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Opening extract from

# Scarlet Ibis

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*'I thought the book was AMAZING just like all of Gill Lewis's other books! It was good all the way through and I couldn't stop reading! It was brilliant and very realistic!!'*

*Aisling, age 11*

*'I really loved Scarlet Ibis! I could not stop reading from the moment I started. It was so enticing, you just wanted to know what happens next!'*

*Emma, age 10*

*'Every page is a rollercoaster of exciting events and I never knew what the next page might bring.'*

*Harry, age 13*

*'Scarlet Ibis is really good. The description is magic. I think Gill is one of the best authors ever!'*

*Eva, age 10*

*'I loved reading Scarlet Ibis. I wanted to stay up all night to finish reading it. It is packed full of emotions. There are some sad moments, but some happy moments too.'*

*Isabella, age 11*

*'By the end of the book, I felt that I knew the characters as my friends . . . The story is very absorbing and I found it hard to put the book down.'*

*Charlotte, age 11*



# Chapter 1

'Be careful, Red,' I say.

He looks at me, his eyes wide, his red hair lit up by the setting sun.

I stare at the space between us. 'I can see crocodiles.'

'Caimans,' he says. 'We're not in Africa.'

'OK, caimans,' I say.

Red watches them. He sees them moving beneath the water, their bodies leaving ripples and trails of bubbles on the surface.

'Come on,' I say. 'There'll be no time for a story.'

Red's hands clench and unclench in small fists.

He's working it out, planning every move in his mind. He has to take five steps across the lagoon of green carpet, only letting the soles of his feet touch the brown threadbare

patches before he reaches safety. I keep my fingers crossed he gets it right first time. If he gets it wrong he'll make himself start all the way back in the bathroom with brushing his teeth again. Last night we had to go through it all three times. I sit on the beanbag next to his bed and pull the covers back. His fleece blanket is patterned with peacock feathers. Red takes five steps and leaps into bed. He turns to his left and then his right and presses his hands together beneath his cheek. I pull his blanket up around him so all I can see is his hair on the pillow and his eyes peeping out.

'So which story is it tonight?' I say.

'Caroni Swamp,' he says.

I smile because there is only ever one story. I dim his side-lamp and begin. 'Some day,' I say, 'we'll find ourselves an aeroplane and fly up into the big blue sky. We'll be like birds. We'll fly above the roads and houses, above Big Ben, The Eye and London Zoo. We'll fly across the whole Atlantic Ocean, all the way to Trinidad.'

'What then?' says Red.

'We'll take a little boat out on the Caroni Swamp,' I say.

'Just you and me?' says Red.

'Just you and me,' I say.

The corners of Red's eyes crinkle as he smiles. He's seeing the deep green waters, and tangle of the mangrove trees.

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'And we'll wait,' I say. 'We'll wait for the sun to sink, turning the mountains of the Northern Range deep blue.'

'Just you and me?' says Red.

'Just you and me,' I say. 'And as the light is leaving the sky, we'll watch them coming in their hundreds and thousands. We'll watch them settle in the trees like bright red lanterns as darkness falls.'

Red pulls his blanket tighter around him. 'And we'll always be together?'

'Always,' I say. 'Just you and me in that little boat, as evening falls, watching the scarlet ibis flying back to the Caroni Swamp.'

'Night Red,' I whisper.

I stand up to pull his curtains closed. I pull them slowly. I don't want to scare the pigeon outside on the narrow window ledge. She's sitting on a nest of tangled sticks and plastic, her pale grey wings are folded, and her head is tucked close to her chest in sleep. Beneath her, hidden under her soft feathers, lies the small white egg that Red has been watching every day.

Red opens one eye and peeps at me. 'It still hasn't hatched.'

'It will,' I say.

'When?'

I lean in close to him. 'When it's ready,' I whisper. 'Now, shh! Go to sleep.'

I sit with Red while his eyes close and I watch him drift into sleep. His tight little frown relaxes and makes him look four years old again, even though he's nearly eight. I fold his school clothes on the chair, pile his Lego back in the box, and pack it away. I sit back on the beanbag and stroke his hair. I want to stay like this, with Red. I don't want anything to change. I don't even want to think of what tomorrow might bring.

'Scarlet!'

Mum's in the kitchen, calling me. She's banging cupboard doors and sliding drawers open and shut.

'Scarlet, where are you?'

I pull Red's door closed behind me and go and find Mum. She's in her dressing gown and slippers. A cup of tea sits on the table. Her long dark hair falls in knots and tangles on her shoulders.

'I didn't hear you get up,' I say. 'There's half a pie in the oven for you.'

Mum opens another drawer and rummages through the clutter of keys and rubber bands and the stuff we don't

know where else to put. She scatters things on the work surface beside her.

'What are you looking for?' I say.

Mum pulls out the whole drawer and tips it on to the table. 'My tablets. Have you seen them?'

'I locked them in the bathroom cupboard.'

Mum glares at me. 'What d'you do that for?'

'We have to keep them somewhere Red can't reach them. Mrs Gideon will check up on that again. She's coming tomorrow. Don't you remember?'

'Oh!' says Mum. She frowns and pushes a strand of hair back from her face. 'You mean the Penguin?'

I see her mouth twitch in a smile and I smile too. Mrs Gideon is the social worker who comes to spy on us. Red calls them all penguins. I know what he means. They're like the penguins at the zoo, the way they strut about, yabbering and poking their beaks into everything.

Mrs Gideon always asks me to call her Jo. She wants to be on first name terms so we can 'build a relationship of mutual trust'. But I call her Mrs Gideon, because I don't want her thinking she's any friend of mine.

'She'll be here at two,' I say. I watch Mum closely. She's been in bed all day and I know she'll be awake all night, just like last night. She'll be pacing in her room or sitting

at the window staring out across the city, listening to trains rattling through the station. She'll probably be back in bed tomorrow afternoon.

Mum nods. 'I'll make sure I'm in,' she says.

'Fine,' I say. But it's not fine really because it's not as if Mum will be out. She's only leaves the flat to get her tablets and her cigarettes. I just want her to be up and dressed when Mrs Gideon comes.

I turn the oven on and shake some frozen peas into a pan while Mum finds her tablets. At least she's taking them. It's a good sign. A very good sign. Maybe tomorrow will be OK.

Mum sits down, takes three tablets, and gulps them down with a swig of tea. 'You've done the washing!' she says.

I sit down next to her. 'I did the sheets, though they won't be dry by tomorrow. I've vacuumed too,' I say. 'You know how fussy penguins can be!'

Mum's leans across and puts her hand on mine. 'We'll be OK Scarlet, don't you worry.'

I smile and feel warm deep down inside. She's looking at me. I'm not invisible to her today. 'Red found another feather,' I say.

Mum takes another sip of tea. 'What sort?'

'Magpie tail feather,' I say. 'A really long one. It's jet

black but shines bright green in the sunlight. He found it in the playground. I could get him to show you if you like.'

Mum's smiling but she's not really listening. 'Why don't we do something tonight, just you and me? We could watch a DVD,' she says. 'Would you like that?'

I nod, but think of the homework I have to do by tomorrow. 'You set it up. I'll put the bins out first,' I say.

I pull the full bag from the bin and check the fridge for old food. I chuck away a lump of mouldy cheese that Mrs Gideon might use as evidence against us. Last time she came, she offered to fetch milk from the fridge for Mum's cup of tea. But I know she was just snooping. It's what she does. I see her eyes scanning our flat, trying to find something to put in her report. There's only a pint of milk and half a loaf of bread in the fridge now. Maybe she'll accuse Mum of starving us. It's hard to get it right.

'Won't be long,' I yell.

I lug the bin bag down the stairwell, my feet echoing in the empty space. The lift is broken again and I hate using it anyway. It always smells of beer and wee and you never know who's going to get in it with you. Still, I don't mind the stairs and I like living in the top flat. Eight floors up, we can see across the station and the trains and all the other houses. Red pretends we're birds and our flat is our nest.

It feels that way to me too.

We're safe up here.

Out of reach.

I jump down three steps at a time. The TV blares from the Kanwars' flat on floor six. I can hear Pat and Brian arguing from floor one. The ground floor flat is silent, boarded up and out of use. Outside, Chalkie and his gang are on their bikes doing turns and spins along the pavement. I keep in the shadows and walk around to the back of the flats and sling the bin-bag in the skip. Beyond the wall lie the trains and doughnut stalls in the station. The smell of diesel fumes and sugar mix together and fill the night air. The sun has set, and beyond the orange haze of streetlights I can just see the stars. It's another good sign. Another very good sign.

'*Titanic*,' says Mum.

'OK,' I say. It's her favourite film. I get a duvet and the tissues because I know she'll need them.

Mum curls up on the sofa with her plate of pie and peas. I slip beneath the duvet and lean into her. The images flicker on the screen, but I'm not watching. Anyway, I've seen the film a million times before. I'm thinking about tomorrow. I tick off the checklist in my head: kitchen cleaned, toilets

bleached, clothes washed, beds changed, fish fingers and chips in the freezer for supper. I've even left my own room untidy so Mrs Gideon thinks I'm the messy one and Mum has done all the hard work. I've hidden Red's feathers beneath the bed too. I don't want anything to happen that could mess things up again. We've used up our last chances and the Penguin's got her beady eye on us.

I take Mum's empty plate, wash it in the sink, and leave it on the rack to dry. When I go back to Mum, the *Titanic* song is playing. The actors are standing on the prow of the ship, their arms outstretched like birds' wings. Mum's mouthing her favourite line of the song and her face is wet with tears. She's staring at the photo in the silver frame in her hands. I pass her the tissues, curl up next to her, and look at the only picture she has of my dad. He's smiling into the camera. Behind him, scarlet ibis are scattered against a sunset sky. That's how I got my name. Scarlet Ibis Mackenzie. Scarlet Ibis, from the bright red birds that live in the Caroni Swamp below the blue mountains of the Northern Range in Trinidad. That's where my dad's from. Trinidad. Mum says one day he'll come back and find us and take us out there. Her and Red and me.

I stare at the photo of my dad. He's looking at the camera, as if he's looking right at me. Mum says I have his

eyes and smile. She says I have his skin too. *Like the colour of soft caramel.* When I was little she used to say she could eat me up. But I've never seen my dad. Except in that photo. I've never seen Red's daddy either. Red's hair is a shock of orange and his skin's like Mum's. It's white, white, white. We don't look much like brother and sister. Sometimes I reckon that might even be part of the problem. Maybe if we looked a little bit like each other it might help. Maybe then we could stay together. Maybe then, no one would try to tear us apart.