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Maggie Blue and the Dark World
Maggie Blue and the White Crow

MAGGIE BLUE *and* THE LOST CHILD

ANNA GOODALL



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BOOKS

MAGGIE BLUE AND THE LOST CHILD
is a GUPPY BOOK

First published in the UK in 2024 by
Guppy Books,
Bracken Hill,
Cotswold Road,
Oxford OX2 9JG

Text copyright © Anna Goodall, 2024
Illustrations © Sandra Dieckmann, 2024

HB: 978 191 6558243
PB: 978 191 6558205

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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GUPPY PUBLISHING LTD Reg. No. 11565833

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

Typeset by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Books Ltd

For Juno




The Island
Portal
Flooded Lands
Moon City
City at the End
Portal
Portal
The Westerlies
Farmland
Strange Plains
City of Flowers
Gold Mines
West Haven
Portal
City of Gold
Magic Mountains
Portal
Great Lakes
Pink Cliffs
Farmland
City of Folk
Eldrow's Rail Road
Sun City
Portal
Farmland
THE DARK WORLD

PART ONE





1

Maggie was gliding across the surface of the earth, the sky above her so black she couldn't see anything. She only knew she was moving because of the feeling of the air rushing past her face and the undulations beneath her body. There was awful pain in her legs, and her right arm was numb and locked against her side.

The rapid movement suddenly stopped and a pair of glowing white eyes above a multitude of sharp white teeth lurched out of the darkness. Maggie screamed. But nothing happened except the lonely sound of her cry fading away. Then there was silence. She knew she should try to get away, but she was frozen with fear.

In the darkness and the silence, she remembered that the awful eyes belonged to a Terrible One, one of the great black serpents that did the Fathers' bidding. And when she realised that, everything else came back to her in a rush . . .

How she, Oz and Ida had found Cynthia at the pink cliffs, and that her mum wanted to stay in the Dark World, even after everything Maggie had done to find her. And

then Cynthia had told her that Roda, the heartless warrior shifter, the great grey heron, was her father – yet another person who didn't want her. And then they'd tried to escape from the Terrible Ones that came rampaging after them, and then, and then . . . her mum and Oz had disappeared.

Cynthia, who had never been able to function, who could never decide what to cook for dinner so that they'd often just had peanut butter and toast, who had been in hospital for months . . . Maggie remembered now how her mum had taken charge, covered from head to foot in the red dust of the rocky hills. And her plan to confuse the great serpents had almost worked, but Maggie had ruined it. She had screamed out when she saw her mum and little Oz disappearing over the edge of the caldera . . . yes, they had disappeared, and whether they were alive or dead she didn't know.

Maggie felt a terrible ache in her chest, a longing that she didn't understand, until she realised with a jolt that it was a longing for her mum, that all she wanted in that moment was to be with her. She had never had that feeling before, or not that she could remember.

The great black serpent was still looking at her. It clearly hadn't heard of blinking – the two white lamps never turned off – but there was no malice in them now. Nor could she hear the awful humming these creatures made when they were hunting. At this moment, at least, it did not seem to mean her any harm.

A thought struck her: was she dead? Was this like Hades, the underworld that they'd learnt about in school? She sat up with some difficulty and tried to move her right arm, but it was locked in place by some invisible vice. And when she touched it, it felt like a lump of disembodied meat.

And only now did she realise that she was holding something. By the faint glow of the serpent's eyes, she saw a few tattered white feathers stuck to her clothes, and for a moment she thought the white crow was still with her and her heart leapt. But the bird was nowhere to be seen, and she saw that instead she was holding a baby, a real-life baby wrapped in a piece of white cloth.

Maggie stared at it in disbelief. Its little face was all scrunched up and two tiny wrinkled hands gripped the dirty blanket. But when Maggie tentatively reached out and touched the baby's cheek, it was so smooth, so new and so pure. And instead of the crow's sharp beady ones, there was a pair of dark watery eyes with long lashes, open and looking up at her.

Maggie felt panic rising within her. Where was the white crow? And why was she holding a baby? And whose was it? And where had it come from? And how had she got it? And what on earth was going on? At that moment, the baby reached out with one chubby hand and grabbed her arm. Maggie tried to wriggle out of its grasp, but she couldn't. Its grip was so strong it hurt.

She became aware of the serpent again. It was still

watching rather politely as these thoughts flowed through her mind. It had not moved a muscle. Now, however, it emitted a low sinister hiss and twisted its horrible thick neck back onto the ground and began to move at speed.

Maggie jerked back and nearly fell off. But she managed to get onto her side and grip on with her left hand, whilst the baby nestled against her right. Wherever the great snake was going, she was going too; right now she had no choice in the matter.

They must have hit something. There was a lurch and Maggie was thrown to the freezing-cold ground. She could see the outline of trees above her now, and something was wailing and screeching horribly nearby. Was it the baby? But no, she could still feel its warmth against her; she was still clutching it to her body.

Then determined hands found her and lifted her onto some sort of wooden stretcher that immediately began to move so that she was jolted roughly about. In her arms the baby began to whimper. And when that got no result, it began to scream at the top of its lungs, a sound terrible enough to wake the dead.



2

And so they had set out on their grand mission to rescue Maggie Blue in one very old yellow Volvo. Maggie's Aunt Esme was at the wheel; Hoagy the rotund feline was rolling around on the floor somewhere; Ulrich the warrior shifter they had nursed back to health (who was currently in his human form of a giant swivel-headed bloke) was in the passenger seat; and Jean, a friend of Maggie's, who had blackmailed her way into this whole scheme and was apparently unable to stop talking, sat in the back.

The plan? Why, only to cross over to the Dark World from a parallel spot somewhere in mid-Wales, to find and rescue Maggie Blue, and then triumphantly bring her home. If the plan had seemed a touch ambitious back in London, it was beginning to look more and more like utter lunacy.

And it had been, with no exaggeration, the journey straight from hell. Esme's teeth ached she had been gritting them together so hard and for so long. Merging onto motorways had been surreal moments of total fear

and a lot of exterior horn beeping and shouting from other motorists. And she kept having existential freak-outs where she was convinced she had completely forgotten how to drive in a straight line, whilst driving in a straight line – or just about.

Ulrich had remained still and mute for the entire five-hour drive. Jean, on the other hand, had been unable to stop talking until Hoagy had finally bitten her on the hand to get her to shut up. But as they got closer Ulrich's ears had begun to twitch and his spooky swivelling head had started rotating again.

On his very vague directions they had found themselves drifting down the main street of a small village, until they reached a field about half a mile beyond it with a cottage, one lopsided shack, a lot of grass, some sheep and not much else.

There wasn't really anywhere else to go, but he had shouted 'STOP!' so loudly and imperiously all of a sudden that she had stalled the car. It rocked and stuttered to a halt. Everyone released a huge sigh of relief.

When Esme had lifted her cramped hands from the old faux-leather covered steering wheel of the Volvo, her fingers stayed all curled up like wizened claws. And where were they exactly? The good Lord only knew, and it had been a while since she had felt like invoking him for anything, but *really*. She put her head on the wheel and closed her eyes; she felt about one thousand years old, in dire need of

a drink and cigarette, and absolutely desperate, above all things, for a wee. She hadn't dared stop for fear that she wouldn't be able to get started again.

She opened the door and breathed in the soft warm air. Dusk was beginning to fall at the end of what had clearly been a beautiful day. Pink glimmered behind the trees and on the wisps of wool at the edges of the grazing sheep, and the birds sang joyously. She closed her eyes again.

When she opened them, everyone else had got out of the car: Jean was leaning on a low fence, jiggling her leg up and down, and trying to make friends with a deeply suspicious sheep; Hoagy was attempting to have a discreet poo in some bushes, but still managing to look wildly guilty about it; and Ulrich was standing motionless like a creepy statue.

With a great effort, Esme forced herself to get out of the car. She went up to Ulrich. 'Are we in the right place then?'

He swivelled his head round to see her and nodded. 'The portal is here somewhere. Once I have located it, we can plan our next move.'

Jean jogged up to them, her eyes all bright and shiny. 'We'd better get the tents up before it gets too dark.'

Esme had no words: she just pointed at the car. Then she found a handy bush – ah, there was nothing like doing a wee in the wild with the wind on your bare bum. It made her chuckle and cheered her up a little. Afterwards, she found a stile leading into one of the fields and a small copse

of trees. Hoagy joined her there and they watched the purple-clad girl and the giant owl-man wrestle with poles, pegs and tarpaulin until it was almost too dark to see and they could only hear their voices.

'No, child. Give that to me.'

'I have three Cubs' badges. I know how to—'

'If you would pause a moment . . .'

'Watch your giant foot, will you?'

Hoagy sighed deeply beside her, loyal and warm. She located her flask and took a swig that started kindling in her eyeballs before gradually dying away again.

She hugged the old warrior cat close. 'I miss Maggie. Do you think we'll be able to get her back?'

Hoagy started rumbling and vibrating like an engine, his purrs louder than she'd ever heard them. She took that as a yes and kissed his battered old head.

Suddenly, Hoagy's ears swivelled and twitched and they both heard the sound of footsteps somewhere below the sound of Jean and Ulrich coming to blows over the tent poles. A light came on in the small house behind them, and a few moments after that, they heard louder footsteps and then saw a woman's silhouette approach them behind a strong flashlight. A voice called out,

'Who are you? And what are you doing in my field?'

The big torch shone, first over the huge owl-man and Jean clutching various poles, then it swooshed over the grass and came to where Esme and Hoagy were sitting.

'This is private property, you know.' It was a beautiful voice, soft and with a soothing lilt.

For once, Jean had nothing at all to say; Ulrich was mute, too. Esme rolled her eyes and nudged Hoagy aside to stand up. The light was blinding and she raised an arm to protect herself as she approached. Being a little old lady was very helpful sometimes. Now she laid it on thick.

'I'm so sorry, dearie. We must have got lost. I'm afraid I was driving us and I'm just not used to it. I was so tired and I thought we'd arrived.'

She was beside the woman now and could see that she was young, somewhere in her twenties, with a clear sharp face covered in freckles and magnificent red hair trailing down her back.

'Well, I'm sorry. I understand, but you can't stay here. There's a camping place a few miles down the road. That was probably where you were aiming for. And,' here she swung the light onto the dishevelled attempts at a tent, 'you haven't got too far along, I can see.'

Jean suddenly woke up. She and Ulrich came forwards, and Esme saw the woman take a step back just at the sight of him. She waved an explanatory hand at him, 'I know he looks a bit scary, dearie, but honestly, he's a softie.' She just hoped he wouldn't do his head swivel.

Ulrich stopped moving and took a few steps back. But Jean came right up to the stranger. 'Look, I know this is super-weird and everything, but actually Esme here is just

trying to make you think we're on a camping holiday or something. The truth is, we need to be in this exact spot; we don't have a choice.'

The woman sounded amused now. 'Oh yes?'

Jean sighed. 'Um, this also sounds odd, but we're looking for a portal . . . to another world. And it's around here. We're trying to find a friend of ours who has gone missing.'

Esme shook her head in exasperation; would this child ever shut up? There was a long pause, but to Esme's astonishment the woman did not seem perturbed by these revelations. She nodded.

'I see; that *is* interesting. Why don't you come in for a moment? We can have a cup of tea.'

Esme glanced down at the cat and he gave her one of his near-imperceptible shrugs. OK, she'd got this one wrong. Jean bounced triumphantly after the woman, and the others followed slowly, wondering who would be crazy enough to invite their motley crew in for a drink. It wasn't necessarily a good sign.

The light in the kitchen was egg-yolk yellow against a sky that had turned a deep blue. They went in and found themselves in a white-washed kitchen with huge stone flags and a long wooden table in the centre. Although the ceiling was very low, the space was far larger than it looked from the outside.

The woman ran water into an old-fashioned black kettle

and set it on the stove. She did not seem afraid of them even though she was alone here and there were no other houses nearby. The thought flickered again into Esme's mind that maybe it was the young woman they shouldn't trust . . . But then Hoagy began to curl round the stranger's legs, purring, which relieved Esme. Like most animals, he was an excellent judge of character . . .

As the kettle bubbled and boiled on the stove, the woman turned to look at them all, her hair glowing like fire in the low light, an amused expression playing over her face. 'So is anyone going to tell me what's going on?'