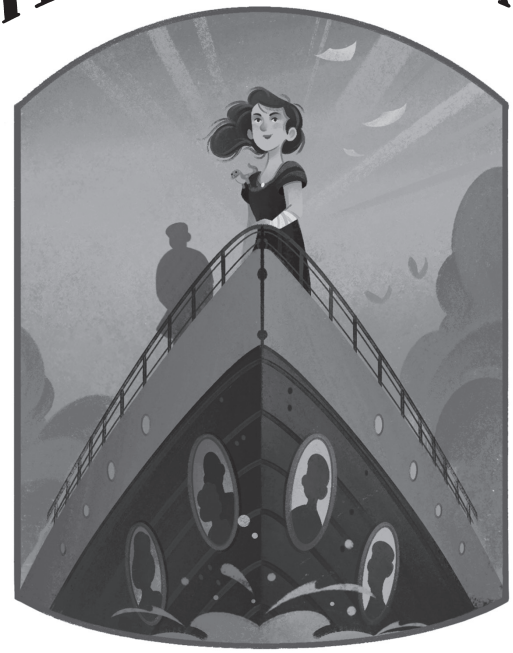
WENDINGTON JONES AND THE MISSING TREE



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For my dad
Who carried me across this world
So I could have any adventure I wanted



It is said walking with a friend in the dark, is better than walking alone in the light. Of course, even better than a friend in the dark is a trusty Madan Brass Lamplight. Never leave home without one!

From *A Guide to Adventuring,* published 1910



CHAPTER 1

THE NEWS

WENDINGTON JONES WAS ON A MISSION. NOTHING complicated or elaborate. It was the middle of the night and all she had wanted to accomplish was to steal a set of clothes, place them in a sink and pour bleach over them. Just your normal, everyday, two-in-the-morning sort of mission.

The clothes had already been purloined. That had simply required patience, light footedness and perhaps a heavy amount of gumption – something that Wendington had running through her veins. But her task was not over yet. What she needed now was bleach. And that meant gaining access to the custodian's cupboard. Something that was currently blocked by a heavy-duty lock.

The clothes were not her own. They belonged to Sophia De La Verte. Sophia was a classmate of Wendington's at Lady Goatberg's Academy, though Wendington also considered Sophia a snake in the grass.

There had been a fight. In truth, there had been several. But that afternoon's had been the worst. It had been ferocious and had ended with one innocent bystander being sent to the infirmary with a cut to the head.

The row had been over a school prize, though many onlooking students might have also said that it was over a long-standing rivalry. Wendington was fifteen years old, which is an age at which most people would not have acquired a hard and fast rival. Wendington Jones was not most people.

A tall young woman, Wendington was sometimes described as dainty or slight, which she disliked immensely. It was not so much the description, but rather others talking about her at all. Wendington was far happier hidden away in the shadows than she ever was as the focus of someone's attention.

That night, she was caked in the shadows of the dark corridor. After the incident earlier, and yet another trip to the headmistress's office, Wendington had been warned that if her actions continued, her place at the school might be at risk.

So, what was most important of all was that Wendington's latest bout of retaliation was not discovered by anyone. And, so far, everything had gone like clockwork. Particularly stealthy clockwork. No one would suspect that she would continue her retaliation against Sophia. Not a single person would know what she was up to.

'Wendington. What are you doing?'

Not a single person that is, except Cordelia.

Wendington turned in the darkness to see the shock of blonde hair that belonged to her only friend at the academy. Despite being the smallest in her year, and perhaps even the

year below as well, Cordelia was the largest in character. She was loyal to her core, an excellent sketcher and almost fluent in Arabic and Italian – something she had picked up from her parents, who acted as envoys and interpreters. But most valuable of all, she was a skilled diplomat when tempers flared between Wendington and Sophia.

However, no amount of diplomacy was going to deter Wendington's actions tonight.

'I am going to break into the custodian's cupboard,' answered Wendington, turning back to the task in hand.

'Why?'

'Because Sophia is an utter horror and she deserves everything that is coming to her.'

'Even if you are doing those things?'

'Yes, Cordelia. Because actions must have consequences. Newton said so. For everything she does, I must respond stronger.'

'That isn't what he . . .'

'I know what he said,' Wendington snapped back, instantly regretting barking at her friend. Cordelia was lovely and sweet and had only ever looked out for her. But Sophia's actions had unbalanced Wendington for too long now.

Four days ago, Wendington had returned to her room to collect a book before dinner. She had found her personal possessions scattered around her bed, many ripped, torn and destroyed beyond repair. Amongst the ruined items was a collection of prized first editions of books written by Wendington's mother. It was this that had sent her into the rage that had sparked everything since.

Wendington's mother was a well-regarded traveller, writer and anthropologist. Pennington, or Penni as she was known to her daughter, and only her, was also a globetrotting swashbuckler. Or at least she was to Wendington. Her mother would often play down her exploits in front of her daughter, but this only made them more exciting and fantastic. She had once survived for a week eating only six-legged creatures while kayaking down the Amazon basin. She had swum with manatees, dined with rajas, and seen the sun rise on four continents. She was her daughter's idol.

It had been just the two of them for seven years now. Horace, Wendington's father, had died suddenly in 1913, when Wendington was eight and only a few months before Wendington started at Lady Goatberg's. And though they had lived in the family's country home with Pennington's mother, Wendington had clung to her whenever they were together – soaking up every detail of her life as an explorer; begging for stories to be told and retold.

'An adventure only half lived, Wendington,' her mother told her, 'is not an adventure at all. It is an opportunity missed.'

And Pennington should know. She had been to every far-flung corner of the globe. The more dangerous the location, the more it seemed to lift her mother's spirits.

Pennington had taken a break from her adventuring following the outbreak of war in 1914, but she had not wasted this time. She'd spent every second encouraging her daughter's imagination and interest in anything that piqued it, from hieroglyphics to combustion engines.

As soon as peace was declared though, Pennington returned

to adventuring. Only two weeks before, she had come back from a five-month trip to Australia, more excited than ever before.

Wendington made no secret of her desire to accompany her mother on one of her less dangerous expeditions and gaze upon the artefacts of bygone empires. Pennington would laugh along before softly reminding Wendington that there would be plenty of time for adventuring when she was grown up.

But Wendington had never been particularly good at just waiting for time to pass. This applied to everything in her life, whether it was the grand adventures of her mother, or the simple desire to get her much needed revenge on a classmate.

'Sophia hurt me and laughed about it.' said Wendington.

'Then forgive her,' replied Cordelia quietly.

'I can't,' Wendington said simply, tears stinging her eyes.

'You didn't have to throw the plate at her head.'

'She didn't have to set fire to my pillows.'

'Then perhaps you should just end it there,' pleaded Cordelia, somewhat futilely. 'The teachers are already looking for you.'

'It has gone two in the morning, Cordelia. No one is looking for me.'

'Miss Fry came to wake me up.'

Miss Fry was a bigger worry than Wendington had anticipated. A senior amongst the teachers at the academy, Miss Fry knew about the fights. She had broken most of them up.

'Why would she . . .' asked Wendington, before the obvious answer came to mind.

'They're going to expel me,' said Wendington flatly, as all

the actions and consequences began to order themselves in her mind.

'Then you must stop. There is still something that can be done,' urged Cordelia.

'Please do not quote my mother to me, Cordelia. She will be upset enough already.'

'Then just think for a second.'

'If I stop to think then it just hurts more. So, I am doing what little I can.'

Cordelia was, for perhaps the first time in her life, lost for words. Wendington raised the arched, metal chair leg she had fetched and stored earlier. It was no crowbar, but the principle of moments cares little for the exact tools one uses. All it cares about is if a big enough force is used to dislodge what it is pinned against.

Wendington's hurt and anger was all the force it needed.

There was a satisfying crunch as the door frame splintered under her push. There was then a less satisfying noise as Miss Pelham, a junior teacher at the academy, arrived to see Cordelia, Wendington and the busted door. The scene told a tale that even a skilled diplomat like Cordelia could not get around.



Wendington was led through the dark corridors by Miss Pelham. Cordelia had tried to follow to argue her case but, as it turned out, there was no getting Wendington out of the quagmire she had placed herself in.

Wendington tried to tuck two strands of her long, auburn

hair behind her ears, in a vain attempt to look presentable for the headmistress. But it was a futile venture. It was like pressing your clothes before going in front of the firing squad; it might make you feel better but it would not change the outcome.

As they turned a corner, they slowed as Wendington saw Miss Fry talking to the head girl, Octavia Winchester. Octavia's normal, refined features looked pinched, as if she were holding back tears. Spotting her, Octavia gave Wendington a soft look of pity, which only confirmed Wendington's suspicions. Even the head girl had been told about her expulsion.

Turning to see her, Miss Fry gave nothing away. She just nodded at both Miss Pelham and Octavia to leave them alone.

'Follow me, Miss Jones,' was all Miss Fry said as she carried on the doomed march down the corridor.

When they finally reached the door of the headmistress's office, Miss Fry simply pushed it open and instructed Wendington to sit in front of the desk. There was a slow ticking of a clock that made the wait for the headmistress seem like an eternity.

Finally, the rear door to the study opened and the headmistress, looking wan and tired, stepped in and indicated Miss Fry to approach. As the teachers entered a hushed conversation, Wendington racked her brain for something to say to get her out of trouble but came up with nothing.

Assured of her fate, Wendington resorted to a trick her mother had taught her. When in trouble, list what you have going for you so you don't feel helpless.

Wendington Jones. Daughter and friend. She was clever, inquisitive, witty and, when she allowed it, pretty. She was

a twice Latin scholar, she was an adequate horse rider and she was the second-best fencer in three counties. And, as she was soon to learn, as of one thirty-five that morning, she was an orphan.