CLASH OF THE TOTEMS AND THE LOST MAGAECIANS

BOOK 1

Yonnie Garber



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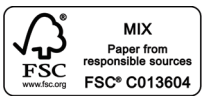
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To Keith who reads all my stories

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1

BURN DOWN THE SCHOOLS

Mum was waiting anxiously for me inside the school gates of Saint Timothy's, a small private school in a village called Tribourne. I got out late as Mrs Hooker (unfortunate name for a teacher) held me behind with my best friend, Letty Keel, to reprimand us for acting *inappropriately*. That teacher had no sense of humour. She said we weren't taking our music lesson seriously, but I burped in perfect time and pitch to Beethoven's Fifth. What was the problem?

"Have a good weekend," shouted Letty as she spotted Billy Carlisle waiting for her outside school. "I'll call you. Maybe we can meet up and do something." Letty was tall with golden hair that curled at the ends. I, on the other hand, was told by the local baker last week that I was a *little cutie*, which was a compliment for a six-year-old but not for someone twice that age and about to become a teenager in a couple of days.

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"Sure," I called out to her but she'd already disappeared off with Billy.

"A bit young for all that, don't you think?"

"Mum…it's not like that! Anyway…you don't understand today's kids." Before I had a chance to continue my lecture on how mature the kids of today were in comparison to her day, she handed me a Tupperware box.

"Pick some wild blackberries on your way home for tonight, won't you, please, Ellery? I've got a staff meeting here…shouldn't be more than an hour."

I took the box from her.

"…and take *him* with you." She gestured in Thomas Marks's sniffling direction, who was putting his phone back into his chocolatey pocket and wiping his eyes with his blazer sleeve.

"What's up, Thomas?" I asked, bending down to him as he sat slouching his large frame against the low wall. His red chubby cheeks seemed to continue straight into his neck. They looked like a couple of freckled pouches. If it wasn't for his size, it would have been hard to believe he was in the same year group as me.

"He's forgotten. He always forgets when it's his turn to have me."

"Your dad?" I guessed. It seemed pretty obvious that collecting Thomas from school was quite low down on his dad's list of things to remember.

Thomas nodded, putting his hand back into his pocket to retrieve some of his melted chocolate raisins. "He said he lost track of time while out shopping with Naomi. Mum hates Naomi. She says she looks like a sixth-former. I give

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up. How am I going to get home now? Dad's in London and doesn't want to leave, and Mum doesn't get back from work for two hours. I've missed the last bus."

"You can come back with me. It's only a short walk. Besides, you can help me pick wild blackberries along the way. They're my dessert tonight." I handed him the small white Tupperware box. Thomas stared bewildered back at me. Most kids at Saint Timothy's thought that money grew on trees, and fruit and veg grew magically on supermarket shelves. Most of my class thought my mum and I were weird. *We* weren't weird – *Mum* was weird. We didn't even own a car as it was *bad for the environment*. All my friends' parents didn't just own *one* car but multiple vehicles in multiple colours. One girl's dad had a private jet. Then, of course, there was Mum's issue with meat. We weren't exactly vegetarians but we didn't eat a lot of meat, only on special occasions. Mum could be so intense sometimes. Her late brother was a vegan and very eco-friendly, so it was her testament to his memory. Boring! If she only knew the number of times I'd eaten burgers and chips at school, she'd have a fit.

"Is your mum really going to introduce *meat-free Mondays* at school?" asked Thomas, staring into the Tupperware box.

I didn't answer, thinking only of the possibility of losing even more friends from the very few I already had if she did.

"Irene Sturrage says your mum's a witch," he added.

"Well, Irene Sturrage is an undersized know-it-all with the brain the size of a pickled onion. Mum likes experimenting with herbal remedies…that's all." I stopped for a minute, remembering one of her remedies for a sore throat, which turned out to be as appealing as a bowl of dog sick.

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"Irene says your mum turns kids into frogs and that you've got no dad because she must've killed him with a poisoned witch's potion."

"What?" I retorted with a snigger. "I never knew my dad. He left us before I was born…" I trailed off. I didn't really want to talk about it with Thomas. Mum never talked about my dad – not ever. With each passing year came a stronger desire to find out more. I should've been more understanding, I suppose. Mum had been through a lot, losing her brother and her parents in one go – in a car accident. I think my dad abandoned her soon after that. Poor Mum but even more, *poor me*. I needed to know more. It was so irritating. I didn't even know what he looked like. Mum had kept no photos of my dad and only a small box of old photos of my grandparents. The only ones left of my late Uncle Win were those of him as a child, looking like any other spotty teenage boy. I did my best to wear Mum down with my frequent outbursts of feeling disconnected.

"I don't even look like you," I used to say. *"I could be anyone from anywhere."*

I thought my friends were so lucky to have dads who grounded them or grandparents who smelled of old socks and farted in public.

As we walked past the old church graveyard of Tribourne Village, there was an abundance of blackberries. I removed the berries one by one, being careful not to touch the thorny brambles, and passed one to Thomas to taste.

"But it hasn't been washed," he said, looking at the juicy berry balanced on my palm.

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"It doesn't need to be. No one's touched it. It couldn't be cleaner. Try it."

He took the berry and reluctantly popped it into his mouth.

"You need to chew it, Thomas." As I watched him chew, a bit of the juice squirted from his mouth, covering his lips like gothic, black lipstick.

"It's good…really sweet." He nodded.

I encouraged him to pick some, putting them in the box but keeping hold of a few to eat.

"What are these ones down here? Blueberries?"

"No!" I yelled, smacking some shiny, black berries from his grip.

"That's deadly nightshade…the Devil's cherries. The roots are the most poisonous part but the berries have been known to kill children."

Thomas wiped his hands uneasily on his trousers and withdrew from further picking, but I continued conscientiously until the Tupperware box was overflowing. Before reaching home, I collected some wild rosemary from behind the cemetery to put with our vegetable lasagne, which Mum had left in the oven. As I unlocked the front door, a heavenly waft of herby deliciousness greeted our nostrils. Lionel, our highly strung, golden-haired terrier barked, then let out a pathetic grunt before running off to the kitchen to await his dinner. We threw our school bags down in the hallway then followed him.

"It's too early, boy," I said with a giggle, stroking his little head. "Soon…"

"My mum can't get here for a while. I think there's roadworks or something," said Thomas meekly as he looked

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down at his phone. "I'm sorry. If it's too late, I can just wait outside."

"Don't be daft, Thomas. You can eat with me. It'll be nice to have some male company for a change."

Thomas blushed, making me cringe. I hadn't meant boyfriend male company…just friend male company.

I'm not sure Thomas was that keen when I told him it was vegetarian but he was always munching on something or other at school so I suspected he'd eat whatever I gave him as his stomach would soon get the better of him. Mum was an exceptional cook and could make an amazing meal out of anything.

We broke into some freshly baked bread which was still a bit warm. We didn't use a knife but just tore at the loaf, releasing a cascade of crusty crumbs and a delicious aroma that would linger all night. The smell of Mum's bread always reminded me of everything that was good and safe. It seemed to give Thomas the confidence to try the lasagne.

"I've never eaten anything vegetarian before," he mumbled with a mouthful. "It's really good…really, I mean it."

"Don't sound so surprised." I laughed.

He was now piling on a second helping, chatting away happily and enjoying some animal friendship as Lionel had sat down by his feet, staring at the appealing plate of lasagne, in an effort to capture any dropped food from my guest. We were interrupted by Thomas's phone ringing.

"It's my mum," said Thomas, scoffing down as much of the remaining lasagne as he could before getting tomatoey goo all over his screen as he answered it.

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I could just about make out Mrs Marks apologising for being late, then she gave an explanation which I couldn't quite hear. She sounded quite hysterical.

"Are you sure?" said Thomas, still managing to have one more forkful of food. "But it can't be…it can't be." There was a small delay. "Cool! Does this mean I never have to go back to school?"

"What can't be?" I asked, watching Thomas disconnect from his mum. "Why don't you have to go back to school?"

"There's been a fire – an explosion or something…at Saint Timothy's. Apparently the roads are blocked by police cars and fire engines and stuff. My mum's stuck in all the traffic. That's why she's late."

I grabbed my phone off the table and called my mum. She didn't pick up. I texted. I waited. No reply.

"Hey – what are you doing?" asked Thomas, waving his fork at me.

"My mum. She's in the building. I must go and help her," I said, throwing my fleece over my school uniform, then feverishly lacing up my trainers, which was proving difficult as my hands were shaking so much.

"But you'll never get through."

"I'll take my bike round the back, through the cemetery."

"But…it's so creepy this time of day. It's when the light fades and the shadows appear. Besides…you're not honestly planning to go into a burning building, are you? Do you know how dangerous that would be, Ellery?"

"But my mum's in there, Thomas. You coming or not?"

Thomas's face was a picture of horror as he stood there in disbelief, his mouth wide open, revealing bits of unchewed

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lasagne…but then he smiled, took one last gulp of food, put on his Saint Timothy's blazer and said, "Yep…I'm coming."

"Here…you can borrow Mum's helmet. It's bigger than mine."

Thomas's large head was more than snug as he wrestled with the buckle on Mum's helmet, dark curls escaping from all directions like a cluster of eels. He followed me into the shed round the back of the garden.

"What do you call that?" he snapped.

"It's called a tandem."

"I know what it's called…but how am I supposed to ride that?"

"We're meant to ride it together. Then we can't get separated. C'mon, it's easy…so long as we *both* pedal, of course. I won't be able to pedal for you as well as me."

Thomas was suddenly less enthusiastic but he had no choice and got on the back of the tandem, causing the front to spring up in protest. Thomas ended up on his back, the bike pointing skywards. I removed the handlebars still attached to his hands, brought it to an upright position, then steadied myself on the front, allowing Thomas to remount on the back. Cycling through the cemetery was far less creepy than expected as the roaring blaze from Saint Timothy's seemed to illuminate our path. The thought of Mum, still being inside the school building, sent a fresh wave of panic with resultant jelly legs, making it much more difficult to keep going through the smoke-filled air. Thomas had run out of steam and given up. I couldn't cycle alone carrying my friend's heavy body on the back. I lost my footing and my balance as the bike toppled heavily sideways onto the

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ground, which was now covered in a layer of grey ash, and I found myself upside down with legs akimbo.

"You okay?" I asked, sliding free from beneath the handlebars and rising quickly to a more dignified position.

"Yep."

We left the bike behind a small bush and continued the rest of the short journey on foot. The smoke was rising vigorously over the school like a sorcerer's cloak engulfing an illusion. Only this was no illusion; I felt my throat burning from the fumes.

"We need to stay hidden," shouted Thomas over the noise of the sirens, "otherwise we'll be sent away."

I nodded.

We walked through the staff car park to face the shock of seeing the library, or more accurately, no library – still smoking with flickering embers glowing eerily in an empty, burned-out shell. Most of the ceiling was hanging down precariously, bits of plasterboard torn apart, exposing electric wiring like human blood vessels. Remnants of book bindings and the odd framework of a chair were all that remained, charred and blackened from the ferocious lick of the flames. I covered my mouth with my hand, which was shaking so badly against my cheeks, it was causing my teeth to chatter. I began hyperventilating, unintentionally inhaling smoke which felt as if I'd placed a burning log into my chest.

"Don't worry," said Thomas. "They never hold the staff meetings in the library. It would've been in the main staffroom. Your mum'll be fine."

I smiled a pathetic smile, a wave of guilt washing over me as my immediate concern was not for my mum but for

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all the books – all the wonderful stories I'd read and all the ones I'd wanted to read from this library, now lost…all gone forever. My stomach knotted into a painful spasm, making me breathless. The heavy grey smoke blurred before my eyes and I swallowed hard and blinked to focus and prevent hysteria from setting in. If Mum was still in the building, then I'd need to keep calm. Mind you, if Mum was okay then she'd be out of a job as she was the school librarian.

"The only way we can get to the staffroom is through the sixth-form common room," said Thomas.

We headed off, trying to avoid falling debris. We must've been nuts, but the adrenaline seemed to give us a false sense of invincibility. As we entered the common room, the whole area behind us was suddenly engulfed by a set of fiery jaws. The only way out would be through the common room window ahead.

"We can't stay here, Ellery. We'll never make it."

He was right, of course, and I knew we'd have to surrender to safety but something caught my eye…on the floor on the other side of the room. It was a hand, a hand that was clenching and unclenching weakly. It must have belonged to somebody…barely alive.

"It's too dangerous, Ellery."

"We can't just leave them here to die. We must at least try."

I raised my fleece to cover my mouth and nose and Thomas did the same with his Saint Timothy's scarf. We managed to reach the body which was attached to a sixth-form boy, possibly Saint Timothy's head boy for all I knew. A large heavy antique bookcase full of student manuals

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on further education and *after sixth form* stuff were still contained within the shelves which rested on the poor boy's chest.

"Can't move," he rasped.

"If we get the books out then we might be able to shift the bookcase enough to slide you out," I suggested.

Thomas nodded and we got to work flinging large volumes away from the shelves as quickly as we could while the temperature around us was rising uncomfortably.

"If I try lifting it, then you can pull him free," said Thomas, grabbing a jutting piece of the bookcase.

"Okay."

Thomas was considerably larger than I was so it seemed appropriate that he'd have more strength to lift the bookcase enough for me to free the injured boy.

"Get ready," he said, taking a deep breath as if that would give him added strength.

I grabbed under the arms of the boy, ready for a speedy slide backwards. As I tightened my grip, he clutched at my forearms then gasped loudly, "Stop!"

"What's wrong? You in pain?"

He didn't answer, he just whimpered pathetically. His face twisted into a grimace every time he tried to move.

"I'm so sorry…erm…what's your name?"

"Aiken…my name is Aiken."

"I'm so sorry, Aiken," I began. "We're going to get you out of here, Aiken…I promise. And…you're going to be just fine." I tried to imagine myself as my mum. What would she have said? "You need to be strong…I know you can do it." This was far more difficult than I thought. This boy

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was practically an adult – he had chin stubble and proper sideburns. He wasn't going to listen to some Year 8 ranting on like a patronising nuisance. "It might hurt for a moment but we're so close now. You're doing really well. Just hang in there."

"Your spell is good. Thank you. Do you know any more spells to help with the pain?"

I looked up at Thomas, whose concentration seemed to be broken by the boy's odd comment.

"What did he say?"

"Dunno," I muttered. "I think he's gone a bit loopy from his injuries. He wants me to do a spell or something."

"He doesn't need a spell – he needs a bloody miracle, Ellery. We're all going to die, it's too heavy," gasped Thomas, looking down at the distressed teenager, drifting in and out of consciousness.

"You!" bellowed a deep and frightening voice from the window.

I froze on the spot as I saw the large, muscular figure to whom the voice belonged. His dark angular face and short, slightly greying, wiry hair accentuated his strong build, the build of someone who knew how to fight, someone unlikely to take sass from anyone. I swallowed with difficulty, my throat so sore. "We need to help him, sir…"

"*You*…sticky boy…"

Thomas, who still had remnants of lasagne round his mouth, pointed at himself in question.

"Yes. Help your girlfriend," he ordered, which turned Thomas's face an embarrassing crimson. The man then climbed nimbly through the window to lift the bookcase

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from the boy's crumpled chest as if it weighed less than a piece of paper.

We slid him away quickly before the man dropped the heavy bookcase with a thumping crash.

"Who sent you?" he shouted.

"No one," I replied.

"Not you…*you!*" screamed the man, glaring at Aiken, then raising him up roughly by the neck and almost throttling him before pinning him against the blackened wall.

This man frightened me intensely but I couldn't stand there while he killed the defenceless sixth-former. I grabbed his arm to pull his grip from the injured boy's neck. As I did so, he took my arm and twisted it behind my back in a lock. Now he had Aiken in one hand and me in the other.

"This boy has just set your school on fire!" he screamed at me.

I stopped at his shocking statement and he released his grip on me but tightened his grip on Aiken.

"Was it Saxon Nash? Did he make you do this?"

The boy said nothing.

"Answer me, boy! Is this his new plan? To destroy Dweller schools and books? To kill the teachers? To hit vulnerable schoolchildren? Answer me, boy. Answer me!" He was shaking Aiken, who despite being covered in soot, was as white as a sheet, tears running furiously down his cheeks, leaving white streaks either side.

"You can't kill me. I'm still a teenager. It's not our way… and you know it. You can't hurt a youngling…you can't."

Youngling? I was starting to wonder if I'd stumbled onto a *Star Wars* film-set. Who would use the word 'youngling',

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apart from Obi-Wan Kenobi? Squinting through the smoke, I tried to scrutinise this large, intimidating man more closely, slightly disappointed by not spotting a lightsabre hanging off his trouser belt.

The injured boy had become red in the face.

"Youngling? *Youngling*?" snapped the man. "You've got more facial hair than I have!"

"I seriously doubt that," I whispered to Thomas, watching the boy slump to the floor as the large man sent a vicious slap in his direction. He then hoisted the unconscious teenager over his shoulder and ushered us to the window.

"My mum…" I choked, as I clambered through.

"Who do you think sent me to find you? She's fine, by the way…very lucky…very lucky indeed. She'd left the staffroom to get some more mugs from the canteen when the explosion hit. Your headmaster, on the other hand, wasn't so lucky. He might not make it. Such an unnecessary waste," he shouted over the noise of fire-engine sirens, looking pensively ahead as he led us away from the building.

"My mother *knows* you?"

The man ignored me. "What you did was madness – you know that, don't you? What were you thinking, strolling into a burning building like that? And *you*…sticky boy…you went along with her."

"Thomaaaaas! Thomas Marks! How dare you go off like that. I've been worried sick."

"You must be the boy's…erm…older sister? I'm Hendrick Myerscough." He extended his arm for a handshake.

Thomas and I both groaned at Hendrick Myerscough's lame line.

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"Prunella Marks." She giggled, holding out her hand to shake Myerscough's. "Thomas's *mother* actually."

Thomas's mum had a round freckled face framed with a mane of curly, dark hair which was peppered with grey. Her waistline was quite large, causing her to topple as she struggled to keep her balance over her high heels, but she was still tiny next to Myerscough. I reckon he was the biggest person I'd ever met.

"Your son has behaved recklessly and deserves your reprimand. However, as his friend could not be dissuaded from searching for her mother at the school, young Thomas here took it upon himself to look after Ellery in her quest. This was quite possibly the bravest thing he's ever undertaken in his young life, and it must not go unnoticed that he managed to save the life of a fellow pupil. He knew the danger involved and yet he still took the risk. I think he deserves to be commended. Bloody foolhardy, if you ask me…but bloody brave all the same."

Mrs Marks stood silent, looking at her son like a complete stranger. "Are you sure it was Thomas?"

"You need to give the boy some credit, Madam. Now if you'll excuse me…I need to get this young lady back to her mother." He took my arm and began marching me in the direction of the fire crew and ambulances, where I saw Mum, sooty-faced and waving with a very relieved smile.

"Mr Myerscough?" I asked.

"What?"

"Why would Aiken want to burn the school down?"

"This is neither the time nor the place for explanations. I'll take you and your mum home. We'll talk there."

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"Who's Saxon Nash?"

Myerscough looked surprised that I didn't know but made no attempt to answer my question and I certainly wasn't going to challenge his decision. He frightened the life out of me.

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