C.C. HARRINGTON

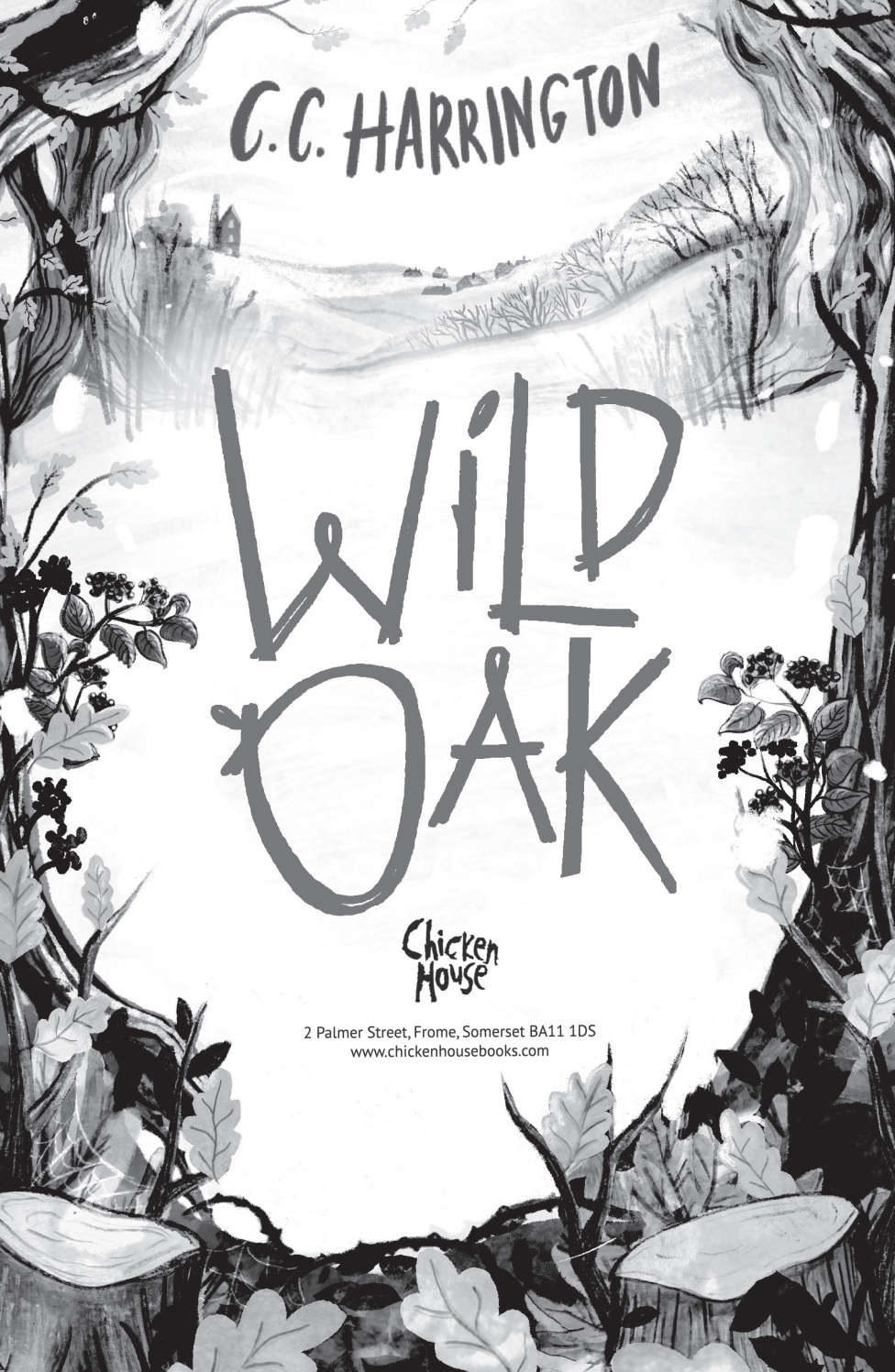
WILD OAK

A MESSAGE FROM CHICKEN HOUSE

Did you know that you could once buy rare animals from posh department stores? Our story starts decades ago, when a snow leopard purchased from Harrods escapes – lonely and afraid – to a wild wood, deep in the countryside. Only a young girl (who is also suffering and uncertain) is capable of saving the beautiful creature – and the wood itself. Concerned, warm, passionate and dramatic, this novel is already among my top animal stories of all time. If you care about the bonds between humans, nature and the animal kingdom, this classic debut from C. C. Harrington is for you!



BARRY CUNNINGHAM
Publisher
Chicken House



2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © >>>>>>>>>
Cover illustration © Kate Hickey 2023

First published in Great Britain in 2023
Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Chicken House/Scholastic Ireland, 89E Lagan Road, Dublin Industrial Estate,
Glasnevin, Dublin D11 HP5F, Republic of Ireland

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Cover and interior design by Helen Crawford-White
Cover and interior illustrations by Kate Hickey

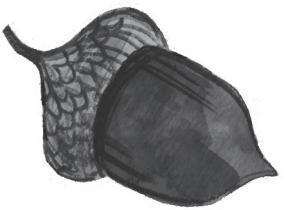
Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

PB ISBN 978-1-915026-14-9
eISBN 978-1-915026-19-4



To all children who stammer.
To all who speak for the animals
and all who speak for the trees.

Only if we understand, can we care.
Only if we care, will we help.
Only if we help, shall all be saved.

Dr Jane Goodall, *40 Years at Gombe*



Prologue

Wildoak Forest was whisper-still. Spiderwebs glistened in the half-light, dipped in frost. Soft white snowflakes drifted down without a sound. Badgers huddled deep in their setts. A tawny owl swooped between the black-and-white branches, quiet as a ghost. And deep beneath the layers of fresh white snow and rich brown earth, the ancient trees spoke to one another, through a tapestry of roots and veins no finer than a spool of gossamer thread.

Then something happened in the forest that had never happened there before and would never happen again.

A van drove slowly down the lane, headlights

groping through the whirling snow. A man got out. His leather shoes skidded along the ice-packed lane. He peered at the silhouettes of the tall trees and nodded. 'This will do,' he said, his breath melting into wisps. Then he switched on a torch and opened up the back of the van.

He unlocked a cage.

A cage that had no business carrying what it carried.

February 1963

London, England





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Maggie pressed the tip of one finger against the point of her pencil. It was keen and sharp. *But was it sharp enough?* Surely. Her stomach felt hollow and shaky inside. In fact everything felt shaky, even her legs. She rolled the yellow pencil between her thumb and forefinger. She flipped and twisted it, tapping one end against the surface of her desk. *It was the only way out.*

Hilary Muir was next. She started reading at the top of page thirty-two, second paragraph, fourth sentence in. Her voice was crisp and light. It flowed like music.

Maggie bit her lip. If she could just get through

the first line without stammering. Maybe the rest would follow and then she could put away the pencil.

No.

She would block. She was bound to. Some of the words would come out fine, and then, suddenly, they wouldn't. The air would catch, her head would jerk around, her mouth would lock open, she would blink repeatedly and every single person in the room would stare.

And laugh.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Laughing mouths and pointing fingers crowded in. She couldn't bear it. And then everyone would *know*, and she would have to move schools. Again.

She opened her eyes and glanced around. The classroom windows were locked. The door was closed. Old radiators clinked along the bare cream walls. The air was hot and stuffy. Louisa Walker sat on her right, listening, reading, following along with her ruler. They had never really talked, but she had always seemed kind. Maybe this time would be different, Maggie thought desperately. Maybe Louisa wouldn't laugh. Or Nicola. Nicola Robinson was kind too. *Lots of people were kind.*

There was a pause, a shuffling of feet, the rustling of pages.

'Thank you, Hilary. Well read – beautiful in fact. Margaret Stephens, please start at the bottom of page thirty-four.' Miss Bryant's voice sounded muffled and far away as it drifted across the classroom. 'Margaret?' she repeated.

A stifled giggle. Somebody was laughing already, and she hadn't even opened her mouth. Maggie could feel the wool of her jumper, tight around her neck.

'Margaret Stephens, are you listening to me?'

She stared down at the page, at the printed words, curling, pointed, full of sharp edges, like a mouthful of fish hooks. Miss Bryant's question hung in the air. Everyone was staring now. Waiting for her to start. *It's the only way out.* Maggie's heart thudded against her ribcage. She gripped the pencil. She pulled it back. *Now.* She drove the keenly sharpened point deep

down

into

the

soft

palm
of
her
left
hand.

She let out a gasp of shocked pain. Tears scalded her cheeks. Unsteadily, she rose to her feet and held up her hand. The pencil protruded from it like a grotesque oversized splinter. She trembled. Beads of scarlet blood escaped from the wound and dropped to the floor.

'Oh my goodness! Margaret, what on earth just happened? Are you all right? Quickly! You're excused! Get yourself to Nurse Nora right away! Go!'

Maggie ran out of the classroom, ignoring the sweep of horrified and disgusted faces. Nobody was laughing now. She kept running, holding her own hand, footsteps echoing along the corridors of Southam Primary. But more than the pain, she felt a rush of relief.

Nurse Nora was a large, plump woman with small eyes, a navy blue uniform and starched white cap. She moved with a cumbersome gait from one side of

the room to the other.

'Margaret Stephens. Again? What is it this time?'

Maggie looked down. She held out her hand without saying anything.

'Well, how on earth did *that* happen? Speak up, child!'

Maggie continued to look down. Her excuses for being sent out had been getting more and more extreme. There was no point in trying to explain. Nurse Nora of all people would never understand.

'You've been in here six times in three weeks. It's not normal.' Nurse Nora sighed deeply. 'You're almost twelve years old, Margaret. You can't possibly be this clumsy all the time.'

Silence.

Nurse Nora glared. Maggie swallowed hard. It really hurt now, the throbbing in her hand.

'So once again you've got nothing to say for yourself. What a surprise.'

Maggie stared at the toes of her shoes. She had not polished them, and they were scuffed and worn-looking. Why couldn't people see that none of this was a choice? She didn't *choose* to stammer. It wasn't a question of trying harder or breathing more slowly or

whatever. She stammered and couldn't help it, no matter what she tried to do or not do. Sometimes the words came out fine, but mostly they didn't.

The room suddenly felt small and cramped. She glanced at the door.

'Sit down,' said Nurse Nora, following her gaze and pointing at a stool. 'You're not going anywhere.'

Maggie watched her rummage through one of the cabinets and pull down a large bottle of iodine and a jar of cotton wool balls. She unscrewed the cap with a high-pitched squeak. The dark yellow liquid soaked into the soft white fluff like a filthy stain. 'This is going to hurt,' she said.

Maggie stared at her, at the smallness of her eyes and dabs of pale blue eyeshadow. *You're a terrible nurse*, she thought. *You've never made me feel better about anything.* She longed to snatch her hand away and run out.

Nurse Nora took hold of Maggie's wrist and placed her fat fingers around the pencil. She tugged. There was a faint squelching, and the pencil came loose, releasing a gush of blood. Quickly, Nurse Nora pressed down hard with the soaked cotton wool ball, covering the open wound with iodine. Maggie stifled

a scream as the sting raced up her arm, burning like fire.

'You know, I've always thought there was something wrong with you, ever since you got here, Margaret.' Nurse Nora fluttered her pale blue eyelids, apparently deep in thought. 'It's your voice, isn't it? You try to hide it. I've seen you in the playground, sitting by yourself, not talking to the other children, even when they come up to you. It's not normal, not right.' She transferred the pressure on to Maggie's good hand.

Maggie felt a wave of nausea and thought she might be sick. 'Well, they can treat people with frozen mouth nowadays.' Nurse Nora continued, the words shooting out of her like little lead pellets. Maggie tried not to listen, but the woman kept on. 'There are places, you know, special hospitals, institutions for the disabled. There's one in east London, and it's very well respected.' She reached for a metal tray containing several needles and a spool of dark green thread. 'I'm going to tell your parents about it. Granville Place, I think it's called.'

Maggie shuddered. She had heard of Granville. Tom Baker from St. Anne's had been sent there

months ago, because of his limp. Maggie remembered his mother at the school gates, all pink-eyed and teary. Everyone had talked about it. One of his friends had been to see him and claimed that kids were being locked into cupboards for crying and strapped down to their beds. He'd said the 'doctors' had sounded all caring and nice to the parents, but on the inside it was a nightmare, with children so hungry they had to eat grass and toothpaste to keep themselves from starving. Grass and toothpaste.

Nurse Nora cleared her throat. She tapped a needle on the side of a metal tray. It made a soft pinging sound. She held it up between her thumb and forefinger.

'It's not right,' she went on, threading the needle. 'For somebody like you, Margaret, to be put in a class with properly behaved children. It's disruptive. And this, well, this is quite simply the final straw.'

Maggie turned her face away and looked out of the window. She did not want to give Nurse Nora the satisfaction of seeing that her words hurt. Even more than the pain in her hand.

'Now then, don't move.' Nurse Nora squeezed Maggie's fingers and lifted the needle. Maggie

clenched her good fist. She had never had stitches before. She stared at the grimy raindrops as they broke and trickled down the glass. And once again, from somewhere deep inside her heart, she felt the howl of wanting to be exactly like everyone else: to speak without stammering, to say whatever she wanted to say. To be understood. To be heard.

The needle went in.