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Opening extract from

The Empress's Tomb

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Published by

Bloomsbury

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CHAPTER ONE

You've Been Warned

Before we begin, take a quick peek out your window. It makes no difference if you look down on a crowded street in Calcutta or a strip mall in Texarkana. Wherever you might be, all the people you see share one thing in common. They've all got a secret they'd like to keep hidden. The dapper gentleman with the briefcase robs parking meters in his spare time. The kid on the bike enjoys eating ants. And the little old lady on the park bench was once known as the Terror of Cleveland. I'm kidding, of course. I don't know their secrets any more than you do. That's the point. You never know.

There are many lessons in life that can be unpleasant to learn. Don't dry a hamster in the microwave. Flip-flops aren't appropriate cocktail party attire. And mayonnaise shouldn't come with a crust. But for a girl detective, there's one lesson that's hardest to learn. No matter how hard you try, you can never know everything about the people you care for the most. Even if you've shared countless

adventures and faced death side by side, there may still be secrets between you.

When this story began, I had five best friends. I knew all about their unusual hobbies, life-threatening allergies, arrest records, and shampoo preferences. What I didn't know was that two of my friends still had secrets they were hiding—and that one of those secrets was powerful enough to destroy us all.

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It all started at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning. I was sitting at my kitchen table, reading a book and enjoying a well-balanced breakfast of butterscotch pudding, when I looked up to find my mother standing in the doorway, clutching a newspaper. I don't recall feeling particularly guilty that day, but I let loose a shriek at the sight of her. Her short black curls had broken free from their hairpins and surrounded her face like a cloud of toxic smoke. There were bags under her eyes and mismatched sneakers on her feet.

"What are you reading?" she inquired in an oddly formal voice.

"*Phantoms, Fiends, and Things That Go Bump in the Night*," I informed her. "I found it under the bed in the guest room. What are you doing up?" In my fourteen years, I'd never seen my mother standing upright before noon on a weekend.

"There was a story on the news last night. I thought you might find it interesting, so I got up early to buy the newspaper." On her way to the table, she stepped over a pile of books that had spilled across the kitchen floor. A

week earlier, what most people assumed was a minor earthquake (I knew better) had toppled the tall towers of books that had lined the walls of our apartment. But the task of putting my parents' large and bizarre library back in order was too tedious to consider, and most of the books were still lying where they fell. My mother lowered herself into a chair across from me, keeping her eyes trained on my face.

"What was the story?" I asked, trying to remember if I'd done anything that might have made the papers. On Wednesday I'd helped nab a flasher in Grand Central Station, but that didn't seem terribly newsworthy. And as far as I knew, the source of that earthquake was never determined. I was trying to keep a low profile.

"See for yourself." My mother slapped the newspaper down in front of me. The front page of the *New York Post* featured a picture of a young orangutan wearing a pair of purple boxer shorts and brandishing a set of salad tongs. I started to laugh until I read the headline: *Is This the Work of Kiki Strike?* the paper asked. The smile slid off my face as I glanced up at my mother.

"Go ahead. Read it," she insisted. "The story's on page three."

As my mother watched, I skimmed the article. Apparently, at eight o'clock the previous evening, a woman by the name of Marilyn Finchbeck had woken to find a three-foot iguana crawling into bed beside her. Her next-door neighbor, hearing Marilyn's terrified screams, was dialing 911 when he stepped into the nursery to discover his one-year-old son playing peek-a-boo with a family of hairy-eared lemurs. Not long after, a man on the third

floor of the same building leaped from his bedroom window when confronted by the orangutan pictured on the newspaper's cover. At the time, none of the residents of 983 Broadway had noticed that the animals that had invaded their apartments were all wearing handwritten notes tied around their necks.

When police had responded to calls from Marilyn Finchbeck's building, they quickly discovered the source of the mayhem. Someone had picked the locks to a pet store on the ground floor and liberated the animals inside. Rotweiller puppies were found gorging themselves on bags of premium dog food. Half a dozen cockatoos and one foul-mouthed parrot screeched from the rafters. But rather than search for the animals' mysterious benefactor, the police instead arrested the pet store's owner. In the back of his shop, behind a hidden door, they had found a series of secret cages. Most were empty. Only two drugged koalas remained inside, both too woozy to join the party. The zookeepers who were called in to capture the lemurs and orangutan (along with a young snow leopard that had chased a deliveryman for thirteen blocks) knew a crime when they saw one. The animals that had been locked away in the secret cages were all members of endangered species. They had no business being in New York. Around each of their necks was a note that read *I want to go home.*

The *New York Post* believed Kiki Strike was responsible. A man in the neighborhood was reported to have witnessed a pasty-looking elf in dark clothing casing the pet store the week before. (Not the most flattering description of Kiki, but not entirely inaccurate, either.)

"So. Where were you last night, Ananka?" my mother asked.

"*Here*," I insisted, relieved to be able to tell her the truth. "I don't know anything about this."

"You know Kiki Strike. She was here on Thursday watching kung fu movies in our living room."

"Yeah, but the girl I know is fourteen years old and couldn't care less about the animal kingdom. The *Post* is just trying to sell papers, Mom. Everybody wants to believe there's a teenage vigilante running amok in New York."

My mother snorted like an angry bull preparing to charge. "Let me get this straight. You *still* expect me to believe that your friend had nothing to do with foiling that kidnapping plot a couple of months ago?"

"Do we have to go over this again? You saw the news," I told her, sidestepping the truth. "The Kiki Strike story in June was a hoax. That girl who claimed Kiki rescued her from kidnappers was lying. She made up the story because she wanted to be on TV. Who knows where she got Kiki's name? She could have picked it out of the phone book."

My mother leaned back in her chair and glared at me through narrowed eyes. She had something else on her mind, and I knew it couldn't be good. I saw a mouse take a cautious step out of the cabinet under the kitchen sink. He took one look at my mother and scurried back to safety.

"Principal Wickham called yesterday afternoon," my mother finally announced. "Your history teacher says you haven't been paying attention in class. He claims you

slept through a lecture on the founding of New York. Apparently you didn't even bother to clean up your drool when you left." At last I had identified the species of bee in her bonnet. My extracurricular activities weren't the issue. I could dress up like Wonder Woman and fight the forces of evil as long as I got good grades.

"I don't *drool*. Mr. Dedly doesn't like me because I know more about New York history than he does." It may sound conceited, but I wasn't exaggerating. I'd spent two years picking through my parents' massive library and gobbling up every book I could find on the subject. I knew how many unfortunate workmen were entombed in the Brooklyn Bridge, which burial grounds had once supplied the city's medical students with fresh corpses to dissect, and the location of the secret underground railroad built for the Vanderbilt family's personal use. I could have taught the class myself—and with much more flair than Mr. Dedly, I might add.

"That may be true, Ananka. But Mr. Dedly isn't the only teacher who's caught you taking cat naps."

"Who else complained?" I snapped, not entirely surprised to find that the snooty Atalanta School for Girls was filled with spies and traitors.

"It doesn't matter," said my mother. "What matters is that classes started three weeks ago and you're already in trouble. I don't want more report cards like last year's. Any more C's or D's and I'll send you to boarding school. I'm not joking, Ananka. I'll find one so far away from civilization that you'll have nothing to do *but* your homework."

"You're bluffing." I laughed nervously. My mother had never threatened me before, and I wasn't sure if I should

take her seriously. But I couldn't imagine a fate more horrible than being banished from Manhattan.

"I don't think you want to find out what I'm capable of. I suggest you start spending more time studying and less time hanging around with your friends. Some of those girls don't seem to care about school, and a couple of them are downright shifty. Oona Wong never even knocks when she comes to visit. She just picks the lock on the front door and lets herself in."

I felt myself wince. I'd asked Oona to stop picking the locks, but it was a habit she was finding hard to break.

"My friends are geniuses" was my pathetic response.

"I don't doubt it for a moment. They may even help you win a scholarship to the community college of your choice." My mother rose from the table. "You and Kiki Strike are up to something," she said. "I don't know what it is, but if it keeps affecting your schoolwork, I'll make it my business to find out."

As she shuffled out of the room, I glanced down at the open paper in front of me. If Kiki was responsible, she should have been more discreet.

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Of course my mother was right. My friends and I *were* up to something. But even if the possibilities had been presented in the form of a multiple-choice question (*Ananka and her shifty friends have been . . .* A: *spending time with radical animal-rights groups*; B: *sniffing Sharpies and neglecting their homework*; C: *falling under the influence of a tiny Svengali who will ensure they end up working at Better Burger*; D: *saving the city of New York*), my mother

could never have guessed the truth. Like many people her age, she suffered from a bizarre form of amnesia that prevented her from remembering what it was like to be young. Despite her suspicions, she couldn't bring herself to believe that a group of fourteen-year-old girls were capable of anything more than petty mischief.

Since I'm in the mood for sharing, I'll let you in on the truth. At the age of twelve, I had joined the Irregulars, a band of disgraced Girl Scouts led by the infamous Kiki Strike. Together, the six of us shared a remarkable secret. We had discovered a vast maze of forgotten passages beneath downtown New York that had been constructed by the city's criminal community more than two hundred years earlier. Hidden entrances to the Shadow City could be found in the basements of banks, boutiques, and fancy homes throughout Manhattan, and anyone with access to the rat-infested tunnels could enter and rob the buildings at will. Of course the Irregulars weren't interested in lining our pockets with ill-gotten goods. We just wanted to keep the tunnels to ourselves. But we knew our underground playground came with a price. Instead of letting the authorities ruin our fun, we took responsibility for keeping a new generation of criminals out of the Shadow City.

I'd like to say we succeeded. But like the bloated bodies of giant squid that wash ashore on the coast of New Zealand, even the best-hidden secrets surface sooner or later. Six months earlier, an incomplete map of the Shadow City had fallen into the very worst hands, and Kiki Strike's murderous relatives—the evil Queen of Pokrovia and her morally challenged daughter—had used

it to plot her destruction. After the Irregulars foiled their attempt on Kiki's life, Livia and Sidonia Galatzina fled to Russia. But it was only a matter of time before they returned—and as far as we knew, they still had a copy of our map.

While we waited for the Galatzinas to make their next move, the Irregulars stayed busy. Over the summer, we explored new tunnels and expanded our map of the Shadow City, collecting the treasures (gold coins, silver watches, surprisingly valuable antique bedpans) we found along the way. Whenever we came across an entrance in danger of discovery, we either blocked it or set booby traps. It was exhausting work, and much of it was done at night while most girls our age were snuggled up in their beds. We had hoped to complete our map before school started in September. But by the time Principal Wickham decided to rat me out, there was still one tunnel left to explore. Nothing my mother might have threatened could have kept me from finishing the job.

It's not that I didn't take her warning to heart. As my friend Verushka would say, when a quiet dog begins to bark, it's best to pay attention. I even tried tackling the geometry homework I'd long been neglecting. But math has always made my mind wander, and it didn't help that every room in our apartment was littered with books on more interesting topics. (Lost South American civilizations, forensic analysis of prehistoric dung, and the MI5 plot against Princess Diana, to name just a few.) While brewing a pot of strong coffee, I spotted a book titled *Female Poisoners of the Seventeenth Century* leaning against a box of Sweet'N Low. Unable to resist, I convinced myself

I needed a short break from numbers and let my eyes sink into the story of the greedy Marquise de Brinvilliers, who poisoned half her family before being burned at the stake. When I looked up again it was almost nine o'clock in the evening. As I threw on a pair of black pants and a black T-shirt, I cursed my lack of discipline. Books have always been my weakness.

I locked the door to my bedroom and scrambled down the fire escape outside my window. I'll admit that there wasn't much call for Cat Woman–style stealth. My mother and father weren't even home. I had put on such a convincing show of studying all day that they had decided to toast their success at a nearby restaurant. A simple *Studying: Do Not Disturb* sign would keep them out of my room when they returned. But since I was meeting Kiki Strike for an evening of adventure (perhaps my last for a while), going out the front door just didn't seem fitting.

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The weather had been unseasonably hot for weeks, and the air was thick with the rancid smell of a million garbage cans. Lightning crackled in the clouds above, warning of a storm that was slinking toward the city. As I headed for the Marble Cemetery, a hidden graveyard with an entrance to the Shadow City, I counted the rats that ducked into the sewers at the sound of my footsteps. I'd made it past forty when I turned into a short unlit thoroughfare named Jersey Street. The hair on the back of my neck began to levitate, and my fingers gripped the small can of pepper spray I had hidden in my pocket. I tried to prepare myself for an encounter with a gang of

quick-fisted hooligans or one of Manhattan's fabled muggers. Instead, I found myself face-to-face with an enormous rodent.

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Painted on the side of a building, the squirrel stood over six feet tall, and he didn't look pleased to see me. Two black, beady eyes stared out from beneath bushy brows, and a sinister sneer revealed a set of buckteeth. One of the squirrel's meaty hands held a sign written in block letters. It read YOUR MONEY WILL SET ALL THE ANIMALS FREE. I peered over my shoulder, hoping a flesh-and-blood squirrel wasn't there to make good on the threat. The alley was empty. I reached out and brushed my fingers against the paint on the wall. It was still wet. Whoever had painted the squirrel had only recently finished the job.

On any given night in New York, there are hundreds of artists slipping through the shadows, leaving their marks on the walls of the city. Some are adrenaline junkies hooked on the rush; others have something to say and want the whole world to hear it. There was little doubt that the squirrel artist was on a mission—I suspected it might even be the same person whose pet store adventure had made the front cover of the *New York Post*. But one thing was certain: It wasn't Kiki Strike. She could speak a dozen languages and kick butts twice her size, but she couldn't draw a convincing stick figure. There was a new vigilante in town.

Having cleared Kiki of the animal-liberation caper, I was itching to tell her about the squirrel I'd seen. I made

it to the Marble Cemetery with three minutes to spare and paced in front of the gates, consulting my watch every few seconds like a famished fat man checking a batch of brownies in the oven. Nine o'clock passed without word from Kiki. At nine fifteen, a pet supply truck drove past with a punk squirrel emblazoned on its side. The squirrel held a sign that announced LET THEM GO FREE OR SUFFER THE CONSQUENCES. I wondered what the consequences might be as the sky rumbled like the bowels of a constipated giant. At nine thirty I stood huddled under the awning of the neighborhood undertaker. It was pouring rain, and I was starting to worry. Kiki Strike prided herself on her punctuality. If she was late, there had to be trouble. I dialed her cell phone, but there was no answer. At nine forty, I hailed a cab and gave the driver directions to Kiki's house.

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For anyone who might think I was overreacting, I've included a brief list of the people who wanted Kiki Strike dead. The list has grown considerably over the years, but given the fact that, at the time of this story, Kiki wasn't old enough to drive (though she often did), I think you'll find it rather impressive.

1. **Livia Galatzina, (Exiled) Queen of Pokrovia.** A power-hungry monarch with a penchant for tacky home furnishings, Livia Galatzina had poisoned her older sister's entire family in order to ascend the throne of the tiny European kingdom of Pokrovia. Kiki Strike,

Livia's unfortunate niece, was saved by Verushka Kozlova, a member of the Royal Guard. After the people of Pokrovia gave Livia the boot, she moved to New York. Kiki and Verushka soon followed, intent on revenge.

2. **Sidonia Galatzina, Princess of Pokrovia.** Livia's daughter and my former classmate at the Atalanta School for Girls, the Princess had once been labeled New York's *It Girl*. She, too, had tried her hand at killing Kiki Strike. To lure Kiki into her clutches, the Princess had kidnapped two girls whose parents had access to a dangerous map. When the Irregulars managed to rescue the girls, Sidonia and her mother fled to Russia, where they were last spotted playing croquet at the home of a notorious gangster.

3. **Sergei Molotov.** A corrupt former member of Pokrovia's Royal Guard and Livia's right-hand man, Molotov pinned the murder of Kiki's parents on Verushka Kozlova, forcing Kiki and Verushka into hiding. Later, the dapper assassin shot Verushka in the thigh while trying to capture Kiki Strike. He, too, escaped punishment.

4. **The Entire Fu-Tsang Gang.** While exploring the Shadow City, the Irregulars discovered that the Fu-Tsang, a gang of Chinese smugglers, were using rooms in the Shadow

City to hide its booty. We alerted the police, and in retaliation for the raid that followed, the Fu-Tsang joined forces with the Princess to kill Kiki Strike. Most of the gang had been jailed, although a few members remained at large.

5. **Lester Liu.** The mysterious leader of the Fu-Tsang, Lester Liu was rumored to be running his business from Shanghai.

6. **Hot Dog Vendor on the Corner of Fourteenth Street and Sixth Avenue.** Let's put it this way: Since Kiki reported his activities to the Health Department, I've never eaten another hot dog. Having skipped bail, the vendor was still wanted on multiple charges of animal cruelty.

When a queen, a smuggler, and a hot dog vendor are all determined to kill or capture you, it's best not to stay in one place very long. In July, Kiki and Verushka had moved to new living quarters on Eighteenth Street. Originally a carriage house, the long, narrow brick building had a single floor. Since Sergei Molotov had shot her two years earlier, Verushka had slowly lost the use of one leg, so stairs were out of the question. Over the summer, Luz Lopez, the Irregulars' brilliant mechanic, had spent three weeks crafting a one-of-a-kind wheelchair for Verushka's sixtieth birthday. When finished, it featured a seat that

could rise three feet in the air, a robotic arm, and a small cannon for launching tear gas canisters. Late at night, when the city's traffic died down, Verushka could be seen racing the chair down Seventh Avenue. A policeman had once clocked her going fifty-three miles an hour. Verushka often bragged that he'd been far too impressed to give her a ticket.

At Eighteenth Street, I stepped out of my taxi and into a river of rainwater that coursed along the curb. Squinting past the streetlights at their building, I couldn't tell if Kiki and Verushka were home. A voracious ivy vine had swallowed the two small windows that faced the street, and its hungry tendrils were now attacking neighboring buildings. I walked up to the tall, arched wooden doors, reached deep into the ivy, and pressed a hidden doorbell. When no one answered, I waited for a nosy pedestrian to turn the corner and started to climb the wall.

If you're anything like me, you've seen a hundred movies in which people scale buildings using a wide variety of clinging plants. Trust me when I tell you that it's far more difficult than it looks and shouldn't be attempted unless you're saving lives or running from the law. Before reaching the edge of Kiki's roof, I slid back to the ground half a dozen times, skinning my knuckles in the process. Finally, I pulled myself over the top and peered down at the massive skylight set in the building's roof. The lights were on, but Kiki and Verushka were missing. The entire dwelling was as still and as silent as a dead child's dollhouse. I could see no evidence of a struggle—from what I could tell, everything was in its

proper place. In fact, there was only one sign that something was wrong. In the middle of the room sat Verushka's empty wheelchair.

As much as I would have liked to investigate, I couldn't break into Kiki's house. The Irregulars had spent weeks booby-trapping the building for Kiki's protection. Break the skylight and a cloud of laughing gas would send you chuckling over the side of the building. Jimmy a lock and you'd find yourself trapped in a net of skin-searing lasers. I squatted on the roof and considered my options. There was really only one, and I didn't like it: I'd have to wait.

As I prepared myself for a trip down the ivy, I checked the street for passersby. At the end of the block, I spied a thin, dark figure standing by a brick wall, sheltered by the building's eave. Given his posture and lack of umbrella, I assumed he was answering nature's call. My cell phone vibrated, and I fished it out of my pocket, hoping to hear Kiki on the other end of the line. Instead I saw the text message icon. Distorted by raindrops, a sentence flashed on the phone's screen. "*Meeting Tomorrow. 7:00 a.m. Fat Frankie's. Oona.*" Disappointed, I started to inch my way down the side of the building. Only when I landed safely on the sidewalk did I realize I might have been spotted. I hurried toward the figure I'd seen by the wall. The person was gone, but he'd left his mark—a fierce six-foot squirrel with a sign that read YOU'VE BEEN WARNED.

HOW TO APPEAR MYSTERIOUS

Despite what some books will tell you, you don't need magical powers or friends in the faerie kingdom to enjoy a thrilling adventure from time to

time. What you *do* need is a little common sense—and some practical advice. That's what I'm here to offer. I may not be the world's greatest adventurer, but what I've learned, I've learned from the best. (And I tend to take *very* good notes.)

Let's start with something simple. How would you like to intrigue other people, inspire novels, and possibly become a legend in your own time? You don't need a criminal past, a dangerous secret, or even a trench coat to appear mysterious.

Silence Screams

If you're the sort of person who's willing to tell her entire life story to someone she meets on the subway, you may find it hard to cultivate an air of mystery. (Don't worry—you'll probably enjoy a fabulous future as a talk-show host.) Nothing will make you seem less mysterious than a bad case of verbal diarrhea. That doesn't mean you should be sullen or unfriendly. Simply keep your mouth shut and let people do what they enjoy most—talk about *themselves*.

Invent a Secret

Choose a subject to avoid in conversation. It could be your job (or a parent's profession), what happened on your summer vacation, or why there's always a bodyguard following you. Whenever the topic comes up, just smile and change the subject.

Look the Part

Bold colors and exposed flesh don't say *mysterious*. Instead, think black, streamlined, and sophisticated. Also, have at least one curious item that you're never seen without. It doesn't need to be a set of nunchakus—an old locket, a strange Indian armlet, or a well-worn copy of *International Affairs* could work just as well.

Flaunt Your Scar

Few things are more intriguing than a scar. If you already have one, consider yourself lucky. If you don't, you should be able to find a reasonable alternative at a costume store. Once again, it's best not to discuss it. No story you invent will be as fascinating as the ones people will concoct for themselves.

Choose an Area of Expertise
Take a lock-picking course. Learn how to hot-wire a car. Work toward a black belt in karate. Get to know the stock market. But never brag about your expertise. Instead, wait for the right opportunity to showcase your skills and watch all the jaws drop.

Learn How to Vanish
Disappearing is easier than it seems. Always have lunch with your friends in the same spot? Pick one day to eat your tuna fish in a new location. Don't explain your absence. Refuse to answer your phone or respond to e-mails for twenty-four hours. Tell people you were *busy*. When out with a group, wait until no one's watching and ditch them. When asked, say you *had something to do.*

Start a Secret Society
Once you've managed to create an aura of mystery, it may be time to pass your knowledge on to a few friends. Find a cause you can all rally around—whether it's saving baby squirrels or world domination—and start your own secret society. Consider creating your own logo, but remember—in order to be a *secret* society, it must always remain a SECRET.