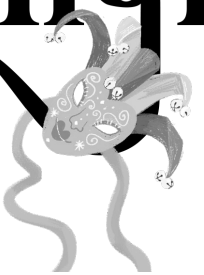

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Emma Rea

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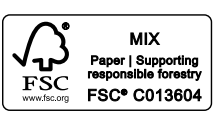
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for Matilda

Chapter 1

It felt exactly like a hedgehog. Sharp prickles all over its back. A soft, furry underbelly.

With his eyes scrunched shut, Thomas let his fingers wander further, until they came to the beady nose and tiny claws on each foot. It even smelt earthy and animal, but that would be the rabbit droppings.

'Only bring the dry grassy ones,' Tia had told him. 'Not the wet and yucky ones.'

Thomas opened his eyes.

It looked just right, too.

'How is it?' she asked.

He glanced at Tia's face. Her eyes open, hopeful. And gazing at the wall. She was holding her breath. The hedgehog was the first thing she had made since she lost her sight a year ago.

Back then, before anyone knew what was wrong, Thomas had thought she was playing a game. If Mum

asked her to pass a mug, Tia would gaze at it and take too long to hand it over. If Dad told her to pick something up off the floor, Tia seemed to pretend to hunt for it. It made Thomas laugh. He was secretly impressed.

Then they were on Aberdovey beach one day, helping Tia collect orange shells for an art project. Mum and Thomas bent down every time they saw one of the tiny golden spirals, adding them to Tia's bag. When they got home and emptied the bag into the sink to wash the sand off, Thomas saw three small orangey pebbles in the collection. He hadn't picked them up, and Mum wouldn't have.

Which meant Tia had.

Which meant Tia couldn't tell the difference between a shell and a pebble.

Suddenly all Tia's messing around made sense.

Standing behind her in the kitchen, and listening to her describe how she was going to paint every single one, each with its different markings and shades of orange, watching her sift through them and not notice the pebbles, not pick them out and not throw them away, Thomas felt as if he was going to be sick.

It wasn't long before it became obvious to everyone that Tia needed eye tests. On the day they said she would go completely blind, his guts tied themselves

into a great thick tight knot. With the knot came something else – a thought so dreadful that his neurons in charge of Difficult Things to Think About Later quickly bagged it up and stuffed it into a dark corner of his brain.

Tia stopped painting and going to art club after school. She began to feel her way carefully around the house, counting steps. Her friends stopped coming round. Thomas heard her crying at night.

A dark magic came and turned Thomas' family into different people. Tia hadn't only given up painting, she mostly gave up talking. Mum stopped running. She didn't make Tia do her chores. Her voice went flat, and she never said, 'Race you to the car!' Dad no longer quoted his favourite book. He looked shocked even when he was making tea.

After a while, Tia joined the swimming club at school. She said it was great to move free and fast, counting the strokes until she reached the end of the pool. She began asking Thomas to describe colour to her exactly, so he never said something was green, he said it was WhatsApp green, or ivy green or green like the sea on a thundery day. Mum's voice began to bounce a bit and she asked Tia to unload the dishwasher, and place everything on the table. Dad even managed a quote.

Thomas couldn't understand what was happening. It was almost worse than when it all went wrong. Didn't they realise this wasn't going to go away? The knot in his stomach tied itself tighter. The dreadful thought struggled in its dark corner.

And now, a year later, here was her hedgehog.

All Thomas had done was find what she asked for: toothpicks, beads, earth, moss, rabbit droppings and – this was the worst job – toenails. Dad's feet had never looked so tidy. Tia had pulled out a strand of her long, corkscrew red hair (with an 'ow!') to wind around the base of the prickles to give a golden glow underneath, and she'd put everything together, feeling and moulding and thinking and murmuring and winding.

'Thomas?' She was still waiting for his answer. 'Is it any good?'

'It's a class hedgehog, Tia. You've smashed it.'

'The nose doesn't stick out too much?'

'No,' Thomas said. 'It's exactly like a hedgehog; it has a hedgehoggy feel. Even smells like one.' Thomas didn't know what a hedgehog smelt like, but the rabbit droppings and the green mossy underbelly – ok, so green was an odd colour for a furry stomach, but that was what she wanted – smelt just how he imagined a hedgehog would smell.

'It's ready, then.' Tia grinned and pulled a folded piece of paper out of her back pocket. 'Here's the form. Mum said one of the prizes was loads of clay. I could make anything with that!'

Princeton Hotels Children's National Art Competition the form said. Thomas scanned the piece of paper and there it was: third prize, a huge block of modelling clay with a set of tools to sculpt and make fine markings.

'You'll win it just for the claws,' Thomas said quickly. 'Not being funny, but no one else is mad enough to touch their dad's toenails.'

He filled in the form and Mum helped them cushion the hedgehog in bubble wrap, box it, label it and take it to the Post Office counter.

What nobody bothered to check, was what the other prizes might be.



'*Dear Tia*,' Mum read out over breakfast, the day the letter came. '*Congratulations! We were most impressed with your hedgehog and your innovative use of materials and we are delighted to tell you that—*'

Thomas jumped up, knocking the milk off balance. Dad caught it before it fell, without even looking at it.

'You won, Tia!' Thomas cried.

They all jumped up, with Tia passed from one to the other for a bear hug from Dad, a long squeeze from Mum and a bang on the back from Thomas. Dad was nodding and nodding; Mum's eyes were glistening and Thomas' grin was stuck on his face, possibly forever.

'Wait, what did I win? Did I get the clay?' Tia asked.

Mum read on, '*…you have won first prize along with nine others from around the UK. You are invited to take part in an art trip to Venice, Italy, staying in the Princeton Hotel. You will each make a mask and join in the carnival. The trip will be run by KidsRGo, an organisation which provides highly acclaimed overseas educational trips for children.*'

A trip to Venice? Thomas' brain stalled.

Dad was the first to speak. 'Oh, Tia, Venice! Ancient canals, gondolas, all those pretty bridges! La Piazza San Marco – the most magical place in the world, with its angels and bronze horses and winged lion.' His face was dreamy. 'Dylan Thomas' wife Caitlin bought twenty-seven pairs of shoes in Venice. Twenty-seven! It's that sort of place. And the carnival! The whole city dresses up in fantastic costumes and masks, and parades around the streets! I've always

wanted to go to Venice.' Then his face fell. They all knew he was terrified of flying.

Mum was more practical. 'I don't know about magical,' she said. 'But La Piazza is huge, about the size of five football pitches. Would be more fun if they used it for that.' She leafed through a stack of stapled sheets, reading fast, her eyes screwed up. 'Health and safety, good, they've got that sorted… Regulated by Ofsted, excellent… Ah!' She shook the papers in a flourish. 'Disability procedures, here we are. *KidsRGo has a comprehensive policy with regards to children with disabilities, and provides extra assistance where needed. Please ring us to start the conversation.*' A huge smile spread across her face. 'This is sounding good.'

'Think of the mask I could make,' Tia said. 'I could be a kingfisher, or a mole, or an elephant, or an…'

Every single one of the hundred billion neurons in Thomas' brain glued up in a ball. He had a vision of Tia a thousand miles away, standing alone with her white cane. The knot in his guts tightened, like it did every time he thought of moving up to secondary school next year and leaving her to cope without him. This was much worse. She couldn't possibly go to Venice. His neurons unglued themselves and mobilised. They came up with obstacles. So many that

Thomas relaxed. There were far too many problems. It wasn't going to happen. She would stay here with him and Mum and Dad, nice and safe in Aberdovey.

So it felt like a bad dream when Mum made the phone call right there and then, at breakfast, and all the obstacles fell away. Tia would have professional help on the flight and a carer all to herself in Italy. Everything would be paid for. All she'd need was a small amount of pocket money. The trip was during February half-term, so she wouldn't miss school.

In the end it came down to one last thing: she also had to have a family member with her. Mum had her PE teacher's exam in February and Dad couldn't fly. He went white when Tia asked him if he would go and didn't even manage to answer.

Thomas breathed again. The nightmare was over and they could all go back to having a normal Saturday.

'The main thing is, you won, Tia,' Thomas said, trying to hide the relief in his voice. 'You came first! And who wants to go to Venice anyway? Away from us all for a whole week? The sea is everywhere.' He shuddered. 'The boats would make you feel sick, and bridges are boring.'

Tia nodded. She felt for her spoon and caught a few Shreddies from her bowl.

Dad crunched his toast in a business-like way.

Mum folded her lips tightly and swallowed.

Thomas' family was good at disappointment.

Thomas glanced around the kitchen table. The silence would go on until someone thought of a way to change the subject. Surely Mum would come up with something? Everyone's head was bent low. Dad's eyebrows were trying to meet in the middle, as they always were when he was thinking hard.

'Maybe you could get some clay for your birthday?' Thomas said.

Tia's head jerked up. She sat bolt upright.

'Wait,' she said. 'You said family member, right? Not parent?'

Mum peered at the small print.

'Yes,' she said. 'It says a family member over ten, who is invited to join in all the art activities.'

Tia beamed.

'So it's ok. Thomas can come.'

Chapter 2

Thomas decided he liked airports. He hadn't wanted to go to Venice because he was busy researching how the brain worked, and he didn't think an art trip would provide good opportunities for that. But he did like the airport. There was nothing to knock over. Chairs bolted to the floor, plenty of space. Travelators. He really liked travelators, where you could move without moving.

Following a lady with a badge saying Airport Staff, he could see the electric effect Tia had on people. Some of them did a double take when they also realised she was blind. Her explosion of corkscrew golden-red hair made her hard to miss, but it was also the way she dressed. She didn't like things to match. She liked bold colours, all mixed up. Today it was bubble-gum pink Converse with rainbow laces, and red shorts over blue tights. Her jacket was covered with shiny badges,

and her bag dripped with multicoloured ribbons. They were both tall for their age, but the way she stood – shoulders back, chin up – really commanded attention. It looked like confidence, but Thomas knew it was bravery.

The woman with the Airport Staff badge handed them over to a young man with an Unaccompanied Minor Escort badge, head bent over his phone. He put his phone away long enough to nod at them and take possession of their passports.

In the plane they settled into their seats. Eventually it glided, then thundered forwards, gathered speed and lifted into the air.

'What can you see?' Tia asked.

Thomas leaned over Tia to look out of the window. 'Tiny cars. On roads like black ribbons.' Then it all disappeared. 'Now we're inside cloud. You can't see anything.'

'Is the cloud thick?' asked Tia.

'Not really. It's a silvery grey mist.' And a little later, 'We've come out of the clouds. It's sunny up here, bright blue sky all around.'

'No clouds anywhere? No more above?'

Thomas craned his neck upwards.

'No.'

'So it's always a lovely day, if you go up high

enough?' Sometimes there was an edge in her voice, but now she sounded clear and happy.

Thomas laughed. 'I guess!'

An hour later, Thomas' phone battery was down to five per cent. Tia had her earbuds in, probably still listening to her book about a gorilla in Portugal. On his other side, the Unaccompanied Minor badge man had his laptop out and was watching a film. Thomas took a sneaky look: *Ant-Man*. It was a film Thomas liked because it was about entangled particles, which affect each other even when they're far apart. He wondered if the man would be interested in talking about particles, because the entangled thing was really amazing. Even top physicists didn't understand it. Even Einstein hadn't understood it. He'd called it 'spooky action at a distance'.

Thomas had nothing to do.

He accepted the inflight magazine from the flight attendant, and flicked through the pages. It had an article about Venice, with a map. Venice was basically a city in the middle of the sea, not joined to Italy at all. It was roundish, with a narrow split down the middle. It reminded him of something.

He was extremely interested to find an article about Leonardo da Vinci. A picture of Leonardo with a long white beard, a black cloak and a floppy dark red

velvet hat gazed at him from the glossy pages. It was a name he knew because Dad always said, 'Oh, ok for Leonardo,' whenever he had to fix the hoover or glue something Thomas had broken. It was a quote from a book about Christmas by Dad's favourite author. But Thomas also knew about him because he spent a lot of time Googling the brain, and had found a painting of it by Leonardo.

For the last year or so, Thomas had been knocking things over. Everything he touched went flying. Eye tests showed 20:20 vision. X-rays, scans, blood tests – all good. 'Healthy as a butcher's dog,' the doctor said. 'He seems to have an almost photographic memory,' he added. 'He's just accident-prone.'

When Tia started losing her sight, they did brain scans. They found a tumour. They said it was 'benign' which was supposed to be a good thing, but it pressed on her optic nerve. An Optic Pathway Glioma, they called it. What Thomas couldn't understand was how come, with no tumour – benign or the other sort, his brain tangled up his arms and legs and made him knock things over the whole time?

He'd printed out a diagram of the brain and stuck it on his bedroom wall. Brains were divided into two hemispheres. The right one was imaginative and the left one, scientific. Different parts of the brain did

different things, and had cool names like prefrontal cortex and hippocampus and amygdala and medulla oblongata. A hundred billion neurons zapped and flashed and snapped in there, connecting and sorting information, sending commands to his limbs, deciding, choosing, remembering. His theory was that if he used the left, scientific part of his brain and thought really hard, he might be able to get his brain to work out what was wrong with itself.

'What are you reading?' Tia asked, her earbuds in her lap.

Thomas looked up sharply. How did she know he was reading? Sometimes he couldn't help thinking – hoping – that her blindness wasn't real, that she could see, that it was all some sort of peculiar joke. The terrible thought, the one he couldn't bear to think, the one that was bagged up and stuffed away, nearly surfaced again. A team of neurons in charge of security stuffed it back in the bag. Then he realised she would have heard him flicking the pages over. That tiny sound was all she needed.

'The plane's magazine,' he said.

'Anything good in it?'

'Yes! There's a picture of Leonardo da Vinci. Five hundred years ago he worked in Venice, inventing sea defences to stop Venice being flooded at high tide.

And he invented the helicopter, except they didn't have the right things to make it.'

Tia sighed. 'Anything else?'

He flicked back to the article on Venice with the map to find something she'd be interested in. The word 'clay' jumped out at him.

'Says Venice is built on loads of small clay islands. A hundred and seventeen of them,' he said.

'How far apart? Do you need a boat?'

'It says they're threaded together by three hundred and ninety-one bridges. There are no roads or cars. Just canals and boats. They use gondolas, these long, black, wooden, open boats, narrow, bit like canoes, for getting around. And boat buses. Oh, and the whole city is slowly sinking into the lagoon. In some houses the ground floor floods when the tide comes in.'

'They live in houses where water comes in? That's mental.'

'They're trying to stop the flooding. They've invented a monster yellow barrier that pops up in the sea when the tide is too high.'

He tilted the page sideways. He knew what the map reminded him of – it looked like a wonky version of Leonardo da Vinci's drawing of a brain. The Grand Canal split Venice into two hemispheres and all the

complicated twisty passageways were like neural pathways. It even had a railway link to the mainland, like a sort of brain stem. He wondered if anyone else would find this as fascinating as he did.



At Marco Polo airport a sign saying TIA & THOMAS JENKINS waved in the air. A smart lady with her hair in a ponytail stood holding it. She smiled as they approached. Mr Unaccompanied Minor handed over their passports, nodded again and sloped off, head bent over his phone.

'Good afternoon, you are Tia? Lovely to meet you, Tia. And Thomas?' She had an Italian accent and a KidsRGo badge on her lapel. 'I'm Sophia Marmo; call me Sophia. Do you need anything, Tia? Are you ok?

'I'm good, thanks,' Tia said.

'Usually I am the guide, but this week I will be your carer, Tia. And this is Gregory Gloaming, who's thinking of joining our organisation. He is shadowing me for this trip.' She introduced a stiff, upright man in a blazer with gold buttons, a sharp parting in his greying hair, and a very large moustache.

Thomas' mouth fell open. Suddenly, being in Italy wasn't the most amazing thing that was

happening. Gregory Gloaming's moustache wasn't just any moustache. It was a huge curly moustache. And even then, it wasn't just any old huge curly moustache, it was the one Thomas and his family had been looking for all his life.

Whenever Thomas' dad saw a moustache, he quoted Dylan Thomas' words, 'nicotine-egg-yellow weeping walrus Victorian moustache'. As a family, they had seen many moustaches, and had described them all: penny brown, speckled ash, tabby-cat orange and glossy-as-a-new-tyre black. But never had they seen one that exactly fitted Dad's quote. Until now. The neurons in Thomas' brain made images – of eggs, walruses, old-fashioned gentlemen – flash and dance before his eyes. Thomas snapped his mouth shut and rearranged his face into a normal smile. He wished Dad could see this man.

'Ah-ha! Good to meet you, Tia; jolly good to meet you, young lady. You may address me as Major Gloaming,' he said, looking nervous and grasping her hand and giving it a hearty shake.

He only glanced at Thomas, and Thomas had to squelch down a spurt of anger. People were right to talk mainly to Tia, to ask how she was, to make sure she was alright. It's just that it gave him an invisible feeling. It made it hard to speak.

Major Gloaming started telling Tia facts about Venice which Thomas already knew from the magazine. His marvellous mop of a moustache leaped and bounced as he said everything three times, and got things wrong, which made Thomas' brain feel as if it were collapsing on the inside. As Major Gloaming rambled on, Thomas imagined his neurons slowing down, bumping into each other, swaying, connecting to the wrong terminal.

Sophia took Tia's hand, but Tia pulled away and flipped out her white cane.

'I only need a hand on my elbow if I'm going wrong,' she said, with that edge in her voice. Thomas fell into step beside her, lightly brushing his arm against hers, so she knew he was there.

'He's got the moustache, Tia,' he whispered.

'Wait, THE moustache? Nicotine-egg-yellow weeping walrus Victorian?'

'Yes!' Thomas hissed.

'Wow,' Tia said quietly. 'And is it really eggy yellowish? And sad walrussy?'

'*Yes*.'

'Dad would love it.'

Six travelators later they came to the cold banks of the lagoon. Boats were parked in different bays, like buses in a bus station. Thomas was extremely good at

avoiding boats in Aberdovey, but there was no choice here. Sophia and Major Gloaming went off to buy the tickets.

'Take me to the water's edge, Thomas,' Tia said.

Thomas put a hand behind her elbow and walked her as close as he dared to the edge, which was three metres away.

'The sea is the colour of dishwater, Tia, and it's heaving like some monster's about to burst out of it.'

'What colour is the light?' she asked.

'Mustard. It's all misty and yellowish. Bit creepy. It makes the surface flash when the water dips up and down.'

'We could get closer though, right?'

'Nope. This is as close as we can get.' It was as close as Thomas wanted to get, that's for sure.

'We can't be. There'd be a railing. Come on, Thomas, I'm not stupid.' There was the edge in her voice again.

Thomas sighed and took her right up to the railing until she could reach out and touch it.

'Remember how we used to…?' she asked.

He did, but he'd much rather not.

Tia climbed up onto the railing and leaned way over the top rail, right over the water.

Thomas knew exactly what she was about to do. Up until a year ago they swung around railings a lot,

but if he tried to swing round the railing now, he would end up in the lagoon. The water beneath her swelled like a gruesome invitation. He grabbed at her arm.

'Don't, Tia,' he said. 'We can't.'

'Why not? You don't need to be able to see to go round a railing. You can do it with your eyes closed.'

'Attention!' Major Gloaming called. 'Prepare to depart!'

They climbed on board the boat bus with Sophia talking Tia through every single step, and the boat headed off into the mist, into white nothingness, along a sort of ghostly watery motorway marked by ancient wooden poles leaning out of the water.

'It smells fishy,' Tia murmured. 'Like we're entering a sea world.'

The mist lifted as the boat neared Venice, and the stone walls of the quay shone like gold in the slanting evening light. Thomas and Tia's suitcases rumbled over flagstones as they followed Sophia and Major Gloaming through a maze of quiet streets and dark, narrow alleyways. It was like walking straight into a time before cars existed, or roads, or road signs, and instead of the noise of traffic you heard the slap of water against the banks of the canals, a distant boat engine, and laughter from just around a corner.