
Saving
Neverland

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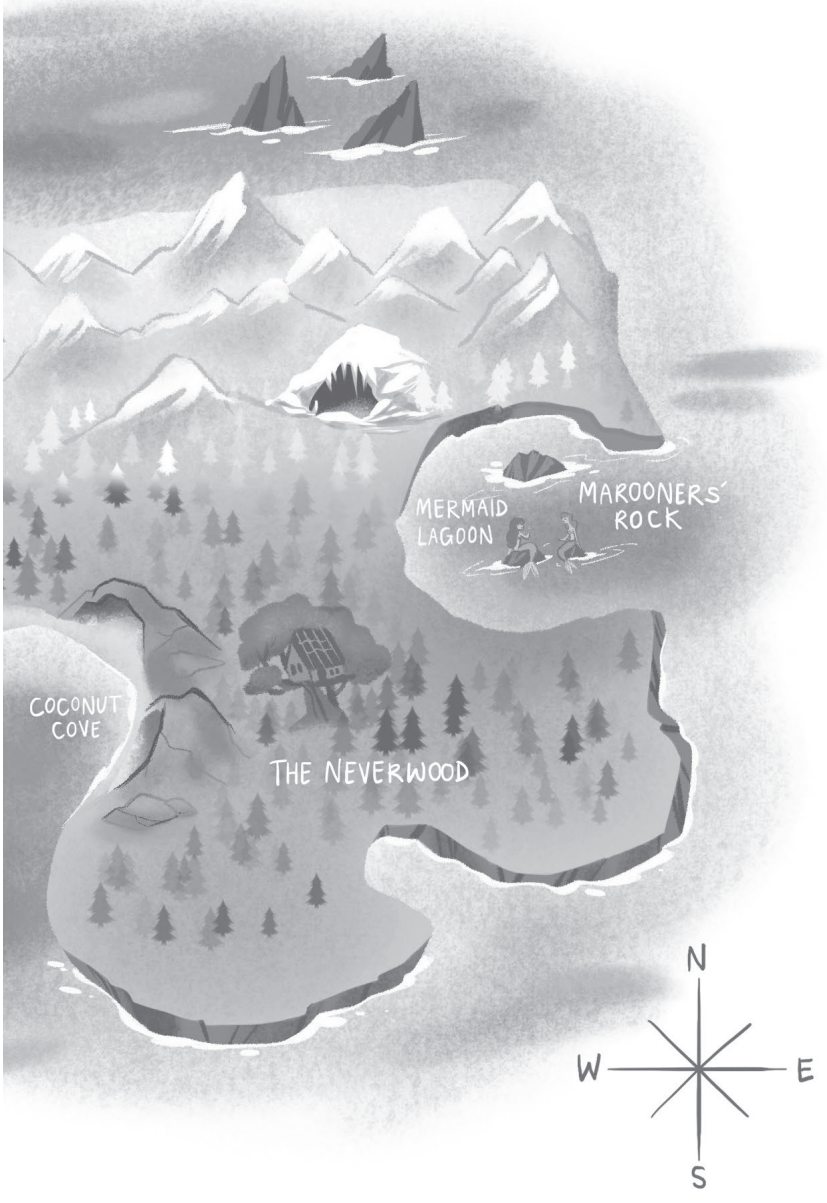
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*For my god-daughter, Martha:*
*remember to grow down as well as up.*
*(And always keep a fork in your pyjama pocket;*
*you never know when you might be invited to*
*a midnight feast.)*


Neverland
THE WHITE GIANT
TO THE MAINLAND
THE SILVER STAIRCASE
PETER'S JUMP
SMUGGLER'S POCKET
DRAGONTAIL RIVER
JOLLY RODGER


MERMAID LAGOON
MAROONERS' ROCK
COCONUT COVE
THE NEVERWOOD
N
W
E
S



# *Chapter One*

Number 14 Darlington Road in Bloomsbury, London, looks like a perfectly ordinary townhouse – at first glance, anyway.

It is tall and thin, with three rows of windows and a blue door with a brass knocker. Almost an exact copy of the terraced houses either side of it. And yet, if you were to linger a while outside Number 14, you would notice that one of the top-floor windows – the one with the white cotton curtains billowing in the breeze – is never shut. Even on the coldest winter nights, when frost clings to the rooftops and the air swirls with snow, you will find this particular window wide open.

Had ten-year-old Martha Pennydrop known there was something strange about this window when her family moved into the house a few weeks ago, I very much doubt

she would have chosen the room beyond it as her bedroom. But it had been at the start of the summer holidays, when nights are warm and bedroom windows are often left open, so she wasn't aware that this one was impossible to shut, and that it had been that way for over a hundred years.

And she certainly wasn't aware that magic was involved because, until the mischief kicks in, magic looks remarkably innocent.



Martha was sitting on her bed the evening it all began. Sunlight spilled in through the open window, and, if Martha had not been concentrating so hard on the notepad in her lap, she might have noticed that her whole bedroom was lit gold in the setting sun. But Martha didn't have time for noticing things any more. She was ten now, and ten – as everyone knows – is the beginning of the end.

It's when your age jumps to double digits. It's when you enter your last year of primary school. It's when you're expected to eat all the vegetables on your plate without complaining.

Ten was, as far as Martha could tell, the age at which you either grew up or got left behind. And getting left behind wasn't an option because Martha had discovered it came with dangerous consequences – consequences that were always there, lingering at the back of her mind.

Growing up while sharing a bedroom with your seven-year-old brother, however, was like trying to complete a complicated puzzle in the same room as a rhinoceros.

'WHOOPEE!' Scruff shrieked as he bounced on his bed in his pyjamas, knocking over a lamp and sending a photo frame clattering to the floor. He leaped still higher. 'These beds are so much springier than our old ones, don't you think?'

Martha didn't answer, but she looked up briefly because a secret part of her wanted to leap on to her bed and bounce with Scruff. She pressed her notepad into her lap to stop her legs getting any ideas because charging into childish games could, and most probably would, lead to disaster. It certainly had done six months ago . . . Martha shuddered at the memory of the Terrible Day and turned back to her notepad.

'If the roof wasn't in the way,' Scruff said, panting, 'I could probably bounce out of the house and over half of London.'

Martha tried her best to focus on the list in her notepad. It was a checklist for the day just gone, detailing all the jobs she had done about the house to make sure things didn't get out of control. She ran her finger down the list of evening duties to make sure she'd ticked each one off:

- Have bath (make sure Scruff washes between his toes and behind his ears)
- Brush teeth (give Scruff a star on his Star Chart if he does it without shouting and kicking – ask Dad if Scruff can sponsor a sloth or a penguin or whatever his favourite animal is when he gets ten stars)
- Lay out clothes for the next day (search Scruff's pockets for sweets as kitchen supply suspiciously low)
- Brush hair (if feeling strong, wrestle Scruff to ground and brush his too)
- Check Scruff's inhaler is in our bedroom (VERY IMPORTANT)

Martha flicked over the page and scribbled out the same checklist for tomorrow. Then she turned to the back of her notepad and lifted out a photo. It showed her doing a backflip in their old town hall while the rest of her gymnastics club cheered her on.

She smiled. Her dad had taken her to that club every Saturday: she'd learned to do the splits while performing a handstand and do a backflip from standing. And just as good as all that was her dad being around so much more then, driving her to and from the club, and spending the hours in between with Scruff, who loved animals so much that the keepers at the local animal sanctuary let him muck out the llamas at weekends.

But then Mr Pennydrop had been asked to head up the removal company he worked for. Rather than working nearby, he'd had to take the train to and from the company's head office in London, a two-hour journey twice a day, every weekday for a year.

With each passing day, Martha noticed him becoming more and more stressed, so she and Scruff had tried to do nice things to help him relax. They'd decorated Mr Pennydrop's briefcase with unicorn stickers, but on seeing them he hadn't looked very pleased. They'd baked

a cake for his birthday, but misread the recipe and stirred in washing powder instead of baking powder. The cake had tasted of soap. And they'd painted Father's Day cards at the childminder's house one evening after school, but in their rush to give them to their dad they hadn't waited for the paint to dry, and the important documents Mr Pennydrop was holding had been ruined.

Then the last day of the summer term had come, just over a month ago, and Mr Pennydrop announced he'd found a fully furnished flat to rent, on the top two floors of a house in London, and they were moving there because it would make life easier.

Only life didn't *seem* easier. Martha's dad was trying his best with her and Scruff, but he was still just as stressed. Perhaps even more so given that he'd started locking himself up in his study after school pick-ups to chase up removal vans and organize paperwork.

Martha thought of her mum briefly, hundreds of miles away from Number 14 Darlington Road in some new place or other. A *Free Spirit* was what Mr Pennydrop called his ex-wife (so free, it turned out, that she had checked out of the family when Martha and Scruff were

very little and checked into a backpackers' shack on a beach in Thailand and never returned).

She sent postcards now and again, but Martha didn't bother reading them. It wasn't as if she missed her mum; she'd barely even known her. And, quite frankly, Martha had enough on her plate keeping the family going and preventing another Terrible Day.

She winced as her little brother misjudged his landing and tumbled off the bed. He emerged, grinning, seconds later, and Martha breathed a sigh of relief.

Scruff grabbed a blanket from the end of his bed, tied it beneath his chin and resumed his jumping with extra vigour.

'Look, Martha! Every time I bounce, I'm going to turn into a different animal!' He flapped the blanket over his arms. 'I'm a puffling! That's a baby puffin, in case you didn't know!'

Martha stifled a smile and turned back to her notepad. She'd never heard of a puffling, but she was used to her brother running rings round her with animal facts. He'd been obsessed with wildlife for as long as Martha could remember. And, thanks to him, she now knew that

spiders had eight bums, and three per cent of the ice in Antarctic glaciers was penguin pee.

Scruff bounced again, fanning the blanket out round his neck. 'I'm a frill-necked lizard! Don't I look great?' He twirled in the air. 'Now I'm an African bush elephant! Look, Martha, look!'

Martha wanted to watch him and give him a clap, but she was worried Scruff was going to topple off his bed again, and sometimes ignoring her brother was the only way to stop him doing reckless things.

You see, Martha worried about Scruff on a daily basis. He'd been born two months early, a tiny ball of pink skin and dark, tangled hair, which had earned him the nickname Scruff. Nobody bothered with his real name now, and because it was never used Martha found it hard to remember what it actually was. She'd been certain Scruff was called Wilbur once, but then she remembered that Wilbur had, in fact, been the name of her first guinea pig, so she gave up wondering and, like everyone else, just settled for calling him Scruff.

He'd been a cheerful baby right from the start, but his lungs weren't strong, and Martha could recall countless trips to the hospital involving tubes and masks and

worried doctors. Scruff was in better shape now, and any time his asthma flared he just took a puff of his inhaler and on he went. The problem was he often forgot to carry it and, with Mrs Pennydrop off being a Free Spirit and Mr Pennydrop shut up in his study, Martha saw the inhaler, and indeed Scruff, as her responsibility.

She glanced up warily, and, delighted to have caught her attention, Scruff launched himself into such an enthusiastic somersault that his legs collided with the bedside table next to the bed, knocking it over. He let out a yelp.

Martha leaped up. 'Are you OK?'

Scruff lay in a heap on his mattress. Then he brushed back his hair to reveal two big chestnut eyes and a freckled nose. 'That, Martha, was only a baby duck-billed platypus. For the grown-up platypus, I was thinking I could hurl myself –'

Martha flopped back on to her bed. 'One of these days, Scruff, you're *really* going to hurt yourself.'

He sat up, cross-legged, on his mattress. 'But you're always there to make sure I'm OK. Like the time I fell out of the Guzzlehut, and you caught me by my ankle just before my head hit the ground!'

Martha flinched at the mention of the Guzzlehut, the treehouse in the garden of their last home. But Scruff chattered on.

'We should ask Dad to build us another treehouse here – the landlady said we could do what we liked with the garden. Then we can play Raiders, and it'll be just like it used to be!'

Martha didn't need to look up to know that Scruff was staring at her with the intensity of a china doll. Up until last year, she and Scruff had spent almost every evening after school in the Guzzlehut playing their invented game, Raiders. They collected acorns, feathers, fir cones and pebbles, then reimagined them all as sugary laces, chocolates and lollipops in their treetop sweetshop. Scruff's long-suffering one-eyed teddy bear, None-the-Wiser, ran the Guzzlehut shop, but it was raided, on a daily basis, by Armageddon, Martha's large shaggy beanbag shaped like a woolly mammoth.

They had been halfway through a game of Raiders when disaster struck that Terrible Day six months ago. And it had *all* been Martha's fault. So, when she turned ten the next day, Martha had vowed to put an end to childish games because they made you lose sight of

important things. Things that, if forgotten, could lead to disasters on an epic scale. Martha reined in the make-believe first, despite Scruff's protests, which meant no more messing about in the Guzzlehut. And no more chasing Scruff on her bike, pretending to be a monster. And no more bedtime stories huddled under the duvet with her little brother and a torch. All that stopped.

Admittedly, there were days when Martha had a wobble – a moment, in private, where she found herself longing to forget about growing up and throw herself back into silly games with Scruff. But when that happened she remembered the Terrible Day and took a few more steps towards growing up instead, just to make sure she stayed on track. Recent tactics included no more hugging her dad in public; no more skipping down the street; and certainly no mention of Fluffington, the family's Norwegian forest cat who doubled up as a babysitter.

But, even so, Martha *still* felt full of guilt about what had happened – and she still felt hopelessly young, as if she didn't quite belong to Scruff's world *nor* the world ahead of her. She was caught somewhere in the middle – without a map – and it made her very lonely. Not that she ever mentioned this to Scruff or her father because acting

like a grown-up, as far as Martha could tell from watching her dad, meant focusing on work, paying bills and not being late for things, rather than falling apart.

Martha took a deep breath now and hoped hard for that life-changing *Moment Life Begins*, which she was sure was just round the corner. Then she'd know she was well and truly on the road to growing up, and life would feel under control. Martha couldn't help thinking that this moment had already happened to her old friends: Sophie had turned ultra-sophisticated the day she was given a mobile phone; Ishaan's voice had broken; and Izzy had woken up one morning suddenly interested in boys.

Martha hoped her moment might come in the form of an unexpected phone call from the Olympic Committee pleading with her to pack in school and train as Great Britain's youngest gymnast.

She looked at Scruff. 'You know we can't have another treehouse. Not after what happened.'

Scruff made his eyes go big and adorable. Martha narrowed hers to show she wasn't giving in. Their eyes were the same colour – chestnut brown – and Martha shared Scruff's dark, unruly hair and smattering of

freckles. She didn't mind the hair – nothing a hairbrush couldn't sort out – but the freckles? Martha was yet to meet a grown-up with freckles who didn't look mischievous. And Martha was doing her best to grow up, not down.

'Martha,' Scruff said sternly, 'you're being *very* boring.' He cocked his head. 'Would you like me to bounce as a flying squirrel? Maybe it would cheer you up.'

'I don't think –'

Before Martha could finish her sentence, Scruff cut in with another question. 'Why is there sand in the drawer of this bedside table?'

Martha rolled her eyes. 'It can't be sand; we're miles away from the sea.'

'It's definitely sand,' Scruff replied. He slid off his bed and crouched beside the bedside table he'd kicked over. The little drawer at the top had slipped out.

Martha leaned over to right the table, and as she did so she saw that there was indeed sand inside the drawer, just as Scruff had said. But, Martha thought uneasily, it wasn't yellow or orange or brown like ordinary sand. It was gold.

She and Scruff gazed at the pile of grains, which

sparkled back at them, bright and glittering like stardust. Suddenly something about the air inside the bedroom seemed to change. The breeze ruffling the white cotton curtains blew a little harder, rippling through the room and stirring the sand in the drawer until it danced before them. The gust of wind vanished, as swiftly as it had come. Everything fell still, and the last of the sunlight slipped away.

'Whatever that was,' Scruff murmured, 'it was cool.'

Martha nodded without thinking, then she shook herself. 'No idea what you're talking about. I didn't see anything unusual. Just a heap of old sand.'

Scruff snorted. 'You're rubbish at lying, Martha. But if you're going to do it you'd better learn to control your nostrils. They always flare when you're telling a fib.'

Martha scowled. Little brothers didn't know much about life, but they knew an awful lot about things you'd really rather they didn't.

The bedroom door opened wider, cutting the conversation short, and Fluffington trotted in. Martha looked at the cat despairingly. He had been chosen from a rescue shelter by Scruff a few years ago, but, after Fluffington had accidentally nudged the taps on at bath

time one evening, Mr Pennydrop had concluded he was extraordinarily intelligent, and so Fluffington had become involved in the children's bedtime routine.

He made his way over to the window and tugged the curtains closed with his teeth. This was, in fact, the full extent of his childcare duties – the bath taps had been a fluke – but he shut the curtains each night with such a sense of purpose that Martha and Scruff always let him do it.

Scruff skipped over to the cat and gave him a cuddle. Martha looked on with a pang of jealousy. Fluffington was vast, not far off the size of a fox, and in the past Martha had loved snuggling into his shaggy brown fur. But that was before she turned ten, and hugging had to be given up.

Scruff looked at Fluffington glumly. 'Martha's being grumpy again, Dad's working late and Mum's who-knows-where in Asia. Could my day get any more boring?'

The cat wiggled his nose, then nuzzled Scruff's cheek.

Scruff glanced at Martha. 'Fluffington says he doesn't know, but can he have a biscuit?'

Martha closed her notepad and pulled the duvet over her. She was used to Scruff talking to Fluffington. He had a way with animals, which the keepers at the animal

sanctuary where they used to live had noticed and Martha had seen countless times with the injured creatures they'd found: wounded birds, lame rabbits, trapped hedgehogs. Scruff grew calm and quiet around them, and they, in turn, seemed to relax. This was really odd, Martha thought, because around people Scruff was rarely calm and never quiet.

'Bedtime, Scruff,' Martha said.

Scruff scowled. 'You're being boring *again*. This must be some kind of record! If you're not careful, Martha, people will find you so dull they'll fall asleep as soon as you walk into a room.'

Martha hated it that Scruff thought she was boring, but she knew that if she was going to prevent another Terrible Day she *had* to stick to her checklist. She glanced at the last line one more time, just to be sure.

- Check Scruff's inhaler is in our bedroom (VERY IMPORTANT)

She spied it on the armchair and, satisfied, closed her notepad. 'Bed,' she said, flicking off the light switch. 'Now.'

With a sigh, Scruff yanked None-the-Wiser from

an armchair and hurled the teddy bear on to his bed. None-the-Wiser bore the flight, which included a clip to the head when hurtling past the lampshade, the way he bore most things: with a one-eyed look of weary acceptance. Scruff bounded into bed to join his teddy bear while Fluffington stood, very purposefully, before a hairbrush lying on the rug. He looked at it, then glanced at Martha.

'Already brushed my hair,' she said. 'Item four on my evening checklist.'

Fluffington eyed Scruff knowingly.

He groaned. 'I've already told you: there's no point me brushing my hair before bed because of the fairy. Or maybe it's a pixie. Whatever it is, it's not an animal.'

Martha put her pillow over her head.

'The fairy comes every night,' Scruff told Fluffington. 'She wears a dress made from snowdrops, and she tramples through my hair until it's one giant knot. Then she leaves.'

Sensing that he wasn't going to win this battle, Fluffington sloped towards the door. He paused at the threshold for a moment, whiskers twitching.

Martha peered out from beneath her pillow to see

that the cat was watching the open window. The curtains were drawn, but they were thin enough for Martha to see a full moon hanging over the city. Fluffington eyed the window a little longer, as if he wasn't quite sure what to make of it. And, truth be told, Martha was growing a bit uncertain about it, too. It wasn't just the strange wind that had gusted into the room a moment before. Over the last few days, she'd also felt increasingly unsettled by the handful of leaves that had appeared, out of nowhere, every morning on the rug beneath the window.

Especially as there were no trees on the street outside.

Stranger than that, though, were the leaves themselves. They didn't look as if they belonged to any tree in Britain. They were green and shaped like maple leaves, with three jagged lobes, but the veins scoring the surface glittered silver, as if the leaves had grown with thousands of miniature diamonds stitched inside them. Martha's dad could identify every tree in the woods behind their old home, but, when she'd shown him the leaves, even he couldn't name the tree they had come from. Or explain how they'd got into the room in the first place.

Mr Pennydrop had tried to close the window then, but – no matter how hard he pushed down on it – it just

wouldn't shut. *The wood's probably swollen in the heat and got stuck*, he'd said. And he promised Martha he'd get it fixed. Only, with work being so busy, he hadn't got round to it.

Fluffington turned away from the window. He pulled the door shut with his tail, then settled down for a nap on the landing. And this story might have been very different if Mr Pennydrop had realized that, while Fluffington was top-notch at closing bedroom curtains, the Norwegian forest cat was a hopelessly inattentive babysitter. As soon as he fell asleep, he was out for the count until sunrise. But, like so many grown-ups hurtling through life with demanding jobs, Mr Pennydrop had rather lost his way and, with it, his grasp on his children.

Magic, on the other hand, never misses a trick; it knows exactly when to pounce . . .