THE MOONLIGHT DRAGON

"Utterly delightful! A beautiful story of friendship, courage, and empathy I couldn't put down."
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"A pacy fantasy full of everything we need right now: friendship, hope and love." Ashley Thorpe, author of *Spirit Warriors*

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Set in Kingfisher by Becky Chilcott.

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ONE

WHEN IT WAS DARK, LUNA WENT out alone. Dad usually came too but he had to work tonight.

She darted through the narrow city streets, silent as a shadow. She chose the shortcuts and the back lanes, avoiding the main gates with the guards. Outside the city walls, she hurried all the way to the top of the hill. Just in time!

As the full moon rose, she reached the stone circle. It stood on the flat hilltop like a ring of giants turned to rock. Not far beyond, the hillside dropped away in a steep cliff. But here in the circle, Luna felt safe.

The stones were tall, with long shadows that striped the

ground. She went to stand right in the middle where the grass gleamed silver in the moonlight. Would Mum be here tonight? Luna's heart beat faster as she looked around, searching in every direction.

To the north she could see the faint outline of misty mountains. To the east lay the plains. And to the south she could see the distant lights of the city where she lived now. Beyond that was her old home, where the river used to loop and snake in long, curving bends. But there was no sign of Mum. No sign of any living creature.

The circle of standing stones was empty, again.

Luna sat on a rock to wait. This is what they'd agreed, back when her family was still together. *If we get separated, we'll meet at the standing stones, at moonrise, on the night of the full moon.*

Even though the day had been very hot, it was cold now. There was a light wind. Clouds were sailing across the sky, covering the moon for a heartbeat, so everything turned black, then silver, black, then silver, as if the world was blinking hard, just like Luna. There was no sound, except the rushing of the air. She brushed at the hair tickling her cheek and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

The moon was high in the sky by now. Mum wasn't coming tonight.

Luna heaved herself to her feet, wishing Dad was here. He usually lifted her onto his back when she was tired, but tonight she would have to walk, chilled, hungry and heartbroken.

Just then, from the corner of her eye, she saw something move across the full moon, darker and faster than a cloud. Perhaps an owl, hunting at night? Luna looked up. It was large, with bat-like wings, flying in strange, slow circles.

It looked like a dragon! But it couldn't be. There were no dragons left. She must be dreaming.

Though could she really have imagined this beautiful creature, with its long graceful neck, trailing tail and such powerful wings?

Her tired mind struggled to catch up. She rubbed her face, hard. Yes, she really was awake, and yes, that really was a dragon. She turned, spinning on the spot, gazing up so she didn't miss a single detail, drinking it all in.

Now she heard a new noise. Two riders were galloping up the hill. She saw that they were hunters, armed with bows and arrows. They wore strange dark robes and their faces were covered.

Luna ran and hid behind one of the tallest stones. Then she peered out from its shadow, trying not to make a sound.

She watched the hunters take aim as they rode closer,

closer, closer. The horses' hoofbeats thundered. She watched their arrows speed towards the dragon.

"Oh!" she whispered. "Fly up! Fly away, you beauty! Don't let them catch you!"

Instead, the dragon flew lower, one wing dangling as if it was injured.

Why didn't it fly away? Was it hurt? But Luna was sure none of the arrows had hit it – yet.

Suddenly she realised what the dragon was doing.

She'd seen birds behave the same way.

It was exactly what her own mother had done.

The dragon was leading the hunters away from its nest, making them chase it instead. It must be protecting an egg or a young dragon.

Tears filled Luna's eyes, and the world blurred into a moonlit smudge. *Don't let them hurt you*, she thought.

When the dragon screeched, Luna thought she had never heard such an awful sound.

It tumbled out of the sky, wings tightly wrapped around its body. Faster and faster the dragon fell, spinning down, heading right for the cliff edge, just north of the stones. There was a loud crashing noise.

Forgetting to be quiet now, Luna cried, "No!" But her voice was carried away on the wind.

The two riders slowed as they reached the cliff edge. One of them cheered, then the other spoke loudly.

Luna couldn't hear the words from here, but she saw their long cloaks and the gleam of moonlight on their swords and helmets. As they rode off, she heard the clink of the bridles and the snorting of their horses. She guessed they were heading the long way round to find the dragon at the bottom of the cliff. Was it injured, or worse?

As soon as the hunters had left, Luna started to run in the opposite direction, back towards the city. Her tiredness was forgotten. She had to find her father and bring him here, now. If that dragon had really been protecting its nest, they had to find it, before those riders did.