

LUCY HOPE



For Kev
My rock

First published in the UK in 2021 by Nosy Crow Ltd
The Crow's Nest, 14 Baden Place
Crosby Row, London SE1 1YW

Nosy Crow and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Nosy Crow Ltd

Text copyright © Lucy Hope, 2021
Cover and chapter opener illustrations copyright © David Dean, 2021

The right of Lucy Hope to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted.

All rights reserved

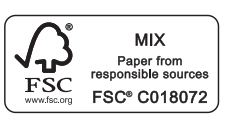
ISBN: 978 1 83994 188 7

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

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, hired out or otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published. 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 written permission of Nosy Crow Ltd.

Printed and bound in the UK by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A
Typeset by Tiger Media

Papers used by Nosy Crow are made from wood grown in sustainable forests



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

www.nosycrow.com



Chapter One

Edenburg, Bavaria. 1900

Our house perches on top of a tall rock. My great-great-grandfather, Walter Engel, built it years ago, hauling the foundation stones up by rope and pulley. It was a simple place at the beginning – just a hotchpotch of rooms looking down on the Bratvian Forest and the small town of Edenburg. With a growing collection of stuffed owls, Walter built another storey dedicated to their display, and an annex to the side for his book

collection. In his middle years he built two more floors for his frequent house guests. When Mother inherited the house, she added a music room at the top. Today our house stretches precariously to the sky, a monument to the dreams of five generations of the Engel family.

Living on a rock presented various challenges over the years, particularly the problem of how to reach the house without crampons and climbing boots. My great-grandfather designed a mechanical winch system that bounced white-knuckled visitors up and down the rock at great speed. My grandfather's somewhat safer solution was to use explosives to blast out a road that encircled the rock like a helter-skelter. And to this day that is how we come and go from our eyrie, either on foot or by carriage.

So that is where we live. Mother, Papa, Grandma and me. At night I can see München, miles away, where Mother performs at the opera house. When not on stage, she spends her days in the music room rehearsing for her next performance.

Grandma moved back in with us when the illness took hold last year. It's spreading through her body now, gnawing at her bones. She used to look after me when Mother was performing and I was too young to leave alone. We'd play games like I spy or hide-and-

seek among the owls. When I was six she taught me the Bavarian dances of her childhood: the Zweifacher and the Schuhplattler.

I sit with her now, holding her hand, squeezing cool water on to her parched lips with a small sponge. She's a remnant of her former self. A heap of hollow bones, sunken cheeks and white hair.

Remembering the nurses are coming later to see her, I check the dials on the brass morphine pump. It was designed by Grandpa years ago to relieve my uncle Killian's pain after he returned from the war with a shattered leg. The bellows hiss and heave noisily and I wonder how she sleeps through the racket. I adjust the settings, allowing a little more of the powerful medicine to flow into her veins.

I gently kiss her hand and head back to my room.

★

A storm is brewing. Living high like this, we see the weather coming before anyone else.

Storm's coming, I tap into my little Morse code machine, warning Raphael, my one and only friend in Edenburg. People tend to stay away from us these days, what with the house, and the owls … and Mother.

Thanks, he taps back.

I glance down at his house at the edge of town and

see him lean out of his room to pull his window closed.

Mother is in her music room, as always. I know she'll keep *her* windows open, despite the storm. People whisper when they see her, standing at a window, as if performing to the heavens. She's singing "*Agnus Dei*" – Lamb of God. The wind catches her voice and it weaves round our rock and up into the eye of the approaching storm.

The world becomes dark. Rain pelts at my window. Mother sings. Grandma's pump sighs.

I hear a tap at my window and press my face against the rain-soaked glass but see nothing. I throw myself back on to my bed and return to my book. I hear the tapping again. I try to ignore it, but it comes again. Curiosity finally overwhelms me, and I pad back to the window, planning to open it just an inch. The wind catches it, throwing it open and the storm fills my room. Something whistles past my ear and lands with a gentle thud on the bed. I slam my window closed, my hands shaking. Turning back to my bed I see what looks like a bird of prey lying in a sodden, trembling heap on my eiderdown.

I pick it up carefully, wrap it in a shawl and hold it on my lap like a baby. Having grown up with the collection of stuffed owls, I should be able to identify it.

Eventually the creature's trembling subsides, and I unwrap my little package to see what's inside, certain it's just a barn owl.

I examine it, gently lifting its wings, turning it over. My heart stops. It can't be. I tap a message to Raphael again.

Please come. I need you.

Now?

Yes, I reply. *Now.*

The creature seems to be in a deep sleep. I barely dare touch it, terrified it might wake. I have never seen anything like it, but I'm certain I know what it is. Four tiny wings protrude from its shoulder blades. Its body is covered in scruffy feathers. The skin on its hands and feet has the feel of parchment. I touch the sparse soft hair on its head. It is dark, like mine, but finer. Still wet from the storm, it begins to shiver. I wrap the shawl round it again. Its pale face with tightly shut eyes is that of a sleeping infant.

★

Raphael comes before the storm has passed. He's drenched.

"I have something to show you," I say.

He bends down to kiss my cheek. "Hello, Cassie, how are you? How lovely to see you!"

"Oh, sorry. Hello, Raphael. But something strange has happened and I don't know what to do."

He looks down at me, and then at the bundle in my arms.

"I think you need to sit down," I say, touching the bed next to me.

I cannot think of anyone else in the world I can trust with this. Gentle Raphael is the obvious and only choice. He sits and I place the creature on his knee. He unwraps the shawl a little.

He looks at me. "Is this what I think it is?"

I nod. He wraps it up again, his eyes wide. "Where on earth did you find her?"

"She was blown into my room in the storm. I heard a tapping at the window. I opened it and she landed on my bed, just here." I point to the patch on the bed, which is still wet. "I thought you only found them in the Bible," I add. "I didn't think they actually existed. And I thought they were supposed to be boys."

"Those stories are from a different time," he says quietly.

"Do you think she's some kind of angel?"

"I think she might be a cherub, actually," he says. "They're quite different to angels."

I remember the exhibition of religious paintings

Grandma took me to see in the Glaspalast nearly two years ago. The main hall was filled with oil paintings and statues of cherubs – but they were pink, well-fed infants with little wings that couldn't possibly have lifted them into the air. They were nothing like this strange creature.

"What do you think I should do with her?" I whisper.

"I don't know," he says, handing her back to me. "It's not something I know much about." He turns away as if to avoid my gaze.

"We could look in the library. See if there's anything there on cherubs…" I say, visualising the shelves in the old library downstairs. "There's a section on feathered creatures, and definitely some religious books."

He nods. "But we need to be careful. It's possible someone, or *something*, will be out looking for her."

My heart misses a beat. "What sort of *something*?"

"I'm not sure." He walks to the window and looks up at the sky, frowning.

The storm is subsiding but dark clouds still swirl around the house, accentuating the gloom in my room.

"Do you think we should feed her?" I say, shivering.

"I don't think so," he says. "I suspect she needs something other than food to stay alive."

"Such as?"

He shakes his head. "I just think her needs will be

quite different to those of a human baby." He hesitates. "And I don't think you should tell your parents about her for now."

I nod. "Where could she have come from?"

He looks at me, as if considering something. "Perhaps she lost the others in this storm. Like a bird separated from its flock."

I look at him. "The other *whats*?" I say, the hairs on the back of my neck pricking. "You think there are more out there like her?" I glance out of the window nervously.

"Probably not many like her. Most likely angels." He turns from the window to face me. "Was your—" He stops himself.

"Was my what?"

"Oh, nothing."

"What is it, Raphael?"

"Your mother was singing earlier, wasn't she?" he says, after a pause.

"Yes, of course she was. She's always singing. What are you saying?"

"Well, I know it sounds peculiar, but I think angels might communicate by song. Like whales. I'm wondering if she was drawn to your mother's voice. Maybe she thought her singing was the host calling to her."

"By *host*, you mean other angels?" I say, even though

I know the answer.

He nods.

"And you think they'll come looking for their baby?"

"Possibly. I don't know, Cassie. I don't know much more than you! But I do know she isn't a baby. She's probably thousands of years old."

I glance down at the creature in my arms, at her strange paper-like skin and delicate feathers. I cannot believe she is so ancient.