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Opening extract from

Upside Down in the Jungle

Written by

Helen Phillips

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2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
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www.doublecluck.com

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So here we are on this shaky little plane high above the jungle, which is kind of (very) scary. On our first flight Roo got the window seat the whole time, so she insisted that I get it for the second flight, which is pretty thoughtful for someone who's only nine-almost-ten. But I really should've let her have the window seat this time too. Even though I'm three years older than my sister, she's the brave one who loves flying and other dangerous things. Plus I've been a bit more freaked out in general lately, ever since The Weirdness began. The amazing view is basically wasted on me – the only way I can get through the wobbly ride is by pressing my forehead hard against the window, trying to pretend the jungle below is a huge green trampoline and even if we fell out of the sky we'd be totally fine.

And then – just as I'm telling myself, *Listen, Madeline Flynn Wade, you need to calm down and get a grip* – I see it.

'There it *is*,' I murmur.

'What? What!' Roo yelps. 'Where's what?'

'There's the Lava Bird Volcano.' I lean back in my seat so she can peek out of the window. Dad taught us that not all volcanoes have the classic volcano shape, but this one definitely does. It's big and blue and very, very perfect.

'Volcán Pájaro de Lava,' Ken/Neth corrects me from across the aisle, where he's sitting next to Mum.

'Volcán Pájaro de Lava,' Roo echoes with a perfect little accent, and I'm thinking, *How come she has that super-great accent when I've been studying Spanish for three years and she's only been studying it for one?* Just as we pass the volcano, two rainbows jump up out of the jungle and crisscross each other. They truly crisscross each other! Roo unbuckles her seat belt so she can squeeze closer to me and see the rainbows better, and we go 'Ooo, *rainbows*!' and start to feel really, really excited about what we're going to do this afternoon. Well, actually, Roo's been really, really excited all along. She always is. I'm the one who gets nervous about things.

Anyway, Roo and I are gasping and squealing and feeling hopeful until we look across the aisle to make sure Mum is watching the rainbows and instead see Ken/Neth whispering into her ear. It gives me an automatic stomach ache. Dad never would have become friends with Ken/Neth if he'd known *this* was going to happen someday. Ken/Neth on a plane with *Dad's* family, whispering things into Dad's *wife's* ear!

But I liked Ken/Neth too. Back in December when Dad brought him home for dinner and introduced him as

Kenneth Candy (seriously, his last name is Candy), a long-time ecological developer and a newtime friend.

'Newtime?' Roo said, giggling, as Mum sighed and added another place mat to the table. 'Is that really a word?'

'Ken's involved in that fascinating development in Central America,' Dad explained to Mum, pinching her waist in the way that makes her smile. 'The one I've told you about, remember, that opened a couple years ago? It's won the World's Greenest Spa award for two years running. They're doing revolutionary work in the field of environmental development. It's the way of the future, Via. And the location is unbelievable – virtually untouched jungle on the flanks of a volcano. An ornithologist's dream!' Dad paused, and all the enthusiasm drained out of his voice. 'Of course, it would've been more of an ornithologist's dream a few years back, before the Lava-Throated Volcano Trogon was confirmed extinct.'

Dad *hates* extinction. And he *loves* Central American birds.

'The most elusive bird in the world,' Dad said dreamily as we sat down to eat, 'long before it went extinct. Spectacular plumage but so shy – hardly ever let anyone get a good look at it. The females were especially reclusive. Even if you managed to spot a male, he'd never give you a hint about the location of his mate or their nest. They were monogamous, mated for life.'

'*Elusive, reclusive, elusive, reclusive*,' Roo rhymed merrily under her breath, twirling spaghetti on her fork.

Mum looked at Dad, shaking her head. 'I still can't

believe they'd build a spa right in the habitat of a rare trogon like that.'

'*Former* habitat,' Ken Candy corrected her, chomping down on a big mouthful of spinach salad. 'Extinct' – chew – 'is' – chew – 'extinct,' he said sadly (or at least as sadly as you can while chewing), almost as if someone from his own family had died. But really it was more like someone from Dad's family had died, because Dad's the one who's the world-class ornithologist, otherwise known as the Bird Guy.

'What's that place called again?' Mum asked. 'The Magma?'

'La Lava,' Ken Candy said with a spinach-toothed grin. 'La Lava Resort and Spa.'

'I love lava,' Roo said. 'It's like the planet's own hot caramel sauce.'

'So,' Mum said to Ken Candy, 'what exactly do you do for La Lava?'

'Oh, mainly just some consultation about ecological development and that sorta thing.' Ken Candy was smiling very brightly at Mum. 'I travel over there a few times a year.'

'We need more people like you doing the kind of work you're doing,' Dad said.

'Well. Who knows. But I do love what I do,' Ken Candy said, pretending he wasn't proud of himself. 'And not to talk business at the dinner table,' he continued, 'but . . . La Lava is seeking an expert ornithologist to help us track and catalogue the native bird species, both for the benefit of our more curious guests and to further our green

mission. What happened to the Lava-Throat should never happen again.'

Ken Candy looked at Dad. Dad looked at Mum. Mum looked at Ken Candy.

'Interesting,' Mum said. 'Very interesting.'

'It's quite a dazzling array of avian life out there, let me tell you,' Ken Candy added.

'I'm sure it is,' she said.

After dinner Ken Candy pulled some chocolate from his pockets and offered it to me and Roo. He just so happened to have a mini-Snickers (my favourite) and a mini-Mars (Roo's favourite). He was nice and also cute, even with spinach in his teeth, and I felt shy. Now, I just wish Dad had never met him.

Because look where we are today: Ken/Neth pointing out of the plane window at the rainbows and leaning in too close to Mum as he whispers, 'Well, that's an omen if I've ever seen one, right, Sylvia?'

'Uh-huh,' Mum says absentmindedly, because she's thinking about Dad. I can tell.

When Ken/Neth came over to our house back in February, after Mum called him to complain because Dad's trip had just got extended for the first time, he asked us to call him Ken rather than Mr Candy.

'Like Ken and Barbie?' Roo said, staring down at him between the banisters of our wooden staircase. I was standing behind her, staring down at him too.

'Can I call you Neth instead?' I said. I knew I was being mean, but I was mad and sad about Dad, and he seemed like the best person to blame.

But instead of being offended, Ken/Neth was charmed. He thought I was being friendly.

'That would be great,' he said, looking up at me and Roo. 'That would be totally great if you called me Neth. No one's ever done that before.' It made him feel special, like I was giving him a nickname. So I never call him Neth. Or Ken. Or anything. Except in my head, where he's Ken/Neth.

Roo can't sit still in her seat. She reaches over across the little aisle and starts poking at Mum's arm, asking in a voice that's way too loud: 'What's an omen? Hey, what's an omen?'

'*¡Señorita! ¡Señorita!*' a woman's voice crackles over the loudspeaker and says a bunch of words in Spanish. Then, again, '*¡Señorita!*'

'Hey, Roo-by, they're talking to you!' Ken/Neth says, pulling himself away from Mum's ear.

The third time Ken/Neth came over was back in March, when Dad had extended his trip for the second time. That day he called my sister Roo, and I had to teach him that only three people are allowed to call Ruby that – I nicknamed Roo when she was three and I was six, so I get to decide these kinds of things. Ever since then he's been careful. Every time he calls her Ruby I feel proud of myself. I like how he begins 'Roo—' and then squirmingly adds the 'by'. I also make sure he never calls me Mad, because I only let people call me Mad once I've given them permission.

'Huh?' Roo says.

'They're talking to you, *señorita*,' Ken/Neth tells her.

He's the only one of us who really speaks any Spanish, and it was already bugging me in the airport hearing Mum going, 'Oh, Ken, what did he say?' 'Oh, Ken, can you translate the menu for us?'

The voice on the loudspeaker sounds more and more annoyed, and at the front of the short aisle the flight attendant is glaring at Roo. 'They're telling you to buckle up!' Ken/Neth translates.

'Oh good lord, Roo, you're not buckled?' Mum shrieks. 'Buckle up! Buckle up! Buckle up! Mad, help her! Quick, quick! Hurry!'

Mum's way more scared of small planes than I am. But Roo's not scared at all. Roo isn't scared of anything. She's not even scared of The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter, which she's pulling out of her little backpack, now that I've got her buckled. It's the last thing in the world I want to see because it's the thing I'm most scared of, the thing I've been most scared of ever since we got it in April. The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter is what I call the last letter Dad sent from La Lava before he stopped contacting us at all. That's when The Weirdness began. After that we didn't get any more letters or phone calls or emails from him.

For a while Mum kept sending emails, kept leaving voicemails at La Lava Resort and Spa. For a while I kept writing letters. Roo, of course, never stopped sending coded notes to Dad. But all we got in return were phone calls from some official person at La Lava, informing us that Dad was deep in the jungle and out of contact, and that he was doing very important work about which he

felt very passionate, and that he sent us all the love in his heart and would be in touch soon, and was very sorry to keep extending his trip this way.

'All the love in his heart?' Mum repeated suspiciously.

'Indeed,' said the extremely calm and beautiful voice on the other end of the line, which I know because Roo and I sneaked upstairs to listen in from the phone in Mum and Dad's bedroom. We were dying to figure out more about The Weirdness. Roo said I had to start thinking like a detective. I said what about her, didn't she have to start thinking like a detective too? And Roo said she already did, obviously.

The voice on the phone was a woman's voice, and it had some kind of slight accent but I couldn't tell what kind. Actually, even though it was a calm and beautiful voice, it was also kind of a chilly voice. And what the voice from La Lava said *was* suspicious, because Dad would never say something like 'All the love in my heart.' He'd say, 'I love you with all the bananas in my brain' or 'I love you like a chair loves a table.' But he would *never* say 'All the love in my heart.'

'I'm paraphrasing, of course,' the voice said in its flat, elegant way, and then added, 'Dr Wade sends his regrets that his greetings to you can't be more personal.'

We were used to it, sort of, because sometimes Dad went to look for rare birds out in The Middle of Nowhere so he could track them and count them and study their behaviour and stuff. Then we'd have to wait a little while for him to get somewhere where he could call or email or even just mail letters. We missed him but it was okay

because, as Mum always said, Being the Bird Guy is Part of What We Love Him For, Right, Girls?

But it had never been like this before. It had never been seven months away from home and three months without contact. It had never been The Weirdness. It had always been a month at most. A month was no problem. A month we could do. When Dad headed off to La Lava and said it would just be a month, we didn't think it was such a big deal.

I feel stupid now, that we just said goodbye and let him go and didn't even worry.

And as Roo smoothes out The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter on the folding tray table, I refuse to look at it. I don't want to see the way Dad decorated the page with badly drawn flowers and vines as though he's a little girl (Roo and I can both draw *way* better than that). I don't want to read the bizarro poem that makes absolutely no sense. I don't want to think about it at all, so that's what I'm doing. Not thinking about it.

Roo strokes the letter and bites her tongue in the corner of her mouth that way she does, then opens up her code notebook and writes a few things down. She's been trying to break the code ever since we got the letter.

The code, I've sometimes wanted to scream at her, is that there *is* no code! The code is that Dad has gone completely, 110 per cent, totally, absolutely, *thoroughly* (Dad's word) CRAZY. Okay?

I used to be a tiny bit jealous of Roo and Dad's code thing. Pretty much as soon as she could read, Roo started to make codes. Dad got her the *Super Little Giant Book of Secret*

Codes, and *Codes, Ciphers and Secret Writing*, and the *Top-Secret Handbook of Codes*. I'm not really into that kind of thing. I'd rather just read, you know, books with stories. Like the ones Mum always brings home from her job at the library. But Dad and Roo had their code thing, just the way they had their bird-tracking thing, and whenever Dad was out of town he'd send us coded letters for Roo to crack. First it would be not too hard, like flipping the alphabet, so that you'd write Z when you meant *A*, and Y when you meant *B*, but then it got more and more complicated and I lost track of it, and I had a small feeling of, *Hey, what about me?* Back in January, when Dad first went to La Lava, before The Weirdness, Roo didn't have too much trouble breaking Dad's codes. Those first few letters were exciting. He wrote that he was going to bring us lots of presents from the rainforest – rare extra-sweet nuts and raw-chocolate bars and pretty little animals carved from jungle wood. He wrote: *Madpie & KangaRoo & Mama Bear, I have some REALLY GOOD NEWS! But it's a big secret, so BE PATIENT!* Madpie – sort of like the bird – and KangaRoo. That's what Dad liked to call us. Another good thing to not think about. Anyway, nowadays I'm not at all jealous of Roo. I'm just glad I'm not the one who's obsessed with the freaky letter from Dad.

I pull out my poetry notebook, which I've been using a ton ever since I made the New Year's resolution to write a poem a day, but quickly I realise there's no hope of me writing a poem while I'm sitting this close to The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter. It's too much of a distraction in the corner of my eye. I put my notebook

away and shut my eyes for a few minutes.

'Hey, Roo,' Ken/Neth says from across the aisle. I open my eyes to glare at him. '–by. It's time to put your tray up. We're about to land! Hey, girls, listen to the flight attendant's announcements and see if you can hear any words you know from Spanish lessons. *Gracias*, you know that one, don't you?'

It bugs me a lot that anyone who overheard this would probably think Ken/Neth is our dad. Also, is there a single Spanish learner who doesn't know the word *gracias*?

But Roo doesn't seem annoyed. She just carefully refolds The Very Strange and Incredibly Creepy Letter, slides it back into its envelope, kisses the flap, slips it into her backpack and locks her tray into place.

The plane starts to descend, leaving my stomach behind with each jolt.

'Woo-*hoo*!' Roo goes, every time the plane jerks downwards. Even though Mum has to grab Ken/Neth's arm (ugh) because she's so terrified, the little plane lands without anyone dying.

'Hey,' Roo whispers to me as the plane brakes, her breath smelling like orange Tic Tacs, 'do you think Dad is coming up with something special for when he sees us?'

Suddenly there's a huge hard lump in my throat. I can hardly wait to see him. I can't believe it's been seven whole months.

'Something special?' I say. 'What kind of thing?'

'Well' – Roo pauses, thinking – 'like, a song he made up just for us. Or a cake with our names on it.'

Sometimes I feel so much older than Roo.

'I have no idea,' I snap at her. 'He's probably doing actual *work* right now.'

I don't want Roo to know that my heart's swelling with excitement. It scares me to be this excited about seeing Dad. It makes me feel superstitious, like things might go extra wrong the more excited I am. I know if Dad were here, he'd tell me to take a deep breath. *Slow and steady wins the race, Madpie. Slow and steady.*

But slow and steady is really hard to do because we're finally here, we're finally going to find out what's up with Dad. Roo and I have been begging Mum to take us to Dad in the jungle since March.

'I don't care if he's in the middle of the middle of the middle of the jungle!' Roo said back then, digging her fork into her mashed potatoes but not eating any. 'I don't even care if he's in the middle of the middle of the middle of the *volcano*. I. Just. Want. To. See. Dad.'

'I can't pull you out of school right now,' Mum informed her. 'You're learning about the solar system.'

'Solar system schmolar system,' Roo said.

'It's a work trip,' Mum said quietly. 'It's not like Dad's on holiday. He's very busy. He wouldn't be able to hang out with you. Besides, it's dangerous for kids.'

I looked across the table at Roo to see if she realised that Mum wanted to visit Dad just as much as we did. But she was too young to notice.

'*What's* dangerous for kids?' Roo demanded.

'Roo,' Mum said, looking suddenly exhausted, 'please.'

A few times, when Roo was out of earshot or over at a

friend's house, Mum said to me, 'Mad, what do you think? You think we should go and . . . ?' She always trailed off, not quite wanting to say *find out what the heck is going on with Dad*.

'Yes, yes, yes,' I told her, and once we even sat down and got online to look for plane tickets, but just then Ken/Neth called to ask if he could drop by with some ratatouille he'd just made. He'd accidentally doubled the recipe.

Things kept on happening. The lady with the beautiful voice would call again from La Lava to assure Mum that Dad was doing ground-breaking work in the inner jungle and his one regret was that he couldn't be in touch with us personally, but he knew we – more than any other people in the entire world – understood how much this work meant to him. Mum would hang up and say, 'We've been overreacting, girls. Everything is fine.'

Or Ken/Neth would stop by with a chocolate cake and three tickets for Cirque du Soleil. 'It's the least we can do,' he said, 'given all that Dr Wade is doing for us. You're very generous, ladies, to lend us your dad and' – with a wink at Mum – 'husband for all this time.' I don't know why I didn't say, Hel-*lo*, we didn't lend him to you; it's not like we had any choice, and besides, we had no idea it would take 'all this time.'

And then there was the night Mum opened the monthly bank statement and gave this enormous gasp, and I was like, 'What's *wrong*?' After not being able to talk for a few seconds she said, 'Well, Mad, La Lava is being exceedingly generous, that's all.'

So weeks went by, and then months, and we never bought plane tickets. When Roo bugged her about it, Mum would say that as far as she knew, Dad might come home tomorrow, and business trips get extended all the time, and we just had to be patient and calm, and this is Part of What We Love Him For, Right, Girls?, and it really didn't make sense for us to leave school and for her to take time off from the library right in the middle of term, and Dad would be furious if we did.

It wasn't till May that Mum decided we really did have to go to the jungle. Ken/Neth had got into the habit of coming for dinner once a week or so, which was pretty much starting to get on my nerves. So he was there at the dinner table when Mum announced that the time had come – she was going to book the plane tickets.

But Ken/Neth insisted that she let *him* book the tickets.

'Are you sure?' she said, though I could tell it would be a relief for her if he'd take care of it. 'I don't want to burden you.'

'Sylvia,' he said in that really sincere way of his, 'it's not a burden, it's an honour.'

I noticed Mum slightly rolling her eyes, but Ken/Neth didn't see.

'Not only that,' he continued, 'but it just so happens that today my contacts at La Lava informed me that they wish to invite you ladies to the Gold Circle Investors' Gala in early July.'

'The what?' Mum said.

'It's La Lava's huge annual celebration for all of their

investors, where they honour the "Geniuses" who have contributed to the success of the organisation in the past year. It's basically the party to end all parties. I know you girls will get a kick out of it.'

'Oh!' Roo yelped with glittering eyes. 'I love parties! When's July?'

'Roo,' Mum said severely. 'You know when July is.'

'May, June, July,' Roo recited. 'Wait, that's not soon!'

'The time will fly,' Ken/Neth said with a grin. 'It's just a little over a month.'

'July is good,' Mum said. 'We can all finish the school year. And James very well may be back before then anyway.'

'Maybe so,' Ken/Neth agreed. 'Maybe so.'

And from then on it was all: Ken booked the tickets, Ken says we should head down the Sunday before the gala, Ken is going to notify La Lava that we're coming, Ken said we should be sure to bring some special dresses for the party, Ken this, Ken that.

And every day Mum's been telling us, 'Look, girls, we'll see Dad soon and everything will be normal.'

But I know the truth. The truth is that Mum is mad and hurt and confused and lonely. She thought I'd left the kitchen when she said to Aunt Sarah, 'When I married James I never thought I'd be a single mother. And look at me now. For months now my kids haven't had a dad.'

'Okay, okay, okay,' Roo is saying as the plane glides to a stop on the runway. She shrugs and kicks gently at the seats in front of us, still offended that I snapped at her

about Dad. 'I was just wondering if Dad's as excited to see us as we are to see him.'

And the truth is: I've been wondering exactly the same thing.