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The Tiger who Sleeps Under My Chair

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ZEPHYR

An imprint of Head of Zeus

This is a Zephyr book, first published in the UK in 2023 at Head of Zeus Ltd, part of Bloomsbury Plc

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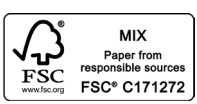
9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN (PBO): 9781803289823
ISBN (E): 9781803289809

Cover art: Lucy Rose

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

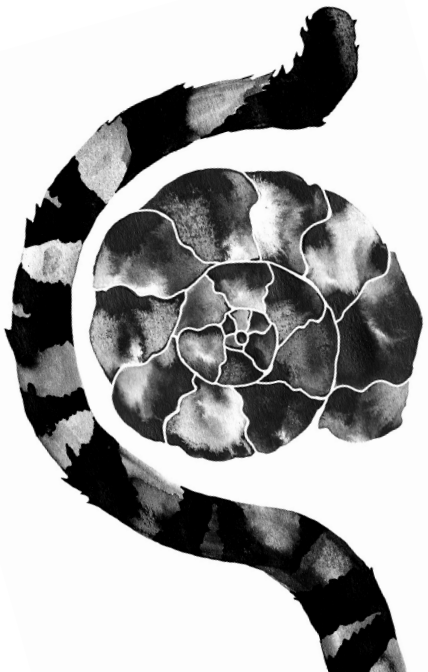


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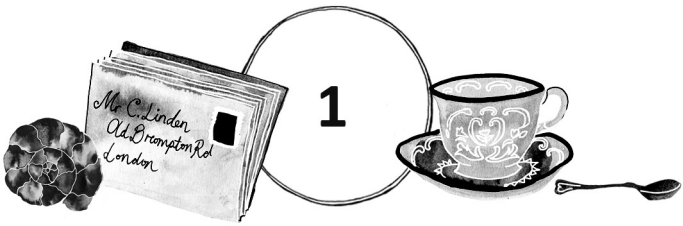
For Rich, who knows





‘There is more to us than some of us suppose’
Wendell Berry





London, September 1884

Emma took a deep breath and slid out from the shadows. She fumbled for her ammonite fossil. Under normal circumstances, she left the attic once a year and never alone. In the last half an hour, she'd crept down the narrow staircase three times, only to dart back again, tears of desperation welling in her eyes. If her father or Mrs Carter should catch her now…

She squeezed the fossil. The ancient spiral shell reassured her. This time she was not giving up.

It was the sight of the letter, which made Emma break the rules. She'd seen her name, written in James's bounding scrawl, tucked in a bundle under Tilly's arm when the housemaid came to collect her tray.



The morning's post was destined for Father's study, as always when he was home. Tilly would never dare disobey Mr Linden by not delivering it. The difficulty was, Emma's father had kept letters from her before. Perhaps he feared the contents would overexcite her, but James dismissed that – nothing exciting ever happened at his dismal boarding school.

Emma tiptoed along the corridor. Charles Linden was not violent – Emma had never heard her father raise his voice – but he ruled their London townhouse with icy control. He was as unfeeling as a locked door, as unyielding as a bank vault.

But she *must* read this letter. Their summer had ended so oddly with the stoat caught in the trap and that man with the gun. She and Olivier had been shocked, but James's reaction… She'd felt anxious ever since, waiting for news from her brother. She couldn't bear that her father might keep it from her.

Emma was grateful for the thick carpet runners and heavy draped fabrics, which soaked up sound like litmus paper sucking up water. But the fear that made Emma linger wasn't only the fear of being caught.

'*Solitude, silence, rational thought.*' She repeated the doctors' orders under her breath. These were the

measures that kept her fragile health intact. Father would be horrified to know of the churning of her gut. Emma was horrified herself. It was stronger than any logic.

She crept downstairs to the first floor, barely daring to breathe. The door to her father's study stood open. The science which explained how her fossil had been made, also explained how gravity worked, how her breath made steam on a cold day. The universe was governed by scientific laws, stable and sure.



She paused in the doorway, ready to fly at the slightest sound.

The room was small, poorly lit by a narrow window, and made darker still by the uniform green binding of her father's books. The morning's post was stacked neatly in the centre of his desk.

Memories crowded in upon her. She remembered gazing up at her father, not understanding why he was so angry.

'Stand up straight, Emma. Pay attention. I am speaking of madness.'

She'd struggled to grasp most of what he'd said, though the words were etched in her mind.

'Madness, Emma! It took every effort of the doctors to bring you back to yourself. This fit is possibly the same mental weakness that possessed your mother. I will not lose you to it as well. You must dedicate yourself to cool logic and calm reason. It is your only hope. *My* only hope. These will be your defences against the tide of emotional instability. Solitude, silence, rational thought. And seclusion. With the exception of Kersbrook, you are not to leave the attic.'

Emma gripped the cold, hard edge of the desk, the room spinning. Was she going to have a fit? But she *must* read James's letter and hear from him in his own words.

She snatched up the post and carefully opened the flap on the envelope, hoping her father would think it had come un-gummed by itself.



St Scabrous School, Bournemouth, Sept 1884

Dearest Emma,

It's hard to be back at school. Back to cold showers, bullying prefects and stiff collars. Didn't we have a summer, Em? The best yet

and all the better for Olivier coming too. I shall remember it for ever.

Do you dream of Devon, Em, now that you are in London?



I do. I dream of Kersbrook almost every night. It is perfect and every house should be made in its image. I dream of the fishing boats pulled up on the pebbles under the red cliffs and how we bought mackerel from the fishermen. I can smell them as Dillis cooks them for supper. Remember how Father turned his nose up? Far too fishy for him!

Even when I'm awake, I find myself dreaming of Kersbrook. The sea sparkling in the sunshine and the coolness of the water as I dive in from the boat. You'll think me ridiculous, but on my first night, I actually sprinted out from the dorm and dived into the lake with all my clothes on. I got into real bother for it. Afterwards, I couldn't think why I'd done it. Except to say that my heart was far away in Devon.



But now I may have worried you, Emma, with talk of jumping into lakes in the middle



of the night! There's nothing to be concerned about. Olivier had me out in a jiffy – he understood, of course – and no one would have been any the wiser if it hadn't been for that creep Perkins telling tales to gain favour with the masters. A chap needs a true friend here and Olivier is the truest. Only one more year in this unfeeling place and if all goes well, he and I will be off to the gleaming spires of Oxford!

What are you reading today, Em? I think of you looking out over the rooftops of London. Does it weary you, staying hidden away from all the world? I know you could never be lonely with all your books, but I wonder if Mother would not want you to experience life? And so, don't be shocked – I'm going to smuggle you out for a trip when I come back at Christmas! There's something I must see and I insist you come with me. I've heard that a great tiger was shot in the jungles of India by Lord Ripon and gifted to the Natural History Museum. The tiger's name is Bhayankar Raaja, Fierce King. He prowled his jungle territory, ever watchful, protecting his realm.

He was legendary. I'd like to see him, to look into his eyes, see his great paws and—

The writing became blurred here and she couldn't make out the rest of the sentence. She skipped to where the writing became legible again.

I promise, I will keep you safe. Say you will come, Em.

Now, onto other matters, how's your knitting these days? Are you coming on? I caught a terrible cold from my swim and it's always freezing here. Would you make me a scarf? You must knit it in the brightest orange, with black and white stripes, so you would easily find me if I should ever be lost.

With all my very best love, darling little sister.

Yours,

James Linden

Emma frowned at the letter. No mention of the grisly moment they'd come across that man, the morning they left Kersbrook. He'd been fetching his trap from the boundary hedge, a stoat caught

between its iron jaws. James demanded the poor creature from him and sent the man, whoever he was, packing. But it was already dead, lolling against James's palm, its blood smeared across his fingertips. Despite her horror, Emma had been awed by the poise of its tiny head, and the neat, muscular body.

'Hunted as vermin,' James whispered, his face whiter than bone. 'Fiercely territorial… like little tigers.'

They'd buried it with ceremony beside the bay tree and he'd barely spoken the whole train journey back to London.

He'd been deeply disturbed by the creature's death. Why did he not mention it? Perhaps he was being careful, knowing Father read his letters. But there was this strange talk of a tiger and an outlandish plan for an impossible outing! That was not being careful. Why would he write it so plainly, as if to purposely land himself in hot water? It made no sense.

'Emma.'

Her father's voice sent ice pouring through her veins.

'What are you doing here? Turn around and answer me.'