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Lights Up

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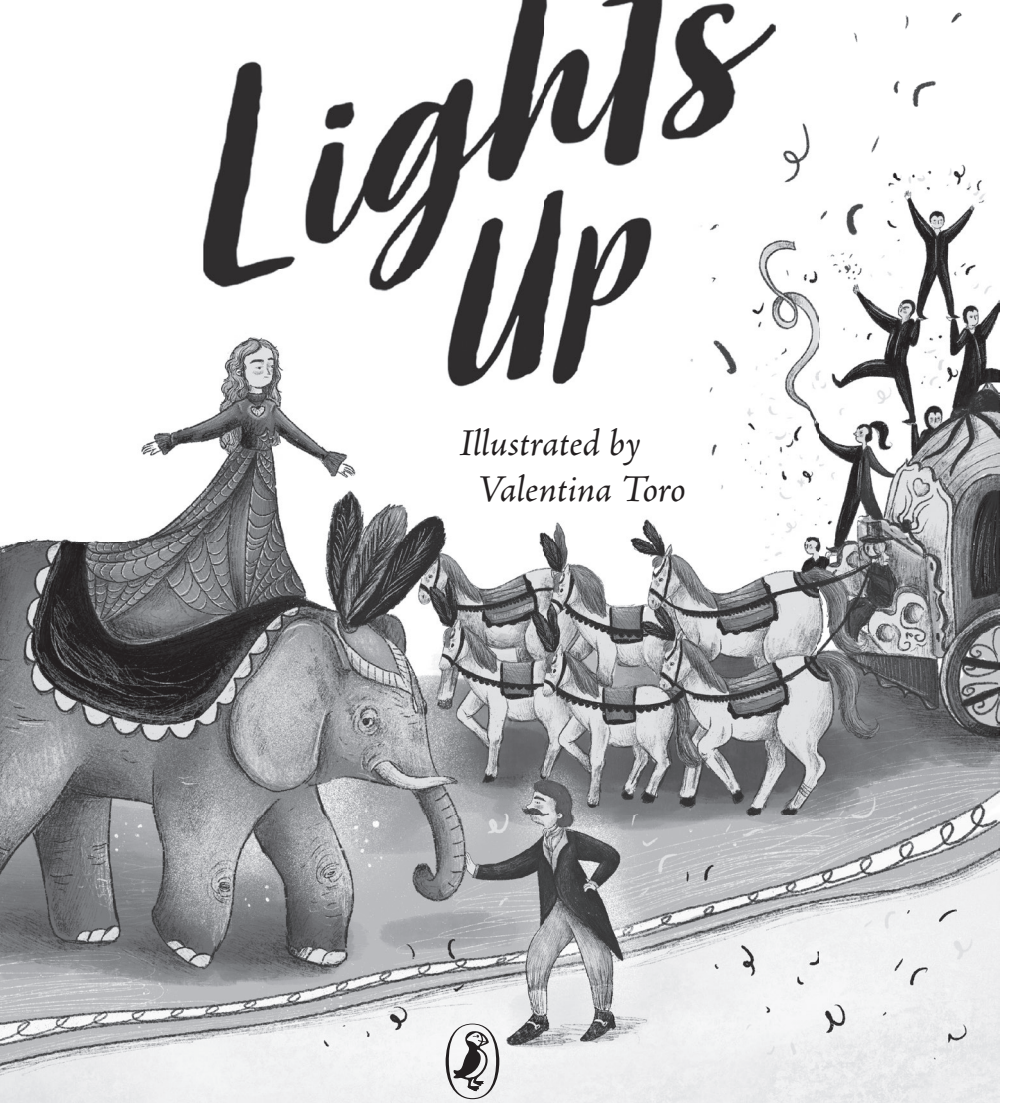
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Illustrated by Valentina Toro



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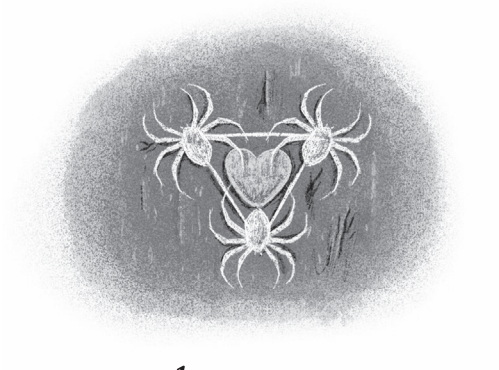
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This book is dedicated to Harper Lee, rescue dog and my beloved editor-in-chief.

And to all the Very Good Dogs: those still with us, and those playing for all eternity at the farm in the sky – especially Milly, Drummer, Ralph, Django, Woody, Aldo, Captain Pugwash, Fraggle, Barney, Maizie, Nyssa, Romana, Ren, Jake, Daisy and Rex.



Chapter One

Way Back When, 1767

'Some villages have a beautiful waterfall, wild ponies in meadows, and what do we have?' Araine Redwood asked her little sister.

'Spiders,' replied Nora. 'Urgh, why does it have to be spiders? I think we got the worst option. The last one left!'

'Exactly,' agreed Araine.

'Girls!' said their mam. 'They've been here since the world was born, weaving their webs under our village, keeping us safe, linking us from this world to the next by invisible strands. Turning dew into diamonds,' she added, trying to get them both tucked up on the straw mattress they shared in the eaves of their cottage's little attic, at the other end of the room to their parents' bed.

A chicken settled next to Nora and she patted its head absent-mindedly.

'Nonsense – we'd know about that if it was true! That's even worse than some of Nora's fibs,' said Araine. 'You do tell some whoppers.'

'I do not!' Nora tugged her big sister's long curly blonde hair and stuck her tongue out. She scooched down to the end of the bed, so that Araine couldn't reach to tug her pigtails in return. 'Anyway,' she retorted, 'if there really were dew diamonds, then Dad wouldn't have to work so hard for Lord Machiavelli.'

There was a heavy pause as they tried not to think about their father curled up downstairs, unable to climb the ladder to the loft any more.

'Mam, is it true that the spiders let folk say goodbye?' asked Araine, trying to change the subject when she saw her sister's face crumpling. But then asking about saying goodbye to dead people probably wasn't the best idea. Luckily, Nora didn't seem to notice – she was too excited and bouncy.

'Can the spiders really do that? Tell us the story, Mam!'

Mam glanced at the spiders in the corner of the room, watching them, keeping them safe. 'You'll know the answer to that when your time comes and you need

them. Just make sure there's three of you together. Now, hop into bed!'

'Oh, Mam!' whined Nora.

'You'll not be able to get up in the morning otherwise, and none of us wants to live with Madam Grumpy.'

'Aye, Nora,' said Araine with glee, siding with her mam.

'Me? Araine, you're the worst!'

Araine could see that Nora was on the verge of tears. She couldn't bear her sister being upset, and knew she loved the tales about their mam once saving the spiders so they were now in her debt, and had promised they'd always look after her two daughters in return.

She looked at Mam. 'Tell us about the spiders' diamond that lets you say goodbye to the dead!'

The spiders all scuttled over and sat by Mam's feet. One harvestman spider with spindly legs and a body like a seed even settled itself on her foot. The spiders loved their mam and this story, just as much as the sisters did.

Nora curled up in bed, watching a tiny money spider beginning to weave a web above her.

'Tell us! Tell us! Tell us!' yelled the sisters between giggles as their mam began to recount the tale of Attercop, their village. It was said that the spiders lived

beneath Attercop. They had a precious diamond made from dewdrops, the spiders' heart, which could link with the villagers for a brief moment, allowing them to say goodbye to their loved ones before they departed for the next world. The spiders' web filled a cavernous catacomb, weaving out from below the church and reaching to the very edges of the village, keeping all those above it safe.

'The diamond only works with three, just like the points of the triangle carved above the church door. Three people who have loved and lost – they can hold the spiders' heart to say their last goodbye, to know that their loved ones are safe on their final journey.'

The sisters drifted off to sleep as their mam's familiar words soothed and lulled them.



Araine rolled over, whimpering, as her dream shot her into a memory of her little sister watching the performance tent being set up. Nora was as excited as the troupe of actors, who'd just arrived in Attercop. It was a blue-sky day and Araine and Nora, in their matching dresses, were sitting next to each other on a hay bale with their best friend, Lucie Lightfoot. They laughed and pointed as some of the players acted out stories while others did somersaults and danced.

The blue faded to grey and Araine moaned in her sleep, pulling her blanket further round herself, desperately trying to keep warm. In her dream, the grey sky transformed into the grey of their dad's skin. And when she ran towards him, dream-running slow, when she finally hugged him, instead of strong muscles, he felt like a twig and she had to be careful not to snap him.

Araine's eyes flew open as she called out for her father. The space beside her was empty – where was Nora? She was nowhere to be seen. And this wasn't their blanket.

Araine sat up in fright, bringing her knees towards her and flinging off the blanket of cobwebs that she'd pulled about herself to keep warm. Looking around, she realized she was in the village bakery, not her bedroom. Then she saw the spiders in the corner, all standing guard, and she screamed.

The panic lasted for just a moment. 'Calm yourself, Araine,' she muttered, trying to get her breathing under control. Mam would tell her off for upsetting the spiders.

They had obviously kept their promise to her mam: they were the ones who had got Araine through the night, their web keeping her warm. Araine hadn't always known what was real and what was story when Mam

told her the tales about the spiders, but maybe her mother had been telling the truth . . .

Mam . . . Everything came flooding back to her, and Araine dissolved into sobs that she thought would break her heart in two. Her dying dad had been working long hours in the fields, even though he could barely stand, because Lord Machiavelli did not like anything to fall behind schedule.

The thought of evil Lord Machiavelli was like poison in Araine's heart; it brought out all the bad bits in her, like when she was mean to her sister if she didn't want to share or was being annoying. Araine knew that everyone had *some* nasty bits inside, but that could be forgiven if you said sorry and walked into kindness. That's what her mam said. Whatever that meant.

But Araine couldn't forgive Lord Machiavelli. Not ever. She tried to shut out her thoughts of revenge, like putting a broom between the spokes of his carriage's wheels so it would overturn when he was inside. No! She was doing it again!

'Stop thinking about him!' she scolded herself. And yet there he was. In her mind, playing over and over again, was a conversation between him and her dad, which she'd watched while hiding behind a barn.

That had been the beginning of the end.

'What would the world be like if we all stopped working?' Lord Machiavelli had said pompously to her father.

His Lordship was dressed in silks and velvet. He was plump with rich food and was sitting on a horse he could barely ride – a horse that was worth more than their cottage and all the houses in the village put together, their homes that they lived in and paid for with their service. Araine had watched as her dad had tried to pick up the scythe, but it was too heavy for him, and he stumbled and fell. Their giant of a dad, now withered and broken.

'Back to work – stop wasting time!' Lord Machiavelli had yelled at the villagers who were trying to help her father. She'd have run to him too if Nora hadn't appeared at that moment and tugged her away.

That was the night the villagers carried Araine and Nora's dad back to their cottage and Mam made a bed for him downstairs by the fire, instead of him climbing the ladder to where they all slept with the chickens.

He didn't get up again.

'You're the elder sister,' he'd said to Araine.

'Only by thirteen months,' she'd said sulkily, suspecting that she was going to be asked to do something she didn't want to do.

Her dad had ruffled her hair. 'That makes all the difference: you're ten and Nora is only nine. It's your job, as the eldest and strongest, to always keep her safe.'

Araine had felt really grown up when he said that. She *was* so much older than her sister, and she promised her father she'd take care of Nora.

But now look at me, she thought. She couldn't even do that right.

'There's still a chance for her,' Araine told herself. 'Don't give up.'

However, she couldn't forget the image of Nora asleep yesterday, before Araine had left her, not waking despite Araine's efforts. And her little sister's fingers, blue and freezing cold.

Not long after their dad's death, fever had struck the village, and Lord Machiavelli had escaped in a convoy of snorting and galloping horses and carriages, leaving the villagers to either starve or catch the illness that poisoned the air.

First the fever took their mam. In a daze, Araine and Nora had buried her in their garden and placed her favourite lavender on top of the mound of earth. Then they went inside the cottage and barred the doors. When Nora became sickly and pale, when the breath began to catch in her chest, Araine knew the sickness had found her too.

'No! I can't think like that. I just need to get back to her and everything will be all right,' Araine said to herself, and gave her head a little shake to try to get rid of the thought. But it was a very gnarly one and wouldn't let go of her heart.

Surely Nora would be all right? She *had* to be. Araine had promised her father!

But they had desperately needed food. If she was too weak to look after Nora, what would become of them? So, yesterday, Araine had made the difficult decision to leave her little sister and had hurried across the bridge over the river dividing Attercop from the town of Cawlington, all set to barter anything she had for food. What if the baker had no bread? Should she steal some flour?

When she'd got to Cawlington, she didn't have to worry whether thieving was a bad thing or not, because there was nothing to take: the place was deserted. The streets were usually bustling, full of people yelling and selling things, pickpockets, people getting in the way, stray dogs and children begging for food, especially on the corner by the Travelling Duck pub where she'd sit outside when her dad had business in town.

But there was no one.

The silence was so unexpected that Araine had had to stop for a moment and wiggle her fingers in her ears to make sure they weren't playing tricks on her.

Everyone had fled, and she couldn't find a single scrap of food. The bakery had been ransacked: bare shelves, a cold oven and empty flour sacks by the door.

As she'd been sitting on the pavement outside the bakery, trying to decide what to do next, the sky had suddenly darkened and a warm wind picked up, then thunder crashed in the distance. By the time Araine spotted where the storm was coming from, the sky had split open and huge drops of rain had begun to fall. Within seconds, horizontal rain was lashing and it soaked her to the bone before she'd had the chance to find shelter in the bakery, leaving her shivering.

When rain like this came down, the river swelled and the bridge linking Cawlington and Attercop was too dangerous to cross. Araine was trapped. She kicked out in anger. She'd have to leave Nora all alone in their cottage until the rain stopped.

Lightning struck the timber-framed building opposite. Araine had watched the spark ignite, and she'd screamed and huddled in a corner. No candles or matches, no way to get dry or to have any light.

That's unless lightning strikes here, she'd thought, and then immediately decided not to dwell on that.

She'd curled up in a ball, and sang the songs she would sing at home when Nora was being annoying and wouldn't go to sleep. She'd thought there was

no way she'd have been able to sleep, but her eyelids were so heavy that they had soon begun to close.



Now, the next morning, after she'd shaken off the spiders' blanket, as well as her dreams, Araine peered out of the bakery door, the spiders keeping a respectful distance behind her. The sun was creeping up in the watery sky; she held her hand out and caught no rain. Wasting no time, she ran.

She'd only gone a few paces when she heard a distinct pattering behind her. Araine stopped and looked over her shoulder. The spiders were following her.

'Do you want to help me? Then find us some food!' she yelled at them. 'You were supposed to keep us safe, but you didn't save Mam or protect Nora! If you can't help us, leave me alone!'

They paused as she stared at them, and as soon as she sped off again they followed once more, gathering in number, tumbling over one another, growing in size like the swollen river.

Araine raced over the bridge to her village, stumbling as her tired legs gave way but hauling herself back up.

No food. A wasted journey.

'I'm coming, Nora – hold on!'

How could she have thought that leaving her little sister was the right idea?

The wind howled and Araine pulled her shawl tight round her long curly blonde hair as she stopped in her tracks and stared at the red cross that the villagers had painted on the lopsided wooden front door to her cottage.

She knew what that meant. She was too late.

Araine threw herself to the ground, pounded her fists into the earth and sobbed for Nora, for her baby sister.

All of a sudden, a spider dropped on to her arm. She screamed and brushed it off, but then there came another and another, falling out of the sky, raining down on her, getting tangled in her long hair. The ones that had followed her home surged towards her.

'You were meant to keep her safe! Get off me! *Get off me!*' Araine shrieked into the wind, and they did. She watched as the spiders jumped into the air and tumbled towards the ground, some of them securing themselves with silk lines before they leaped.

As she looked down, she saw that they had formed themselves into a wriggling, churning line, crawling over one another to form an arrow on the stony ground behind her. An arrow that pointed away from her front door with the flame-red cross and towards the ancient stone church in the centre of Attercop. Her mouth dropped open.

Her mam said the church had been built before the world was fully formed, when only spiders existed. The steps that ran round and round up the church tower were worn and smooth, and even on the hottest day the stone was always cold. Araine had often felt that the church was watching over them, keeping them safe.

Not any more.

I can't leave Nora behind!

There were no grown-ups around to help her decide what to do, and the pain in her heart squeezed so tightly she thought it would explode. Then the sky burst open with more rain and lightning.

Her mam had always told her that spiders weren't something to be afraid of: they were there to help the villagers. So she did the only thing she could do. Araine followed the spiders.



'Hello?' Araine called as she pushed open the great door of the stone church. 'Anyone here?'

Her voice echoed back, swooping down from the high roof space, but there was no reply.

She jumped as the door closed behind her with a deep thud. The air was mossy and damp, thick, as though you could cut it. A tear threatened to leak out of her eye, but she angrily wiped it away. This was not the

time to grieve – she could do that later. She needed shelter and food first. Her dad would be proud of how practical she was being.

Her dad! She'd let him down so badly.

Araine pressed her lips together and refused to cry.

The spiders poured under the door into the cool of the church, and swirled round her feet. Araine rubbed her eyes, closing them tight. How could any of this be happening? She was seeing things – because of how sad and lost she felt. Maybe she'd made it up about the spider blanket and the cross on her door and the arrow? Maybe Nora was absolutely fine, wondering where Araine was, waiting for her to come home! If Araine opened her eyes and the spiders were gone, she'd know it had all been a horrible trick her mind was playing on her.

She slowly opened her eyes.

The spiders were still there.

Anger flashed inside her, the bright red bubbling kind that her mam told her to keep in check, and she screamed into the cool quiet of the church, her shout bouncing off the walls and returning to her like a ghost's unearthly cry.

She was now shivering so hard her teeth clattered together. When the spiders began their march over the thick stone slabs up the aisle towards the centre of the church, she didn't know what else to do but follow them.

They passed the altar and came to a halt at the entrance to the tower that took you up and up, round and round the smooth, narrowing steps until you burst out into the light of the roof.

Araine took a step up and then immediately stopped as a formation of spiders broke off and formed a large X in front of her foot.

'Not this way?' Her voice felt too big in the silent church, with all the stone saints looking down on her. 'What was that?'

Her voice bounced back again, but underneath her feet she was sure she could hear voices that *weren't* her echo. Someone else was here! She knelt down on the cool stone, next to where the spiders had stopped her climbing, and examined the thick wall: not a gap in sight.

But a symbol carved in the floor caught her eye. It was the one on the front of the church that their mam always told them about before bed, but Araine had never noticed it here before. Carved into the stone slab was a triangle, with a spider at each of its points, and in the centre of the triangle was the outline of the diamond-dew heart.

There it was again! She could definitely hear a voice! And was that warmer air she could feel? Where was it coming from?

Araine bent down further to examine the floor. Then she watched in shock as the huge army of spiders, all

different shades of brown and grey, some fluffy and some sleek, a few with what looked like hard shell armour, began to balance on top of each other around the edge of the slab with the strange triangle symbol in its centre.

Despite her sadness, Araine laughed out loud; they reminded her of the players she and Nora had seen last summer, who'd come from the big city of York to perform on the village green.

The dreams she'd had in the bakery floated back to her. Araine shook her head to get rid of the image of her grey skin-and-bone dad; that's not how she wanted to remember him. Then she said a very bad word out loud when she thought about Lord Machiavelli and how he must be enjoying his pampered life, away from all this death and suffering. She whispered an apology to her mam for saying it, especially in church.

The last few spiders climbed on top of the others. Were Araine's eyes playing tricks? No! The stone slab with the symbol was slowly starting to sink. She leaned forward, holding her breath, and gently put her hand in the centre of the wriggling mass, trying not to crush any of them. She pressed her weight on the slab too, but it didn't budge any further.

The spiders looked at her accusingly as if she should know what to do next, their little bulbous eyes – hundreds of them – staring at Araine.

'I don't know!' she exclaimed, and then realized grief mixed with anger was a very peculiar thing, and that sadness and fear left you lost and muddled up and made you believe that spiders were acrobats.

Araine closed her eyes and took a breath. When she opened them again, the spiders were still staring at her.

She reached carefully down to the small symbol of the triangle carved in the centre of the stone slab and traced her finger along the edges of the heart shape in its centre. It was cool to the touch and the grooves were deep. She realized she'd expected something to happen and nothing had, but she looked up and saw that the spiders at the edges, forming a circle round her hand, were leaning forward intently, as if willing her on.

She pressed her fingers in turn on each of the spiders carved into the stone at the points of the triangle.

Nothing.

'Tell me what I'm supposed to do next!'

But the spiders just kept staring at her.

'You're no help at all,' she muttered.

Araine traced the triangle, and when her finger reached the corner where she had begun there was a sharp cracking noise that made her jump. Suddenly the stone dropped a little way, then slid underneath the slab next to it, and she had to pull her hand back to stop herself tumbling downwards. She peered into the

darkness below, and as her eyes got used to the light a spiral staircase revealed itself, curling into the black.

She couldn't wait to tell Nora about this!

Then her heart trembled and tightened again when she remembered she couldn't. It was as though little chunks of her heart were becoming stone each time she thought about what she'd lost.

Before she could think about it any further, the spiders began to march down the stone staircase, and the sounds that Araine had heard became loud and clear voices.

'Who's there?' someone cried out from below. 'Have you brought our mam?'

The question was followed by the sound of crying, and Araine could hear another voice, a little bit older and less squeaky, trying to give comfort. It sounded familiar, but with all the echoing in the church she couldn't quite place it.

Two voices, thought Araine. *And with me that makes three – a triangle!*

She cast one last glance at the familiar church, and then took a step into the unknown.