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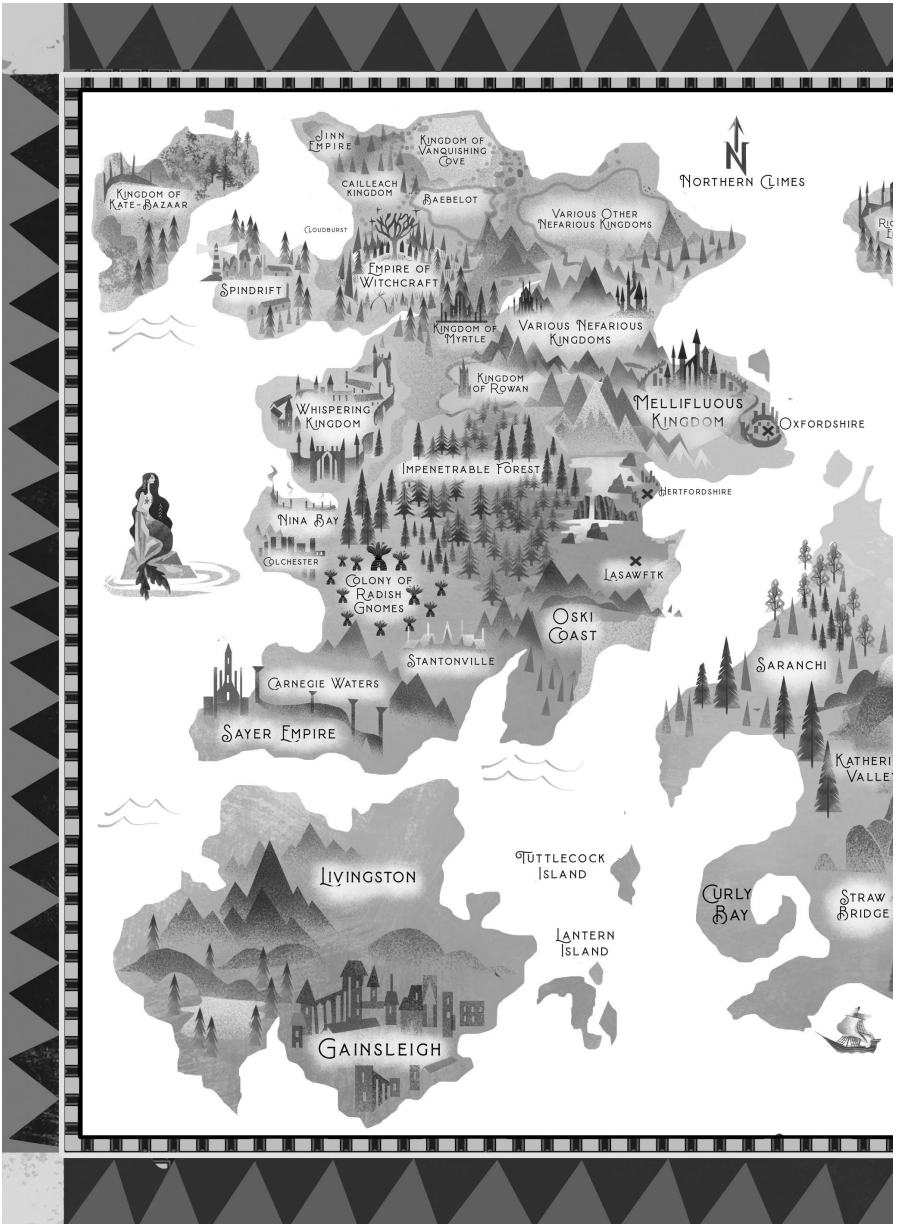
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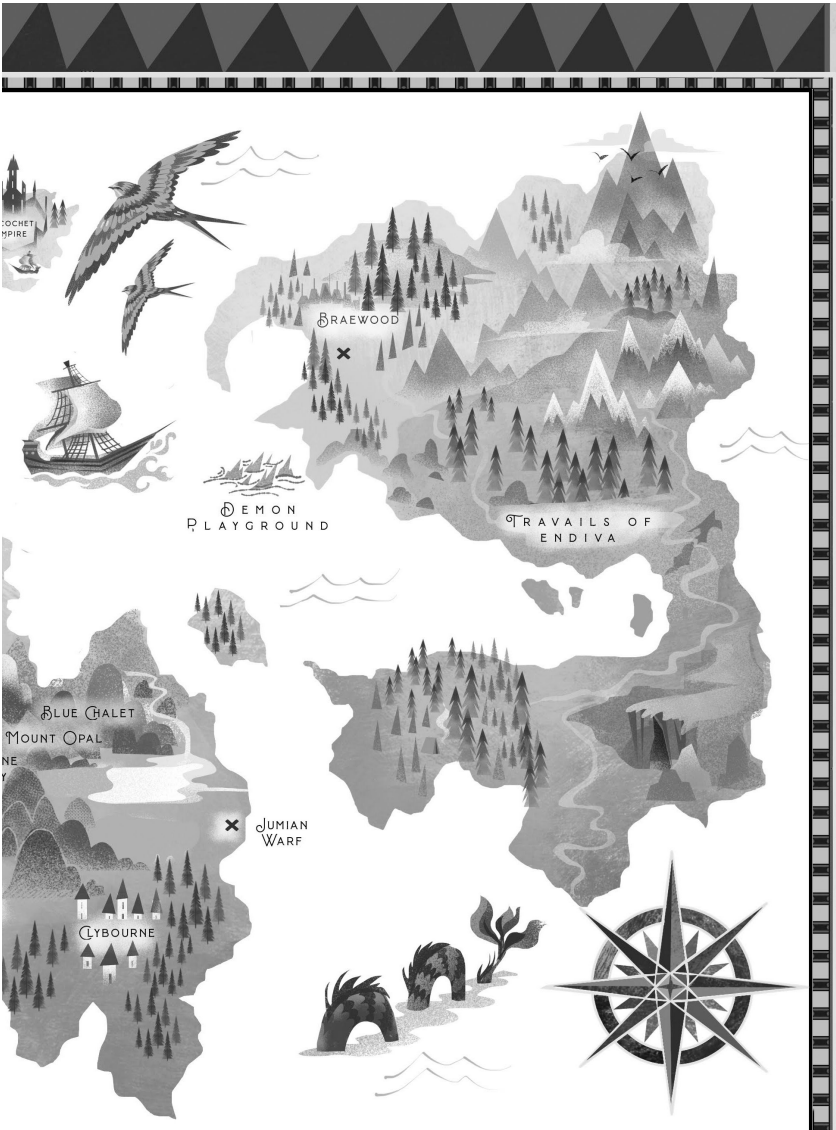
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To my godsons, Connor and Louis,
and their lovely families,

and to my Charlie

THE MONDAY AFTER

OSCAR

Monday morning, I was sent to Mrs Kugelhopf's office.

She's the Deputy Principal.

'Write a report,' Mrs Kugelhopf commanded, 'accounting for every day you were not at school last week.'

'Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday,' I replied, counting on my fingers. 'Five days.'

Mrs Kugelhopf nodded.

I nodded back.

Mrs Kugelhopf's office has a view of the wheelie bins. Her walls are the colour of green grapes that have gone slightly mouldy.

She shuffled her chair closer to her desk, hunching her shoulders to do this. She didn't look well, to be honest, but that was her emotions. She lets them get the better of her. 'You will sit outside my office today,' she informed me, 'and you will write that report.'

'What report?' I said.

'The report accounting for the days you were not at school last week!'

I gave her a careful look. With teachers, you never know how much education they have.

'*Monday*, *Tuesday*, *Wednesday*, *Thursday*, *Friday*,' I repeated slowly. '*Five days*.'

She nodded. I nodded.

'Five days *altogether*,' I added, to be helpful.

We were stuck then. She looked at me.

Put her elbows on her desk, clasped her fingers together and rested her chin on the thumbs. A little shelf made of thumbs.

'Do you understand what you are going to do?' she asked.

Big question, but I gave it my best shot.

'For my career? Play rugby league for Australia. For lunch today? Bolognese from the canteen. Next weekend? Well, I'm thinking—'

'*Oscar*,' Mrs Kugelhopf interrupted.



Her chair is a big leather palace of a chair. Mine was a spindly little wooden one. Two other wooden chairs were lined up beside me, ready for other kids to get busted.

Right now, those chairs looked nervous. Sitting there, trying to be quiet.

'I meant *now*!' Ms Kugelhopf cried. 'What are you going to do *now*?'

'I'm on an in-school suspension,' I reminded her kindly.

Mrs Kugelhopf sighed. 'How old are you, Oscar?'

Surprising twist in the conversation.

'Twelve,' I replied.

'Exactly. You are twelve.'

'If you already knew, why did you ask?'

'And Oscar – ' she ignored my laser-sharp question, ' – do you remember the Friday *before* you decided to take an entire week off school?'

It seemed like a lifetime ago, that Friday. This is because my mind had been effectively shut down and restarted since then. Still, I remembered it perfectly.

'Yes.'

'You were sitting right there.' She pointed at my chair.

Actually, I'd been sitting in the middle chair, but I let it go.

'You had been sent here for snoring loudly in class. Hilarious, I'm sure. Do you remember I spoke to you about the value you contribute to the world? Do you remember I mentioned my own son, Eddie, who is four years old?'

We both looked at the photo on her desk. Cute.

I nodded.

'And remember how I said—'

I decided to change the subject.

'What does "accounting" mean?' I asked, making myself a bit more comfortable.

'Get your feet off the chair,' she replied.

I did what she asked.

'Get your feet off my desk!' Anger vibrated her voice then, like an electric guitar.

'So where *can* I put my feet?'

'On the floor! Put them on the floor!'

She did some deep breathing. Then remembered my question.

'Accounting,' she said, and rubbed at her forehead quickly. 'Accounting is to do with financial records. Why do you—?' Her face grew wide like a balloon into which someone has just blown a huge gust of air. 'When I say *account*, I do not mean I want you to *count up* the days you were not at school! I want you to describe what you were *doing* on those days. We *know* that your father dropped you at the school gate before the bell rang each morning last week, Oscar, but then what? You didn't come *through* that gate, did you? So kindly explain why the valuable time your father spent driving you here – and he is so concerned about you, Oscar, what a lovely man he is—'

'The loveliest,' I nodded. 'And he's my stepdad.'

'All right, so Oscar, explain to me *why* the valuable time of your

stepfather in bringing you here, and the valuable time of your teacher in preparing lessons, have been *wasted*? Because *instead* of coming *into* the school, you chose to spend your time . . . doing *what*, Oscar? Tell me what!'

All those words came flying out of Mrs Kugelhopf's mouth in a rush, as if the gust of air was screaming back out of the balloon.

'You should have just said that,' I suggested.

I'd known what she meant all along, to be honest.

Just messing with her.

Also, listen, my teacher was fine without me last week. She had other kids to teach. I was not wasting her valuable time being gone. In fact, I waste a lot more of her valuable time when I'm there.

I told Mrs Kugelhopf that it was going to take a bit of time to write this 'account of Monday to Friday last week', and also that I'd need the help of a new friend of mine named Imogen Mettlestone-Staranise.

And that's how I came to write this. (Or half of it, anyway.)

Anyhow, here it is.

MONDAY

1
OSCAR

Monday morning, 9.45 am, I went to Cam.

That's the skate park at Cammeray.

It's always quiet mid-morning.

When I skated in, there was a dad with a little kid. Kid had a scooter; dad had a skateboard. The dad skated around a bit, showing off for his kid. The kid scootered, ignoring the dad. The dad attempted a trick right when the kid happened to glance at him. Trick failed. Kid stared at the dad kind of blankly.

'Right,' the dad said. 'Time to go home for a snack.'

And off they went.

That was when I realised there were two other people in the skate park. *Murmur*, *murmur*. Skated over to see.

They were sitting close together on the ground up the back. On the tufty grass that runs between the skate park and the soccer field.

Two guys. Older than me. About fifteen maybe. T-shirts, hairy arms. Their boards were lying in the grass and they were hunched over something.

It was a hot day.

Hazy air. Cicadas.

I coughed. They looked up at me.

One of the boys was holding a little round mirror in his palm. He closed his fingers over it, but not before it caught the sunlight.

I frowned.

'What ya doing?' I asked. 'Killing ants?'

'You do that with a magnifying glass,' Mirror-boy told me. 'Got a magnifying glass?'

'I don't want to kill ants,' I said.

'Well then why did you just *mention* it?' he pounced.

That was unfair and made no sense.

'What ya doing?' I asked again.

The other boy turned and looked at me more closely. He had a long, thin nose with flaring nostrils, like a jet plane. 'You're Oscar,' he said.

'Yeah.'

Mirror-boy glanced up again. 'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'You've had a haircut,' he told me. 'Didn't recognise you. I've seen you skate here before. You're good.'

'Cheers.'

I didn't tell him he was good. I'd seen both of them skate here before and to be honest, they're pretty average.

They were both studying me now. They glanced at each other, super swift, and Mirror-boy raised an eyebrow.

The other one nodded.

'Thing is,' he said, and his eyes went shiny. 'There's meant to be another skate park. Size of a football field.'

'Okay,' I said. 'Where?'

'Right here.' He thudded his fist on the grass.

'Yeah, good on ya.' Dropped my board, ready to skate away.

'No, Oscar, wait.'

'We're serious.'

'Trust us.'

'It's real. It's right *here*.'

Both of them were talking at once.

'There's a secret way to get there,' Jet-plane-nose boy explained.

'You hold a mirror in *just* the right place—' The other boy's hand darted around like a little bird, fingers still closed over the mirror.

'Only,' his friend put in, scratching his jaw, 'we can't find the right place. And we've gotta go.'

They both stood up slowly, kind of groaning like old men.

'Keep trying if you want.' Nose boy looked over at Mirror-boy.

'What?'

'Give him the mirror.'

'Why?'

'So he can try!'

They carried on arguing a while. Turned out Mirror-boy had bought the little mirror at the discount store for two dollars, so he wanted to keep it. He was pretty sure I could use anything reflective, he said. It didn't have to be this mirror. Switch my phone to selfie mode? Or did I have one of those foil bags of chips?

The other boy kept urging him to give me the mirror, explaining that if *they* couldn't go to the 'killer skate park', *I* should be able to go.

In the end, he tried to grapple the mirror out of his friend's hand, and next thing, they were wrestling.

I started laughing. 'It's all right,' I said, holding up my hands. 'You can keep your mirror.'

They looked back at me from their wrestling hold. Mirror-boy sighed and tossed the mirror onto the grass at my feet.

'Try it,' he said.

'Trust us,' his friend added.

The two of them grabbed their boards and skated away.

'Good luck,' they called over their shoulders, heading out of the skate park, onto the path, and off down the road.

A car droned by. Another one.

Helicopter someplace in the sky.

Nobody around.

I went and got my backpack.

Brought it with me to the patch of grass again, sat down, and unzipped my bag.

Nope. No food.

Stood up, picked up my board and my bag, ready to go. Looked down at the mirror, still lying on the grass, facedown. Of course, I didn't believe them. A skate park you could reach with a mirror? Lost the plot, the pair of them.

All I did was, I turned over the mirror with my foot, caught a glimpse of my eyes staring back—

My eyes?

Wait, *were* they my—?

And then, there I was.

Standing at the foot of the best skate park I ever saw.

2
IMOGEN

Only, it wasn't a skate park, was it, Oscar? It was the Elven city of Dun-sorey-lo-vay-lo-hey.

But you didn't know that at the time.

Hello, my name is Imogen Mettlestone-Staranise, and I am thirteen years old. I have been asked by Oscar Banetti to help him write this account.

At first, I said: 'No thank you, Oscar, I have no wish for additional homework.'

I was only joking. Of course I would help him. (Although, to be clear, I definitely have no wish for additional homework. In case any overexcited teachers are about to jump in.) The fact is, Oscar is quite clueless. This is not his fault of course, but it would cause him difficulty in describing Monday to Friday of last week.

And so would the fact that Oscar himself was dead for most of Monday.

Before I begin, though, you should know that I don't really