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Opening extract from

Kiki Strike: Inside the Shadow City

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Published by

Bloomsbury

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

By taking the time to open this book, you've become a member of a very elite group: The Curious. I can't tell you how pleased I am that we've found each other. As you must have noticed, there aren't many of us around.

Contained on these pages is a true account of my first adventure with the legendary Kiki Strike. If you're looking for a thrilling story to keep you entertained on those rainy days when you have nothing better to do, it should serve that purpose quite nicely. But if you're interested in learning a few essential skills along the way, all the better. Of course, I'm not speaking of the kind of skills you're likely to learn in any classroom. Hopefully, I'll be able to provide you with an altogether more useful education.

Happy Reading,

Ananka Fishbein

CHAPTER ONE

The Shadow City

Until the age of twelve, I led what most people would consider an unexceptional life. My activities on an average day could be boiled down to a flavorless mush: I went to school, I came home, I took a bath, and I went to bed. Though I'm certain I didn't realize it at the time, I must have been terribly bored.

Then, early one Saturday morning, I happened to glance out my bedroom window. Across the street from my apartment building, a little park had been sucked into an enormous hole. Roughly ten feet from side to side and seemingly bottomless, the crater had swallowed two Japanese pagoda trees, an old marble birdbath, and a statue of Washington Irving. The park bench where I had sat just the day before teetered on the muddy lip of the hole.

Holes of this sort are rare in New York City, where the earth is sealed beneath a layer of asphalt, and one can go for years without catching sight of actual dirt. Ordinarily, such a spectacle would have drawn a crowd.

But it was a dismal November day, and the streets were deserted. Black clouds hovered above the roofs, and a bone-chilling mist had licked every surface. In the buildings on the opposite side of the park, the windows formed a checkerboard of pulled blinds and drawn curtains. At street level, the hole was hidden from view by an ivy-covered fence that stubbornly circled what was left of the park. A delivery van with a cross-eyed dragon painted on its side sped past without even slowing, headed toward the narrow streets of Chinatown.

Leaning out my third-story window, I noticed a peculiar bulge on the section of fence nearest the hole. An orange rope had been tied to one of the pickets, and I followed its long end with my eyes, through a row of mangled juniper bushes and over the side of the hole. As I watched, the rope began to thrash violently, and then two tiny hands and a head smeared with filth appeared. The creature to which they belonged took little time to pull itself over the edge of the pit. From a distance, it didn't appear human. Its entire body was caked in muck, and its hair was plastered to the sides of its head. When it stood upright, I could see that it was extremely short, and with nothing to guide me but my imagination, I determined it might be a highly intelligent monkey or a troll of some sort.

For a moment, the thing peered back into the hole, apparently hesitant to leave. Then it looked up at me, as if it had known all along that I would be watching at the window. Even now, six years later, I can still see its eyes, which looked colorless and without expression—like those of a statue come to life. It all seemed quite sinister until the creature offered a little wave, its hand cupped

in the singular style of British royalty. It jumped back into the hole, only to reemerge minutes later. Before it scampered over the fence and disappeared into the mist, I could have sworn that I saw it grin.

Looking back, it's hard to imagine what my life might have become if I hadn't thrown an old coat over my nightgown, shoved my bare feet into a pair of furry pink snow boots, and run outside for a closer look. I've found that such opportunities are few and far between. If you miss them—or like most people simply fail to recognize them—there's no guarantee that another chance will ever come your way.

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At the edge of the hole, I bent down on my hands and knees and peered into the abyss. The mist had turned to an icy rain that seeped into the lining of my boots and trickled over my toes. Mud oozed between my fingers, and in one of the hundreds of dark apartments that had turned a blind eye to the scene below, a dog howled a muffled warning. The orange rope still dangled inside the hole, its knotted end slowly sinking into the mud at the bottom.

The pit itself was far larger than I had imagined, and there was little to see where the earth had given way. But the hole had opened into an underground chamber that extended off to one side, the ground above it still solidly in place. In an oddly generous gesture, the creature had left a flashlight behind. It stood upright on a table and cast a column of light that illuminated a little room, half of it destroyed by Washington Irving, the other half still perfectly intact.

To those of you who are sticklers for safety and approach life with all the caution of amateur beekeepers, I can offer no excuse for what I did then. I'll admit that a more mature human being would never have let her curiosity take control.

Thankfully, I was twelve years old and fully prepared to meet the challenge at hand.

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Unaccustomed to scaling ropes in nasty weather, I slipped and landed in a puddle next to Washington Irving, who lay facedown in the mud, pinned by a pagoda tree. Wincing with pain, I used his right ear to pull myself up, then turned to face the light.

The room was in many ways remarkably clean. A few passes with a broom, and it would have been ready to receive visitors. Only a couple of clumps of earth and a shrub or two lay scattered across the floor. Four shabby tables stood awkwardly in the center, shielded by mismatched chairs. Gilded mirrors, their paint shedding piles of chips, clung to the ragged brick walls. Across from them was a makeshift bar—no more than a wooden counter backed by three shelves lined with strange bottles. I felt certain that nothing in the room had ever seen the twenty-first century—or even the twentieth, for that matter. I knew I had entered an ancient world.

I picked up the flashlight and followed a trail of tiny muddy footprints behind the bar. On the highest shelf, a lone book stood propped against a bottle. I pulled myself onto the counter and performed an acrobatic stretch to reach it. But the moment my fingers brushed the book's

spine, the flashlight slipped from my grasp, shattered a bottle of foul-smelling liquid, and crashed to the floor. I shoved the book into my pocket and jumped off the bar to retrieve the flashlight.

Where the flashlight had rolled to a stop, the room's floor appeared warped, and one of the wooden boards jutted up at its end. I bent down to take a look, and on closer inspection I saw that several of the floorboards were made from a different wood than their neighbors. Near the upturned board, which I now realized was an ingeniously disguised handle, was a message written in mud. "Open me," it demanded in a straightforward fashion, so I did. Grasping the edge of the board, I pulled with all the strength I could muster, and the warped floorboards reluctantly rose to reveal another hole.

Just wide enough to accommodate the girth of a big-bellied man, the second hole had a metal ladder attached to one side that creaked as I climbed down. I descended through fifty feet of tightly packed soil and rock before I reached a door that opened onto the side of a much larger tunnel—one that ran parallel to the city street far above. As I stepped through the doorway, a surge of electricity coursed through my body as if I had hopped on the third rail of a subway track. My spine tingled, my fingers trembled, my mouth dried up, and my hair stood on end. I found myself unsure whether to laugh with delight or break into tears.

What I saw, deep beneath the streets of New York, was the kind of structure—not unlike the Empire State Building, the Egyptian pyramids, or the Great Wall of China—that leaves people speechless, their mouths hanging open.

Roughly twelve feet from top to bottom, with brick walls and a ceiling of sturdy wooden beams, the tunnel stretched in two directions until both ends curved out of sight and disappeared into the darkness. I counted at least a dozen doors lining the walls, each door a different color and style.

Just as I reached for a crystal doorknob, I heard voices echoing in the room above and the thud of heavy work boots on the wooden floor. I suppose an ordinary response might have been to hide, but something told me that the trapdoor I had come through should never be discovered. I scrambled back up the ladder to the first room, closed the trapdoor behind me, and rubbed out the message written in mud.

Peeking over the edge of the bar, I saw two city workers in fluorescent orange safety vests standing awestruck in the center of the room.

"Ever seen anything like this before?" asked the larger of the two men.

"Nope," said the other after a long pause. "Not me, but back when I was a kid and my dad worked for the city, he told me a story I could never get out of my head. He said these guys were putting in pipes to one of the skyscrapers that went up near Chinatown about twenty years back. They were tunneling about fifty feet down when all of the sudden they broke into an open space. Can you believe it? An open space fifty feet underground?"

"Was it a subway tunnel?"

"Nah, they were deeper than the subway. There isn't supposed to be *anything* that far down around Chinatown."

"Well, what was it?"

"It was a room like this one—but bigger, a lot bigger. And it was done up like some kind of fancy Chinese bedroom, with straw mats on the floor and pillows all over the place. My dad said there were these weird silk screens with little dragons painted all over them."

"Was there somebody hiding down there?"

"No. That was the strange part. They could never find an entrance to the place."

"What do you mean they couldn't find an entrance?"

"I mean there was no door, no way for people to get inside. It was just a room, fifty feet underground, with no door."

"Uh," grunted the other, unimpressed. "So what happened to it?"

"Nothing. They had to take the pipes around it. My guess is it's still down there somewhere. When I was a kid, I tried to get my dad to let me dig for it."

"What do you think they're gonna do with this one?"

"Fill it in, I'd bet. It's too dangerous. Some dumb kid'd probably fall in and get himself killed."

"Well, if they're just gonna fill it in, I better take a souvenir," said the fat man.

The other man laughed. "What do you want, a chair?"

"No, I'd settle for one of those bottles," the large man announced, stomping over to the bar, the floorboards groaning beneath his weight.

I crouched in the corner of the bar, knowing I was destined for discovery. So as the fat man rounded the corner and reached for a blue bottle, I stood up and said hello. I don't think I realized just how filthy I was or how unusual

my appearance had become, because the last thing I expected was to hear the man squeal like a wounded piglet. He dropped the bottle and ran across the room toward the opening of the hole. His partner stood back in shock as the fat man tried to pull his mammoth body up the rope.

"What do you think you're doing?" the partner asked as it became ridiculously clear that his friend would never make it to the safety of the street.

"I just saw the devil!" the fat man gasped.

"Have you gone nuts?" demanded the thinner man, now thoroughly annoyed.

"Go look if you don't believe me," the other insisted. Again I heard footsteps in my direction, and soon a flashlight was shining into my eyes. A look of terror mangled the thin man's face.

"Would you mind pointing that elsewhere?" I asked politely.

"George, get back here," called the man. "It's not the devil, you dolt. I think it's a girl." He bent down to study my face. "If you *are* a girl, I can tell you one thing for sure. You're in a whole lotta trouble."

Two burly, bad-tempered policemen pulled me out of the pit. Construction workers were already building a tall plywood fence around the park, shielding it from the eyes of the curious. On the surface, I was barraged with questions. Who was I? What did I think I was doing down there? Didn't I know I could have been seriously injured? What kind of girl *was* I? Did I know how mad my parents would be? What was their phone number?

Years of watching crime shows on television had taught me how to handle such situations, and I refused to

give them any information. Instead, I played dumb, and eventually one of the policemen gave me a roll of paper towels and told me to clean myself off and wait in the back of his squad car. I was only making things worse for myself, he insisted, but I knew better than that.

I've always found that one of the biggest benefits of being a girl is that most people refuse to take you seriously. While boys must be constantly monitored and are always the first suspects when anything goes wrong, everyone expects girls to do what they're told. It may seem a little insulting at first, but low expectations can be a blessing in disguise. If you're smart, you can use people's foolishness to your own advantage. It's amazing what you can get away with when no one bothers watching.

As soon as I began scraping the mud from my arms and legs, I noticed the policemen's attention beginning to drift. A few minutes later, one walked to the edge of the hole to monitor the progress while the other directed a stream of traffic around a backhoe that was uprooting the park's little fence. When the backhoe pulled into the road, the poor fence gripped in its teeth like a limp and wounded snake, I was temporarily shielded from view. I simply sprinted across the street and up the stairs to my apartment.

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Saturday mornings, my parents rarely woke before noon. Always an early riser, I would use those precious hours to devise my own entertainment. After a well-balanced breakfast of pudding or pie, I'd settle down to watch R-rated movies on a temperamental television set that had come into the world long before I had. Occasionally,

just for laughs, I'd move the furniture and play a quick game of handball against the living room walls.

I had tested the limits and determined that nothing short of fireworks and a marching band would bring my parents shuffling out of their bedroom before midday. So as I opened the door to my apartment, a filthy fugitive from justice, I felt perfectly confident that I was in the clear. I stripped out of my muddy clothing at the door and tiptoed to the bathroom. There, I wrapped the clothes in a pillowcase, intending to take them to the basement laundry room as soon as I had showered. I dropped the bundle into the hamper, where it landed on the bottom with an unusually heavy thump. That's when I remembered the book.

As I thumbed through its pages, I could tell it was no ordinary book. Entitled *Glimpses of Gotham,* it appeared at first to be a guidebook to the city of New York in 1866. But instead of listing historic sites or four-star restaurants, it guided its readers through the "darker side" of the city. The author, a man by the name of Pearcy Leake III, had gone to great pains to visit every slum, saloon, and gambling parlor in lower Manhattan.

He described in thrilling detail huge "bear baiting" pits dug into the basements of waterfront saloons, in which bears and dogs would fight to the bloody end, cheered by scoundrels and outlaws of every conceivable type. He wrote about the opium dens in Chinatown, where men and women lounged for days on dirty mats, lost in their narcotic comas. He even told of an evening he had spent trapped in the second-floor gambling parlor of a run-down mansion after a herd of angry pigs had seized the ground floor of the building.

Sitting on my bathroom floor, I studied *Glimpses of Gotham* for hours. The book's previous owners must have been equally intrigued, for the margins were crammed with the markings of numerous pens and pencils. Even the illustrations—fanciful sketches of river pirates, dance halls, and roving bands of teenage delinquents—had not escaped comment.

But it wasn't until I came across a short passage with the heading "The Shadow City" that my heart began to beat wildly.

> *Police raids are common in the more colorful parts of town, and gentlemen explorers may be mistaken for common criminals. However, if in the midst of your adventures, you find yourself in a bit of a spot, do not despair. Simply ask the way to the Shadow City. Almost every palace of ill reputeon the isle of Manhattan will have an entrance to the city, a network of tunnels that can serve as a handy escape route when things get hairy. And if you are not disturbed by the thought of the countless criminals who make it their home, the Shadow City also offers an excellent means of getting about when the weather aboveground is unpleasant.*
>
> *Be forewarned. The tunnels of the Shadow City are uncharted territory, and anyone willing to give you directions is likely to lead you astray. Many have wandered for days without finding a suitable exit to the world above. Others have never escaped.*

By the time I lifted my eyes from the page, I knew one thing for certain. I had discovered the Shadow City.

And if it were even half as vast as *Glimpses of Gotham* suggested, then I had seen only one small section of the tunnels that lay deep beneath New York. A hidden world of thieves, murderers, and pirates was about to be explored for the first time in a hundred years—not by scientists or engineers, but by *me*.

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When I woke the next morning, the hole had been filled in, and the little park looked as if it had been rearranged in the middle of the night by an insomniac housekeeper. Washington Irving greeted a different side of the street, new shrubs had been planted, and the pagoda trees were missing. But otherwise, there was little to suggest that the park had been consumed by a sinkhole a mere twenty-four hours earlier. My only entrance to the Shadow City was gone for good.

I purchased copies of every New York newspaper, expecting to find a story about the little room, and perhaps even a brief mention of the mysterious girl who had escaped from police custody.

Mixed in with dreary stock market reports and coverage of city council meetings, I found:

1. A fascinating account of a three-foot-tall monkey man with steel claws who was terrorizing India
2. A tenderhearted story about a Brooklyn family's tearful reunion with a kitten that had fallen down a sewer drain

3. An investigative journalist's report on secret shipments of grade "E" (for edible) horse meat that were routinely delivered to school cafeterias around Queens

But there was no mention of the hole that had swallowed an entire park. And although I was disappointed that I hadn't been immortalized in print, I knew that it meant that the Shadow City was safe. Only the little room had been exposed, and while it might long live in the lore of New York's construction workers, it wasn't enough to interest the *New York Times.* The creature and I were still the only two who knew that the tunnels existed.

I can imagine what you're thinking. What could a twelve-year-old girl do with such information? While I should warn you against underestimating the abilities of twelve-year-old girls, I'll admit that I can't say for sure what might have happened if I hadn't met the person the world would come to know as Kiki Strike.

HOW TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF BEING A GIRL

In the six years since this story took place, I've had the good fortune to enjoy (and survive) countless adventures. Each time I acquired a new skill, I recorded step-by-step instructions in one of my secret diaries. Until now, those diaries have sat undisturbed on my bedroom shelves, cleverly disguised as Harlequin romances. But the day has finally come to open them up and share what I've learned with a few worthy students.

However, before I can teach you how to perform complex tasks, such as caring for a friend who's been attacked by wild animals, you should first learn to use the powers you already possess. These include:

The Element of Surprise
No one takes you seriously? Let people believe what they want to believe, and the element of surprise will always work in your favor. If they think you're weak, you can surprise them with strength, and if they assume you're stupid, you'll out-think them every time. Remember, low expectations can be a blessing in disguise.

Invisibility
I've always found it amusing that many people will say just about anything in front of a girl—as if she couldn't possibly understand. Before the age of fifteen, you will see things that no one else will see, and hear things that no one else will hear. Keep your ears open at all times, and use the information you gather to your advantage.

The Benefit of the Doubt
Most people are willing to give young girls the benefit of the doubt. Girls are too sweet and innocent, they think, to be up to no good. A clever story—generally one involving a search for a missing kitten—can get you out of trouble in nine out of ten situations. Remember, a tear or two will make any tale more believable.

The Art of Disguise
A girl's biggest advantage is her ability to change her appearance at will. If you're handy with a brush and have more than one change of clothing in your closet, you can easily assume the appearance of at least five different people. Eventually, the prudent use of hair color and makeup can make your disguise repertoire limitless.

Size
So what if you're not tall enough to see above a steering wheel? Being small in stature does come with its benefits. You can hide almost anywhere. Disappear into any crowd. Fit into spaces that no adult could cram herself into and go places adults could never go. Make use of your size before it's too late!