

THE LAST DRAGON



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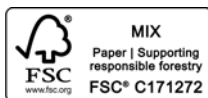
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THE LAST DRAGON

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ILLUSTRATED BY CHARIS LOKE



For my fiery and brave B.

1.

I've never had any time for the dragon before.

Some people are obsessed with it. They live for it, travel the world for it, commit every moment to searching for a glimpse of its ragged, grey wings. There are even those, rooted to one place like I am, who still spend their every waking minute dedicated to it. You know the sort; posters-plastered-to-their-walls kind of people. They document its movements, make a study of it and hope that one day, it might come flying past their window.

Right now, I'm hoping that Mr. Lawton is one of those people, because, just as he is about to launch into a major telling off, Bertie yells, 'Dragon!' sprinting towards the rectangular windows that line one of the walls. For the first time in my life, I feel a little glad

that there actually is one in the world.

Mr. Lawton hesitates, his finger still wagging in the air, and then he too dashes to the window to see if he can spot it.

I've only seen it twice before. Once, when we were on holiday and George and I were still at the age when making sandcastles on the beach all day seemed like the best fun in the world. Just as we had placed the last shells on the tower, the dragon appeared.

At first it was only a tiny spot, a dot in the distance, but it got bigger and closer until it flew right over our heads.

I can only really remember what its belly looked like as it flew over us,

kind of speckled and ridged in a way that made me think of things that were ancient – scrolls and old stone artefacts, those kinds of things. I remember that, and the sound of its wings as it flew; it was like a heartbeat, slow and steady and rhythmic. Or maybe I thought that because it felt like the sound reverberated through my chest, through my heart, as it passed over.

When I think back on that moment, I often don't picture it from my point of view; I see the pair of us, George and I, sitting together on the sand. Two little girls with matching dark brown hair – hers abundant, messy and curly, mine super straight like a curtain – gazing up at the huge, domed belly of the dragon just above our heads.

The second time, I didn't get quite as close. It was last year when George first got ill, and someone spotted it in the hospital we were in. Some people were excited that it was there and looked out of the window, but it was only a speck in the sky and never came very close.



Most people, though, just stayed where they were and didn't even try to catch a glance of it. There were

more important things to do than dragon-spotting; like getting better, like being well.

But, right here and now, to get out of a telling-off, I'm glad Old Tildy has made an appearance. It's a bad nickname based on the acronym T.L.D, which stands for 'The Last Dragon' because she is the last of them, the last dragon on Earth. With her death, there will be no more.

'It's just a plane,' a boy whose name I'm sure begins with 'M' proclaims. Everyone seems to sigh in the classroom at exactly the same moment, and so it feels like the whole room is shrinking in disappointment that the dragon isn't making an appearance today. It's a bland, characterless room – white, scuffed walls, desks in rows, nothing to mark it out as exciting – and now it seems even duller.

'Now where were we?' Mr. Lawton says. I hunch down, hoping he might forget that he was telling me off for pushing the teetering pile of books on his desk to the floor with a slam.

I hadn't been able to help myself. He was getting at me about something again, something small; I can't even remember what it was now, something like my shirt was untucked or I was slouching in a way that

he took offence to. Sometimes I think just seeing my face annoys him.

I could hear a kind of roaring in my ears as his twittering voice started off at me and I had a feeling like bubbles inside me, racing around and rushing through me, stretching out to my hands. The next thing I knew, I'd given the books a good hard shove. I pushed them right at him and that was my mistake. He was really angry then, and it was weird because it was like I could see how I was feeling on the inside on Mr. Lawton's face.

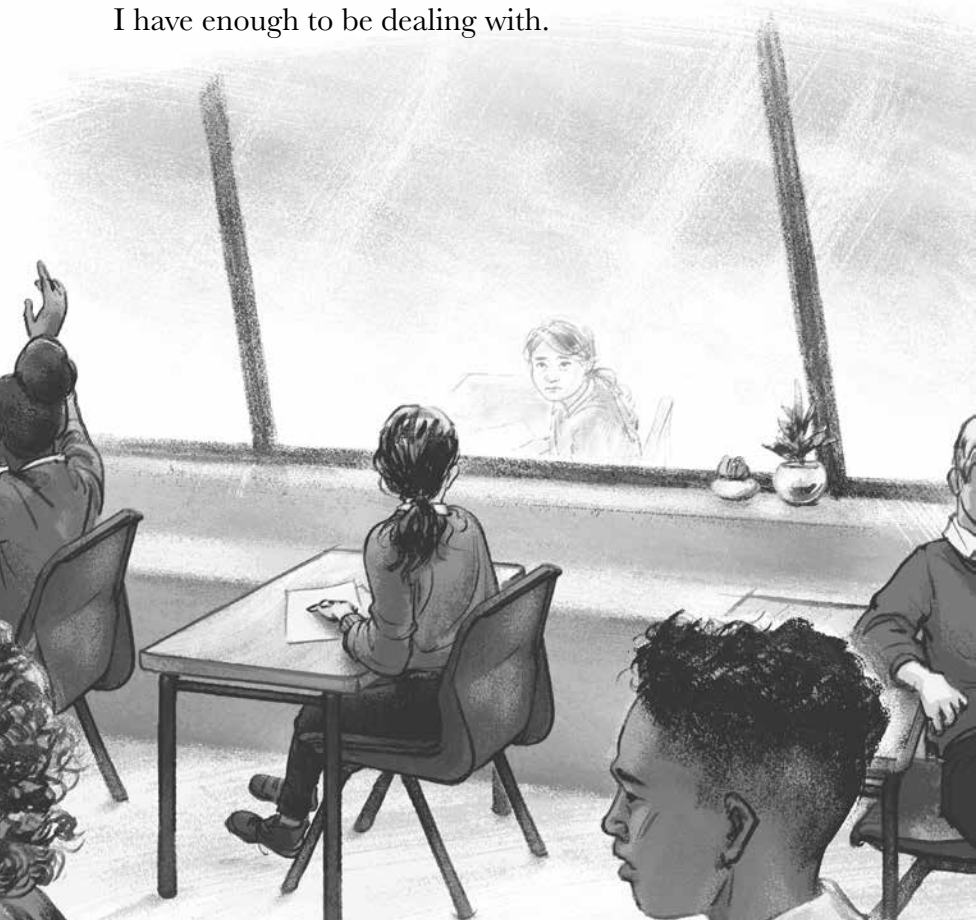
It's been happening more and more, these feelings of anger that force their way up and spill out of me. This wasn't the first time it had happened, and it wouldn't be the last. I didn't know how to control it, although life would be so much easier if I could. If I hadn't pushed those books over then I would probably be at my desk right now, tucked away from Mr. Lawton's beady radar but, as it was, I am still here; trying to make myself smaller, right at the front of the classroom.

'What are we going to do with you?' Mr. Lawton fixes me with an appraising look. His eyes have narrowed and his face has turned pink; it always does

that when he's telling me off. The flickering fluorescent light above him reflects on the shiny baldness of his head, which makes me want to laugh but I know that will get me into more trouble. I look out of the window in the direction they thought the dragon was, but there is nothing but empty space, endless sky.

I wish myself out there, in that nothing blue – just like Old Tildy, wherever she is.

But honestly, I couldn't care less about dragons. I have enough to be dealing with.



'Tell me what happened,' George says. She's sitting up, propped up by lots of pillows, although she looks like she needs to sleep. She's been in this same hospital room for four months now and, when she first moved in here, we all spent a long time cheerfully talking about how nice the room was. There's a blue pattern on the wall like waves and a shelf along one side where we placed all of her *Get Well* cards. But now the blue doesn't look like waves anymore, just a kind of claustrophobic, swirling pattern, and the cards have become dusty and curled from being up for so long; they keep falling down from the shelf.

'I-I-don't know. It was nothing. It was silly, not important,' I stutter. Mum and Dad had had a phone call home from Mr. Lawton, and they'd told George about it before I arrived for my visit. They'd gone off to talk to the nurses about something, leaving George and I alone, so she'd launched straight into it.

My hand closes around a hairband in my pocket and I pull my hair back into a low ponytail just so I have something to do. I don't like talking about my run-ins at school with anyone, and especially, for some reason, with George. Instantly the hairband slips a little into a loose ponytail; my hair is so straight that

I can't do anything interesting to it, it always falls out.

'Yara,' George says – in that serious kind of way where she really wants me to tell her the truth. 'I know you're not this troublemaker but . . .'

Her dark chocolate brown eyes fix onto mine and, for a moment, I remember the day Mum first brought George back from hospital – although I've been told the story so many times I'm not sure if it's really from my memories or just from the memory of that moment being repeated so often. She seemed like a sleeping bundle of blankets, my little sister, but when Mum and Dad propped me on the sofa with pillows all round me and passed her to me to hold, suddenly her sealed-shut eyes flicked open, and she looked right at me. Large, knowing brown eyes locked onto mine and, even though she was only two days old, it felt like she really saw me.

I have the same feeling as she looks at me now, but I try to brush it off.

'Oh yeah,' I say. 'How do you know? I might secretly be this big heap of trouble, it's just a side of me you've never seen before. I might, I might . . . pull on the emergency cord just for the fun of it. Which button is it that will have everyone running in?'

George laughs and shakes her head, her curly hair tumbling by her shoulders, although her eyes stay on me. She's right though, I'm the goody two-shoes out of the both of us, the stickler for the rules. I'm the eldest sister, the one who's responsible and careful and cautious, so George can just be George. She never needed to think of the consequences because I'd be there to protect her.

I don't know if she liked me being like that; George always used to be the one trying to get me to do things I've never normally consider. But the spilling-over-angry feeling had been happening more and more since George had become ill, and it makes me do things I'd never come close to before.

It doesn't take a genius to understand where it's coming from: I am worried about my sister and I want her to be better and there is nothing, not one thing that I can do to help her. It is simply maddening.

'Let's talk about something else. How was your day?' I ask.

For just a second, I can see how she wants to answer: *nothing happened today because I've been here in this bed, trapped in this room of shades of blue, in this hospital all day.* But instead, she gives me a smile and says, 'Can't

complain.’ I bite my lip. Sometimes even the simplest question is the wrong thing to say. ‘Anything else to report other than you trying to bury your teacher with books?’

‘The pile wasn’t that big! But no, nothing else. Someone thought they saw the dragon . . .’

‘Really, the dragon was here?’ George brightens.

‘But it was a false alarm,’ I add quickly.

‘Oh,’ says George. ‘I wonder how much longer Old Tildy has. Do you remember the day on the beach when we saw her?’

‘Course.’

‘I spotted it first but Mum and Dad didn’t think it really was the dragon. Just a plane or something. But you believed me.’

‘Do you remember the sound its wings made when it flew over?’ I ask George.

George puts her hand to her chest.

‘Like a heartbeat,’ we both say at the same time. Then we laugh at the same time too and, for just a moment, I can pretend we’re not in hospital, that George is not in a bed, that we are back on the beach where all we have to worry about is which shell to put on our sandcastle next. But then I notice that George

looks suddenly pale, and I worry that laughing has exhausted her somehow.

Mum and Dad come in just at that moment.

‘What’s so funny?’ Mum says, pushing a strand of her almost-black hair back into place in her bun.

‘Nothing,’ George says, giving me a little look I can’t quite read.

‘Well, it’s good to hear you laughing together,’ Dad says and ruffles my hair in the way he always has done since forever. His blue eyes twinkle a little. ‘I can’t understand why this teacher has it in for this one. She’s no trouble, never has been.’

Mum purses her lips a bit. Neither of them has ever said so, but I know that me getting into trouble is the last thing they need with everything going on with George. There’d been so much to get used in the last few months; we moved here when she needed new treatment that meant she needed to stay in hospital. I kept hoping that George would come home soon and that things would start to feel a bit more like normal, but the days turned to weeks and then to months and still the three of us are in a funny little flat that we haven’t properly unpacked, without George.

Mum and Dad are rarely there either, they’re either

working or at the hospital and I've got used to being there by myself. Once they tried to get me some company and found a babysitter who would come round to make me dinner and things like that. She was called Katya, and she was alright I suppose, but then she left to go travelling and they haven't been able to find anyone since.

'Time to go home now, Yara love,' Mum says. 'I'll drop you off on my way to work.' Mum works for a catering firm and so often has to work in the evenings.

'Really?' I start to complain but then I catch sight of George's face; she looks even paler and I know she has to rest. 'Alright then, see you tomorrow G.'

'Bye, trouble,' George quips back.

'I'll see you later, treasure,' Dad says. 'I've got some jobs to do but I'll check in on you when I get back.' He pulls on his jumper and gets himself ready to go.

I nod but we don't speak the truth of it – that he'll be back so late I'm sure to be asleep. I've overheard Mum and Dad talking about the fact that there's never enough time to do anything anymore. But they've kept on top of their jobs and going to the hospital and doing all those home things like organising shopping or getting the leaky tap fixed; the bit we've had to lose

is the bit when we just used to hang out, spending time together doing nothing much at all. Just watching something silly on telly. Or talking while making a hot chocolate. That bit of time when we used to be together is now filled with Mum and Dad being busy, and I am left by myself.

Dad gives George a kiss on the head and then pecks me on the forehead too, but suddenly I'm overwhelmed with the need for him to wrap me up in a huge hug. Dad's a lot bigger than Mum, George and me. He's much, much taller than us. When he used to hug me when I was little, he felt impossibly tall and big, like a tree trunk. For a moment, I hope he'll scoop me up like he did back then so I can be level with his kind, friendly face.

But he hurries away and, while Mum tucks George up, I leave too.

When I get back to the flat, I make myself dinner – my speciality is instant noodles with sweetcorn and cheese – and I really like eating apples so I pluck one from the fruit bowl as a side. I eat as quickly as I can, watching videos on my phone of a tiny dog trying to leap onto the side of the kitchen to steal a sausage, because I can't bear it, the being alone time in the

flat. The rooms of our flat, even though they are full of our stuff, feel as empty as they did when we first moved in. Three boxy little bedrooms, a bathroom that has no windows; the largest room is the sitting room/kitchen, the one I am in now. The only thing I like about it is the large windows, from which I can see the lights and the horizon of the city.

After eating, I set off. Though I am still alone, I find I feel better when I'm in a crowd. There's a shopping centre not far away, the source of the lights I like to look at out the window, and so I set off on the short walk through the park towards it.

I walk past shadows and sculptures and people whizzing past me on their bikes, and in the distance I can see the glow of the lights from the shopping centre, pulling me towards it. When I'm in there, I can distract myself with other people, with looking at things that I can't buy – I know it's silly but it feels better than being alone at our half-home.

I practically skip towards it, down the path where the trees grow dense in a circle.

But then there's a movement like liquid, a shadow sinking through light, that stops me dead.

A flash of a tail.

The heavy thrum of a heartbeat.
The dragon.

