For Theodora Collier,
to whom this story belongs
– K.R.



For Michael,
for the endless support
and tea at all hours!
– S.O.

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KATHERINE RUNDELL

The Zebra's Great Escape



Illustrated by SARA OGILVIE

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PART ONE

Mink did not believe in bedtimes. So although it was late, and all the other children in the square had gone to sleep, Mink was very much awake.

She was kicking high on the swing when she heard a noise in the bushes. The noise was somewhere between a growl and a cough and a sneeze and a hiccup. It was not a human sound.
A face appeared above her, and a long tongue reached out and licked a little snot from the inside of Mink's nostril.
'*Oh!*' gasped Mink. She froze.

But the swing did not freeze, and so Mink went flying head first into the shrubs.
It hurt. She ran a finger over her teeth to check they were still there.



The creature's legs were as thin as walking sticks, and striped black and white. His eyes were very large, and his lashes were as long as Mink's longest finger.

The baby zebra bent his head and touched the tip of his muzzle to Mink's head.
He breathed.
As he breathed, an astonishing, miraculous thing happened: colours began to appear behind Mink's eyes.

She crouched, flabbergasted, while he breathed again, hot and spitty, and the colours shifted and sharpened.
They were red, and orange, and urgent.
Mink's skin tingled with shock.
'Did you do that?'





The zebra gave a snort and stamped his foot, and the colours swirled, twice as bright and strong.

She could suddenly *feel*, with absolute certainty, what the zebra was saying. She felt it prickling in her fingertips and all the way down her spine.

Help! the zebra was saying. Please help!

Mink was not usually gentle. She liked doing things fast, and wild. But it was with all the gentleness in the world that she reached out and laid a hand on the zebra's fur.

'Of course I'll help!' she whispered.

Mink didn't let herself stop to think. She took hold of the zebra's mane and led him at a sprint towards her flat, right at the top of an old house.



Far away, out in the countryside, a tall figure in black boots smiled. He unloaded two zebras from his van into the waiting cage, and stepped back. The man's boots were so brightly polished he could see his own moustache reflected back at him.

'The last ones,' he said.

He smiled again, a thin and unlovely smile.

The zebra did not find steps easy,
and he bit a chunk out of the banister
trying to steady himself.

'In here!' Mink whispered, and the zebra darted into her bedroom.

'Mink!' called her father. 'Bedtime!'

Mink looked at the zebra and put a finger to her lips.

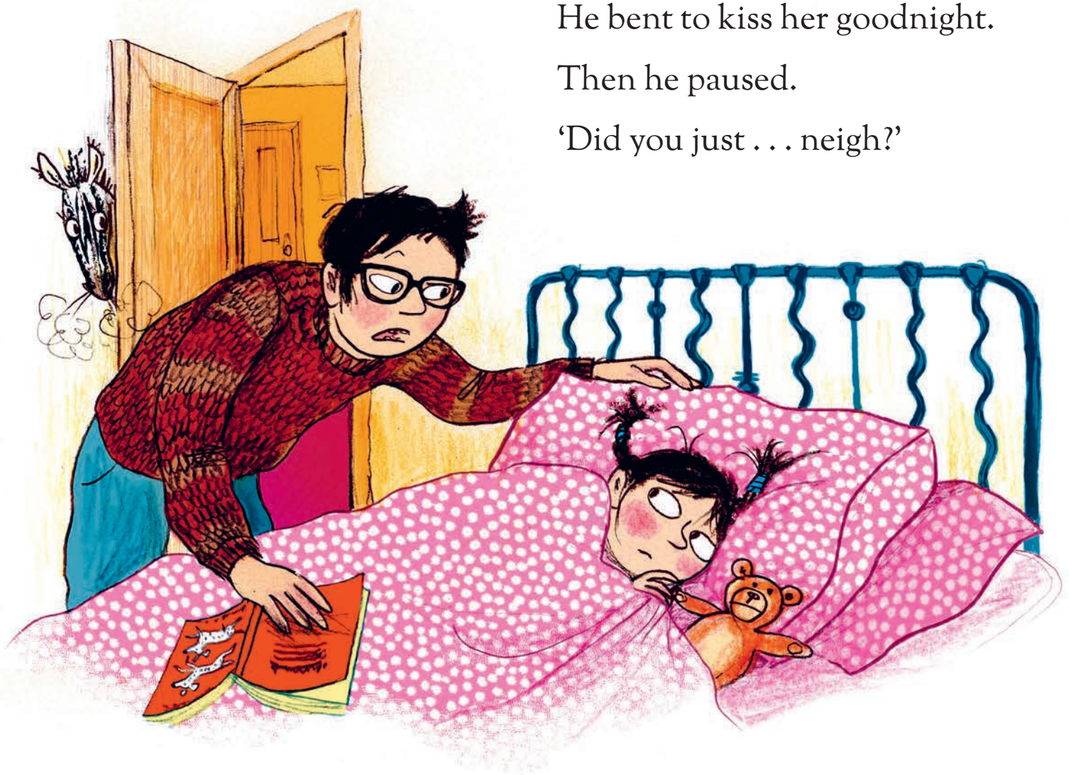
'Mink! Where are you?'

She pushed the zebra behind her door and launched herself into bed.
'I'm in my room!'

She pulled up the covers to her neck so her father wouldn't see she was still wearing her clothes.

'Would you like a story?' her father asked, appearing in the doorway.
'No, thank you,' she said. 'I'm suddenly very tired.'
'That's not like you!' He smiled. 'I thought you didn't believe in bedtimes.'

He bent to kiss her goodnight.
Then he paused.
'Did you just . . . neigh?'



'No!' said Mink. 'I mean . . . yes!
I mean, I was yawning. Like this.'
Mink yawned so widely that her chin rested on her chest and her top teeth almost touched her fringe.



Mink's father laughed, and turned out the light.
Mink waited until she heard him go into the kitchen, then flicked it back on again.

She stood nose to nose with the zebra, feeling his breath ruffle her eyelashes.
'Can you tell me how you got here?'
she asked.

