like it or not."*

I try to relax. My hands rest on my pocket where my map is tucked inside.

No matter what: Escape. Survive.

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