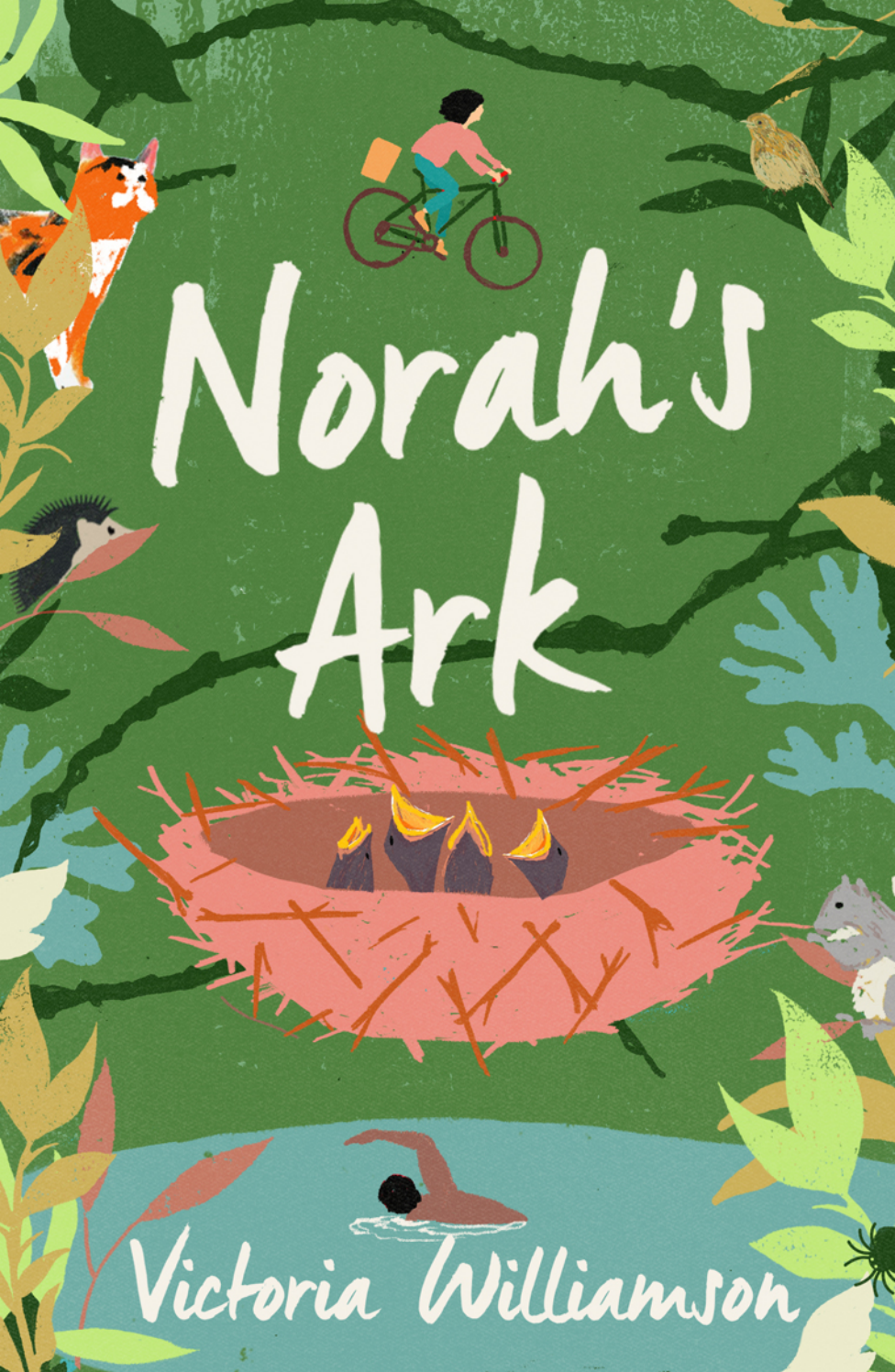

Norah's Ark
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NEEM TREE
PRESS

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Published by Neem Tree Press Limited, 2023
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-911107-99-6 Paperback
ISBN 978-1-915584-00-7 Ebook

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Printed and bound in Great Britain

This one's for Fiona, who has been putting up with my wild flights of imagination since high school, and whose friendship since our teenage years has meant a lot to me.

Chapter 1

NORAH



I must be the only girl in the world who doesn't have a mum.

I don't mean like Maya Turner from my old school whose mum lives in another town cos her parents are divorced. And I don't mean like Chelsea Mackay at my new school either who says her mum's got a super-important job in New York, and that's why Chelsea lives in a foster home here in Hull. I mean I never had one to begin with. Dad says I was grown in a test tube in some space-age science lab just like in that film we saw years ago, but I don't know if I believe him or not.

Dad doesn't always tell the truth.

Last Christmas he told me Santa couldn't come cos we'd moved five times already that year and he didn't know the address of the hostel we

were staying at. That wasn't true. He came to the kids in the room down the hall, and they'd been living there less than a week. After Christmas Dad said the bed and breakfast we were moving to would be the best place ever, but the yukky brown carpet in our tiny room smells of pee and I can hear the people next door yelling at each other through the walls at night. We have to be out of the room by nine in the morning and we're not allowed back in before six at night, which is OK on school days, but rubbish today as it's Saturday.

Right now Dad says I can't come to the shops with him as he can't afford the bus fare for both of us. That's a lie too. Not about the money—we're so skint I can't even remember what colour a ten-pound note is—but about the shops. He took me to the park and told me to stay here till he got back, but instead of going to the bus stop he went to the betting shop at the end of the road. He'll be in there watching TV till it's time to go back to the B&B, and that means it's instant noodles and tomato sauce again for dinner tonight cos he hasn't gone to the cut-price supermarket like he said to look for out-of-date bargains.

I don't mind. I like noodles and I like the park, and best of all I like the late present Santa

brought me back in January when all the posh kids in their fancy houses by the duck pond had already taken their Christmas trees down. It's a purple bike with silver stripes, and it's got five different gears and a mini cargo box on wheels that attaches to the back. Dad says it was really the local church that gave me the bike. He also says that Santa isn't real and at eleven I'm too old to believe in him, but like I say, he lies a lot.

"Is your mum here, pet?" A woman in a red coat steps onto the path in front of me, and I have to pull the brakes hard. She's been watching me ride round the pond for the last twenty minutes and frowning every time I pass her bench. I try ringing the bell, but that doesn't make her move, it just makes her frown harder and repeat, "Is your mum here?"

When I was younger I would've grinned and said, "Why, am I so cute you want to ask if you can adopt me?" But then I wasn't too clever when I was younger. Now I know better. Now I know the best thing to do is look at her all wide-eyed and frightened like she's a kidnapper and say, "Yes, she's right there." I point to a group of mothers standing round the climbing frame chatting while their kids fall off the monkey bars