



THE STOLEN PRINCE OF CLOUDBURST

👑 A KINGDOMS AND EMPIRES BOOK 👑

JACLYN MORIARTY

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
KELLY CANBY

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ALLEN & UNWIN
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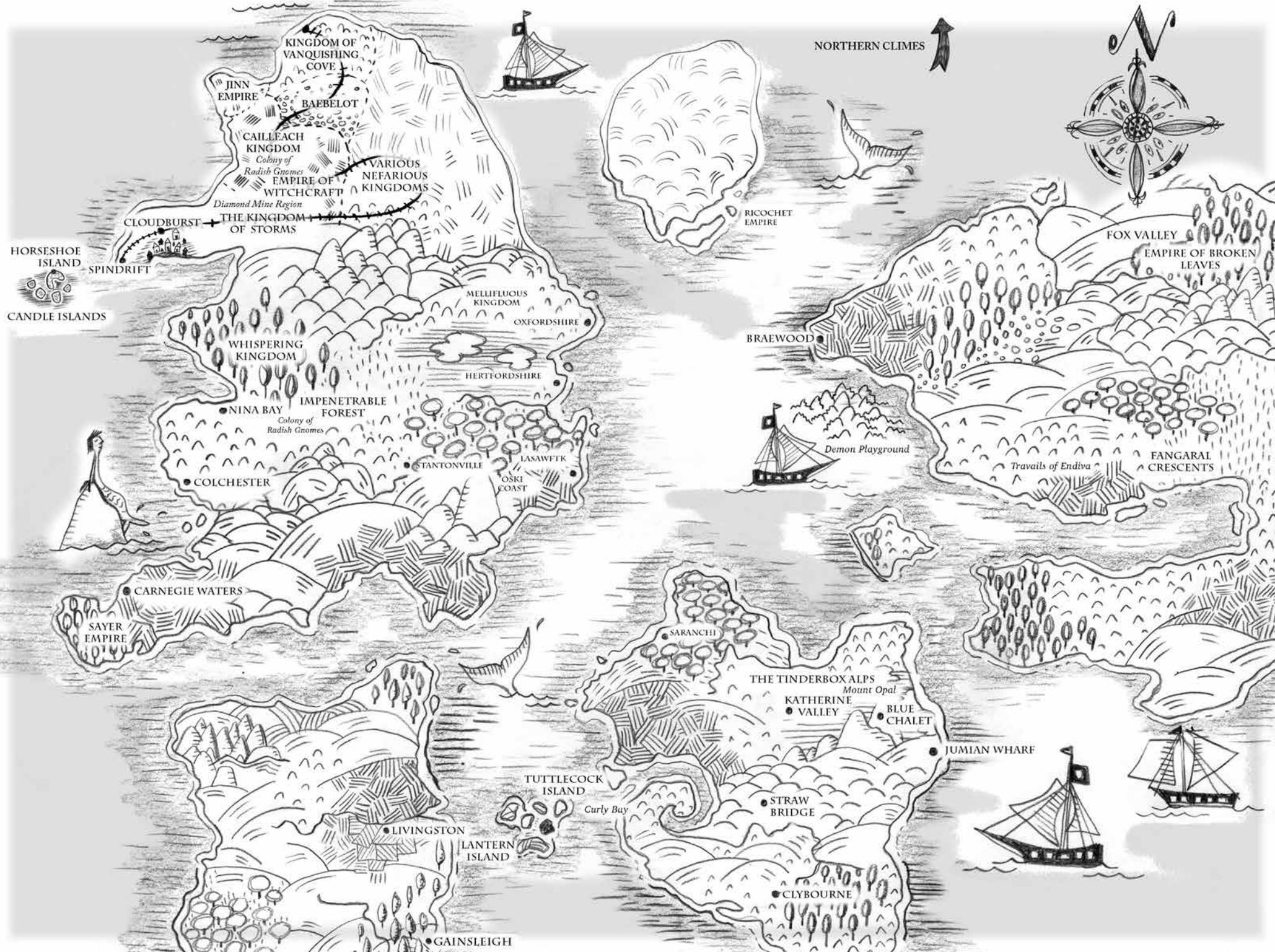
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TO MICHAEL AND JANE
FOR THEIR FRIENDSHIP





KINGDOM OF VANQUISHING COVE

JINN EMPIRE

BAEBELOT

CAILLEACH KINGDOM

Colony of Radish Gnomes

EMPIRE OF WITCHCRAFT

Diamond Mine Region

THE KINGDOM OF STORMS

CLOUDBURST

HORSESHOE ISLAND

SPINDRIFT

CANDLE ISLANDS

MELLIFLUOUS KINGDOM

OXFORDSHIRE

WHISPERING KINGDOM

HERTFORDSHIRE

NINA BAY

IMPENETRABLE FOREST

Colony of Radish Gnomes

STANTONVILLE

LASAWFK

COLCHESTER

OSKI COAST

CARNEGIE WATERS

SAYER EMPIRE

RICOCHEM EMPIRE

BRAEWOOD

Demon Playground

FOX VALLEY

EMPIRE OF BROKEN LEAVES

Travails of Endiva

FANGARAL CRESCENTS

SARANCHI

THE TINDERBOX ALPS

Mount Opal

KATHERINE VALLEY

BLUE CHALET

JUMIAN WHARF

TUTTLECOCK ISLAND

Curly Bay

STRAW BRIDGE

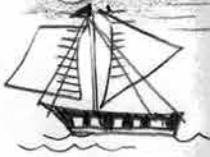
LIVINGSTON

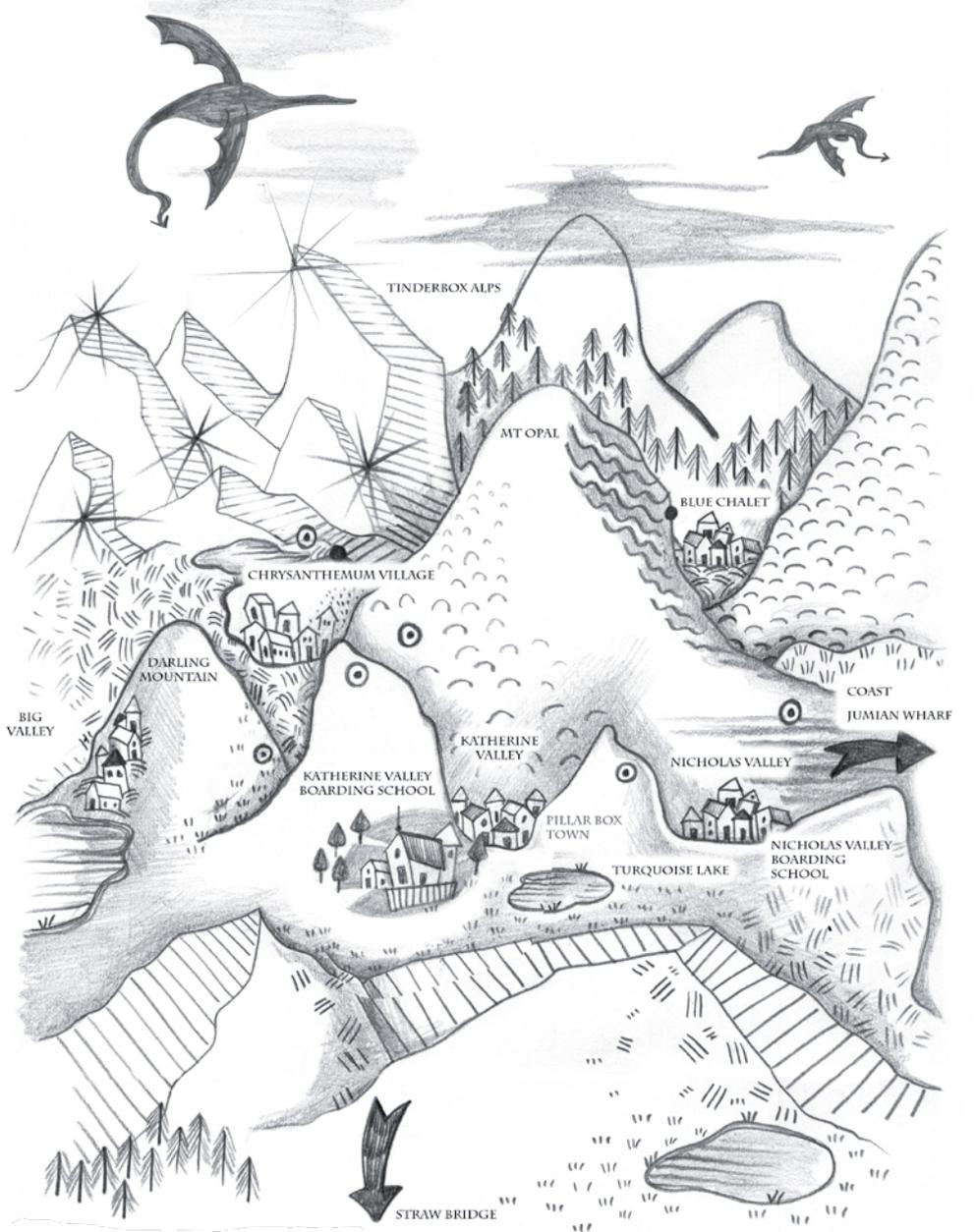
LANTERN ISLAND

CLYBOURNE

GAINSLIGH

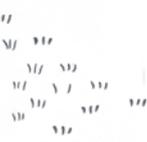
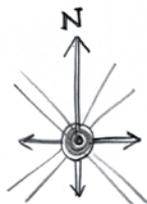
NORTHERN CLIMES





PART 1.

⊙ Indicates estimated location of True Mage settlements, but many of these are closely guarded secrets, and there are likely hundreds more, including Crystal Faery Villages, Elf colonies and possibly also Sprites, Pixies, Blueberries, Fizzes, Wisps and Melon Lords.



The Stolen Prince of Cloudburst: A Narrative Account

by Esther Mettlestone-Staranise,
Grade 6

Long ago, far away, on a damp and sniffly day—
This happened.

A little prince, not yet two years old, played upon the shore.

'Hoopla!' said his nanny, and the boy leapt over a frothy wave. Nanny and boy giggled.

'Hoopla!' the nanny repeated, and again the tiny boy leapt. He wore a little romper suit and his name—*Alejandro*—was embroidered on the collar. His little feet were bare, for the nanny had removed his shoes.

If you are wondering where the shoes were, well, I think they were probably just off to the side somewhere, on the sand.

'Again!' said little Alejandro.

'Hoopla!' the nanny obliged.

The child leapt.

This could have gone on for hours, days—maybe even years! Well, perhaps not years, they'd have gotten hungry—but the nanny's gentleman friend happened to stroll by

along the boardwalk. He spotted the pair on the beach.

'Ahoy there!' called the gentleman friend.

The nanny straightened, raised her hand to wave, and that was all the time it took.

A Water Sprite burst from the waves and stole the child.

The nanny saw him. She felt a *whoosh*, a splash, turned at once and saw. The gentleman friend up on the boardwalk, he saw too.

The Water Sprite had broad shoulders. He gathered Alejandro into his arms, leapt into the waves and swam away. 'Right before my eyes!' said the nanny. 'I chased him! Into the waves, I dove! Ruined my good pinafore! But the Water Sprite—and darling Alejandro—were gone!'

By the way, all this happened in the town of Spindrift, in the Kingdom of Storms, about ten years ago. Ordinarily, the royal family of Storms live in the city of Cloudburst, but they were on holiday by the sea.

Everyone searched the sea for the prince, even the lighthouse keeper: his lighthouse beam swept back and forth like a duster on the sideboard.

King Jakob and Queen Anita were distraught. Well, of course they were. (They were the little boy's parents, if you haven't figured that out.) They were also bewildered.

'Why should a Water Sprite steal a child?' they asked each other, over and over. 'Water Sprites don't steal children!'

Meanwhile, the Water Sprite was asking himself the same question.

His name was Caprito, and he had swum far out to sea,

little Alejandro babbling beneath his arm, and then paused, treading water. Carefully, he'd placed the little prince on an ocean lily.

Then he had swum down to his home beneath the sea, and—

'What have I *done*?' he asked himself. 'Why did I steal a child?'

For it was true that Water Sprites *do not* steal children. Not ordinarily, they don't.

The Water Sprite swam directly to his own king, King Khalid, and confessed.

'You stole a child?' cried King Khalid. 'Well, give him back at once!'

'I can't,' replied Caprito. 'I placed him on an ocean lily.'

(Ocean lilies, in case you don't know, are just like the water lilies you see on ponds, only bigger and stronger. They spread themselves over the surface of the ocean like floating picnic blankets.) (That was a helpful aside.)

'Then fetch him back from the ocean lily!' ordered King Khalid, exasperated. 'At once!'

Caprito thought that was genius, and he streaked through the water to the place where the ocean lily had been.

But it was gone.

And so was the child.

Caprito returned to his king. '*Gone*,' he said.

The Water Sprite King was very upset and got stuck on the issue of *why* Caprito had stolen the child in the first place.

'Why would you *do* such a thing?' the King complained.

'I cannot say,' Caprito replied.

'Yes, you can,' the King snapped. 'Say!'

But Caprito sadly shook his head. 'I cannot say,' he said, 'because I do not know.'

Eventually, King Khalid summonsed a shore's-edge meeting with King Jakob and Queen Anita. Caprito confessed all.

It was a heated meeting, as you can imagine.

Everybody asked the Water Sprite why he had done this: King Jakob, Queen Anita, constables, guards, the nanny, the nanny's gentleman friend. But Caprito's answer was always the same:

'I cannot say.'

And then, more quietly: 'I cannot say because I *do not know*.'

Caprito wept and apologised, begging forgiveness.

The king and queen did not much feel like forgiving him.

However, they did not throw him in a dungeon or declare war on the Water Sprite Kingdom, for they believed his regret and confusion.

While many thought the prince must have fallen from the ocean lily into the sea and drowned, others said that the lily could have floated across the Kingdoms and Empires, washing ashore in a distant land.

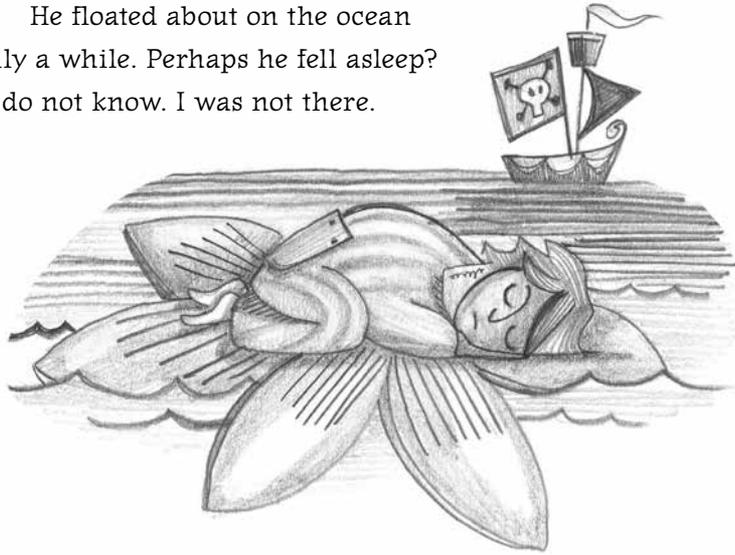
And so the search for little Alejandro continued, year after year, and King Jakob and Queen Anita grew ever sadder, sorrier, thinner and older. Sometimes they sat side

by side on the beach, staring at the waves, taking turns with the spyglass, looking for their lost little prince.

Meanwhile, what of the little prince?

This is what.

He floated about on the ocean lily a while. Perhaps he fell asleep? I do not know. I was not there.



What I do know is this: the currents carried the ocean lily a fair distance, but it did not wash up on a shore.

Instead, pirates spied the child, and scooped him aboard their ship. They did not know he was a prince, of course, or they'd surely have demanded a mountain of gold for his return. They're all about mountains of gold, pirates.

All they knew was that his name was Alejandro, for that was embroidered on his collar.

The pirates thought him as cute as a baby otter, gave him a parrot to play with and let him splash about with dolphins now and then.

As Alejandro grew older, however, they began teaching him things: how to fight with a sword, for instance, or to shoot with a bow and arrow, and how to load and fire a musketoon.

He excelled at these, and the pirates cheered and congratulated themselves on their forethought in fishing him out of the waves.

But then?

When he was eleven years old?

Well, they sat him down and told him that now he must become a pirate.

'And what must I do as a pirate?' Alejandro enquired.

'You must steal gold and treasure from other ships!' one pirate exclaimed, very excited to tell him. (They loved their work.)

'Use the sword, the arrow and the musketoon, to kill any who try to stop you!' a second cried.

'Set the ships alight and watch them sink!' all the other pirates bellowed.

Alejandro was eleven, as I said, and very shocked to find out that *this* was how his pirate friends spent their days. How they 'earned a crust', as they put it. (They'd kept him below deck while they pirated up until now.)

He had a golden heart and did not *want* to steal, destroy and kill!

The pirates were furious.

'Not angry so much as disappointed,' one of them said, which hurt Alejandro's feelings, but then the others said, 'Not angry?! Why, I'm angry enough to rip apart a shark

with my bare teeth! I'm furious! Livid!

They *were* also very disappointed. 'All the *work* we put into bringing him up!' they complained. 'This is how he repays us?' And they squabbled about who had been too soft, so that he was raised to be *nice*. A milksop.

They began to beat him then, and to inflict punishments upon him, trying to make up for years of kindness. Trying to un-milksop him.

'We will make a pirate of you yet!' they swore.

Poor Alejandro. He was very unhappy.

He used his wits and cunning, and escaped from the pirate ship!

They recaptured him.

He escaped again!

Upon the shore, he made friends with a girl his own age named Bronte Mettlestone, who was an adventurer. She invited him to live, *happily ever after*, with her family in faraway Gainsleigh.

And that, as I said, was the *happily ever after* ...

But was it?

No!

We are forgetting the parents!

One night, Alejandro dreamed that his long-lost parents were sad.

The dream told him to have an adventure to find out who those parents were. (He'd forgotten.)

The story of this adventure is too long to put here, especially as it's nearly midnight and my candle is almost completely burned down, and the other girls in

the dormitory are snoring beneath their feather quilts.

So I will only say this: he *did* find his parents!

And he returned home to Cloudburst in the Kingdom of Storms to be reunited with King Jakob and Queen Anita! As we speak, they are planning an enormous party to officially welcome him.

And *that* is the end of the story.

(One last thing. Guess what? The girl in the story named Bronte Mettlestone? The adventurer?

She's my cousin!!!

My sisters and I have even *met* Alejandro, the Stolen Prince of Cloudburst!!!

It's true that we only met him for a short and busy time two years ago, so he might not remember us. But I remember him.)

The End

Esther, yes, I have read much of this story, or its basic facts, anyway, in the newspapers. You have not made them more interesting here. Worse, you have tried to put yourself in the story. You might be related to one of these interesting people, but that does not make you interesting. Do not put yourself in stories where you do not belong.

Also, do not begin sentences with the words 'And' or 'But'. Do not break your sentences and paragraphs into pieces; your tale is very disjointed. Do not boast by saying that your asides are 'helpful'—that is not becoming.

I see that you stayed up past midnight to do your homework. Dreadful behaviour. DEMERIT. As this is your third demerit, please attend Detention on Friday evening as punishment.

Finally, you began this story with the words, 'Long ago, far away, on a damp and sniffly day'. Please write out the following, 100 times:

A DAY CANNOT BE 'SNIFFLY'

C—

PART 2.

CHAPTER 1

A day *can* be sniffly, you know. My father told me it could.

He had a cold last summer. Father, I mean. He had a cold and sniffles the day I overheard the telephone conversation.

I was in the kitchen at home, underneath the table with a glass of lemonade. (That's why I was underneath the table—the lemonade. It was meant for Mother's work colleagues, *not for you girls, I do not want to see you drink a drop of that!* So I was very kindly hiding, to save Mother from seeing me drink a whole glassful of drops.)

I was also reading *Dragon Detective: The Shadow in the Wind*, a new novel by my favourite author in all the Kingdoms and Empires, G.A. Thunderstrike. It was 9.42 am, and I was happy.

When the telephone rang, I quickly pulled my legs in and curled them underneath me. I held myself still and waited.

Father's footsteps approached. Slower, more considering, than Mother's.

I relaxed. If Father caught me drinking lemonade under the table, he'd only murmur, 'Lemonade! Nice one! Where is it?' And pour himself a glass too, keeping an eye out for Mother.

Father's slippers shuffled by the table. He blew his nose. It made a sound like a panicking cow. He picked up the phone.

'Morning,' he said, a bit croaky.

The sound of a distant voice.

'Gordon!' exclaimed Father, his voice gathering strength. 'How's the summer treating you?'

Gordon is one of Father's research assistants. Father teaches history at Clybourne University, although mostly he doesn't teach at all, he travels about collecting information and stories for his books. His research assistants do the teaching.

More chittering from Gordon's distant voice.

'Steady on,' Father said.

More chittering.

'But if you—'

Chitter, chitter.

Father laughed. 'Well, *that* sounds just like Jonathan J. Lanyard, of course, but—'

The volume of the chittering rose. I still couldn't make out the actual words.

Father blew his nose again. 'Sorry,' he said, 'did I hear you say—?'

Chitter.

Chitter.

Chitter.

Father had been silent so long that I peeked out from under the table to check he hadn't fallen asleep.

He was leaning up against the kitchen sink, holding the telephone to his ear. In his other hand he held his handkerchief, and he was twisting this between his fingers.



His cheeks and nose were bright pink from his cold, and his eyes seemed a strange mix of amused and irritated.

And then a curious thing happened.

He straightened up.

He pressed the telephone closer to his ear.

He crushed the handkerchief and shoved it into the pocket of his dressing-gown.

'Gordon,' he said, interrupting a rush of chitter. 'Gordon, listen. This is important. The water around this orange patch you keep on about—is it a constant temperature or does it vary?'

Chitter.

Father listened.

Right before my eyes, the pink in his cheeks and nose faded. His whole face turned the greyish-white of a late winter storm.

'Right,' he said. 'I'll be there tonight.' He hung up the telephone.

He stood very still, facing the kitchen tap, for a long moment. Then, abruptly, he swung around, crouched down and looked at me under the table.

'Hello, Father,' I said.

'Esther,' he replied steadily. 'How long have you been there?'

'Not long.'

'The whole time, then.'

I nodded.

'And how much of that did you hear?'

'Not a word.'

'So, everything, then.' He studied me a moment. 'Do me a favour?'

'Sure!'

'Forget what you just overheard?'

'Well, I'll try,' I said doubtfully. 'But you know, if you ask somebody to forget something, they're more likely to *remember* it?'

Father nodded. 'A fair point. Just don't repeat it to anyone, then,' he said. 'It's probably nothing, but—still, keep it to yourself, Esther. Promise?'

I promised. There didn't seem much in what I'd overheard to make an interesting tale anyway—just *chitter, chitter* and so on—so it was an easy promise to make.

Father glanced with interest at my lemonade and I guessed that he was about to say, 'Nice one! Where is it?' but then his face paled again, and he straightened up and hurried from the room.

There was a squabble with Mother then, something to do with Father being 'Very foolish indeed! Dangerous beyond words! Don't even think about leaving this house! And you, with a *cold!*'

And so on.

Meanwhile, Mother's work colleagues were filing into the house ready to have meetings. These colleagues listened avidly to the argument between my parents, while pretending to be busy drinking lemonade.

That afternoon, we saw Father off in the coach.

My sisters and I chased it as far as we could up the road, waving madly, while Father craned his neck to wave back. Mother stood perfectly still.

CHAPTER 2

Two weeks later, we returned to the coach station, this time so that my sisters and I could journey back to Katherine Valley Boarding School.

'Off you go then,' Mother called, as the sun, shining like a diamond, lit up the buttons of her coat and the buckles on her satchel.

Imogen, Astrid and I were in the back of the coach, our suitcases propped between our knees. Mother stood outside the coach. She had already made us recite how you recognise each of the major Shadow Mages, pretended not to hear us when we reminded her that there are never Shadow Mages in the mountains, given each of us a small tin of chocolate fudge, insisted that we win any competition we entered at school, waved twice, and that was enough farewelling for her, I suppose, because she banged on the side and called through the open window: 'Off you go then!'

We stared at her. Honestly, there was not much off-you-going we could do. That was up to the driver, surely, and he was outside, chatting with some pals, eating a pastry and offering water to the horses.

Passengers in the other seats were also staring at our mother with puzzled expressions.

'Off you go then,' Mother repeated, 'funny things,' and she banged the side of the coach three times: *Thwack, thwack, THWACK!*

The third *thwack* was so hard that it flung Mother herself back a step, and she stumbled, tripped, and landed on her bottom on the cobblestones.

Imogen, Astrid and I hopped up from our seats, and pressed our noses to the windows.

'Are you all right, Mother?' Astrid called.

Mother sat perfectly still, trying to appear as though tripping onto her bottom was exactly what she'd planned. But then she noticed that her satchel had landed upside down, with papers spilling out of it, and she gave up appearing nonchalant. She sprang to her feet, and hurried to collect the papers—just as a gust of wind blew across the square and scattered them.

'Do you need any help?' I shouted.

'Hush, Imogen,' Mother snapped. 'Or who is that? Astrid?'

'It's me,' I said. 'Esther. The middle daughter.'

But the wind was sending papers skittering this way and that, and Mother was busy chasing them. An envelope flew across the cobblestones and landed just by the coach wheel.

'There's one here!' I yelled.

At that moment, the driver crumpled his paper bag, shook his pals' hands, and climbed up to his seat.

'All aboard!' he boomed.

'You'd better hurry and grab this letter, Mother, before it gets run over!' I called.

Mother zipped forward and snatched up the envelope. As she did so, I caught a glimpse of block letters on its front:

ESTHER METTLESTONE-STARANISE
DIME HOUSE, FURRIER LANE,
BLUE CHALET VILLAGE

'But that's *me!*' I cried. '*I'm* Esther Mettlestone-Staranise!' Mother frowned at the letter. She gave a startled gasp, rummaged through her satchel and drew out a small stack of additional envelopes.

'Here you go,' she called, reaching up to the window and handing the stack through. 'I saved these as a goodbye surprise for you.'

'Away then!' boomed the coach driver, jiggling the reins. *Clip-clop, clip-clop*, said the horses' hooves.

Mother stood back, satchel beneath her arm, and clasped her hands.

CHAPTER 3

My sisters and I settled back into our seats. All three of us looked at the stack of letters in my hands.

'She didn't plan to give them to you as a goodbye surprise,' Imogen, my older sister, murmured.

'She forgot she had them,' Astrid, my younger sister, agreed. 'I bet she's been collecting them from the post office all summer, putting them into her satchel, and forgetting them.'

'Who are they from?' Imogen asked. 'Georgia and Hsiang?'

Georgia and Hsiang are my best friends at boarding school. I flicked through the envelopes. Four were from Georgia, five from Hsiang.

All summer long I'd been writing to my friends, wondering why they didn't reply. At one point, I'd sent them both postcards that said: 'HELLO???'

I'd begun to worry that I'd offended them somehow, yet they'd been replying to me all along.

Well, soon I would arrive at boarding school where I'd see my friends and hear their stories in person.

I tucked the envelopes into my suitcase and set them to the far side of my mind.

CHAPTER 4

On the first day back at school, Principal Hortense always holds Morning Tea in the gardens.

It was already a quarter past ten when we arrived, and we hurried through the school. Other just-arrived girls were running along too, everybody looking shiny and sunny, the way people do after the summer break, and everybody calling, 'Hello! Love the new haircut!' to each other. Things like that.

We hurried past the trophy cabinet and there were the gold medals my sisters and I had won in the Kingdoms and Empires Poker Competition. (Our mother taught us poker before we learned to read.)

'When's the competition this year?' Astrid asked.

'Last two weeks of this term,' I said. 'We get to start our holiday early.' We all grinned.

But actually I love my school. I hope that's not strange. There are things I *don't* like about it, of course, such as schoolwork and homework, rules and getting in trouble for breaking rules, which I do, fairly often—but let's say your heart has a *core*, like an apple core, well, right there amongst

the seeds and chewy bits, I love my school.

So at this point, as we ran panting into the gardens, I felt like a kite that is sailing in a clear blue sky.

CHAPTER 5

I couldn't see my best friends Hsiang and Georgia anywhere in the garden, so I settled into a shady spot under the mulberry tree with a group of other Grade 6 girls. We ate orange-and-poppy seed cake and chatted about our summers.

Meanwhile, something strange seemed to be happening.

It was like this. Look at these words:

The new teacher is an Ogre.

Now imagine that those words keep brushing up against you, as if a ghostly cat is wandering the garden, brushing its fur against bare legs and then moving on.

That's what it was like.

The first time it happened, I said, 'Did I just hear that? There's a new teacher this year? And it's an *Ogre*?'

The others giggled, as if I'd made a joke. They often laugh at me, even when I'm being serious.

But the words kept drifting by with the breeze.

After a while, the others stopped chatting about their holidays and began to ask: 'Did somebody say there's a new teacher who's an *Ogre*?'

'It's *not* true,' scoffed Katya Burla. 'They'd *never* hire an *Ogre*. An Ogre wouldn't even fit through a classroom door!' (She's very scoffy, Katya.)

Hetty Rattlestone was nodding. 'Our Aunt Cynthia saw an Ogre once. She said his arms and legs were like logs of firewood. He wanted to hire a rowboat, but the man said that his boats were too small for Ogres, sorry—so what did the Ogre do? He grabbed a rowboat, dragged it into the lake, hopped aboard—and it sank. Then the Ogre swam ashore and demanded his money back. Even though he'd never paid.'

'Is Aunt Cynthia one of your *royal* relatives?' Zoe Fawnwell interjected.

Zoe is best friends with Hetty Rattlestone and her twin sister, Tatty. As far as I can tell, her main job as best friend is to remind everyone that the twins happen to have some royal relatives.

Hetty ignored Zoe's question, so Aunt Cynthia must not have been a royal.

'Ogres have violent tempers,' Tatty Rattlestone said. 'Our mother was at a restaurant once when an Ogre who'd been wading in a swamp came tramping in, leaving mud and slime everywhere. The waiter asked him very politely to wipe his feet please, so the Ogre picked up the waiter and threw him through a window.'

We were quiet, picturing the flying waiter and shattered glass.

'Ogres only live in three different regions,' Katya put in. As well as being scoffy, she's excellent at geography. And at all the other school subjects. 'The three regions are far from

here.' She ticked them off on her fingers. 'Horseshoe Island off the coast of the Kingdom of Storms. The Fangaral Crescents. And Fox Valley in the Empire of Broken Leaves.'

'So if the new teacher is from one of those places, we'll know they're an Ogre,' Zoe Fawnwell breathed.

'We'd know anyway just by *looking* at them,' Hetty said sharply.

DONG! DING! DONG!

That was the sound of a bell being struck.

Principal Hortense was standing very tall in the arbour, striking the bell and beaming around at us. Which meant she was about to speak.

We all turned as one to hear.

CHAPTER 6

'Girls! What a *delight* to see you back again!' Principal Hortense gave a general wave, and then began offering special little waves to individual girls. Her hand became like an excited butterfly jumping from flower to flower. Finally, the butterfly grew tired and settled down.

'Such a delight!' she continued. 'Why, I was just saying to Mustafa yesterday, I said: *Mustafa, the place is too quiet*. And do you know what Mustafa replied?'

We all looked at Mustafa, the gardener. His cheeks bulged with cake. When he noticed us staring, he began to chew very quickly. I saw him swallow.

Principal Hortense continued. 'He said: *Too quiet? No. Not really*.'

Everyone laughed. Mustafa relaxed and took another bite of cake. He is famous for finding us students annoying. He'd prefer to take care of the grounds in peace.

'I trust you've caught up on your summer stories by now, girls—' Principal Hortense began.

'No. Not really,' a Grade 8 girl joked. Or not-joked, because we'd hardly *begun* to catch up. I hadn't even

seen Georgia and Hsiang yet.

Principal Hortense chortled. 'Well, classes don't start until tomorrow, so plenty of time! At any rate ...'

Then she made her Welcome Back speech.

'There are thirteen weeks in this term,' she said. 'Wait now, is it thirteen or twenty-five?' She consulted with the closest teacher who said it was definitely thirteen. 'Shame. Twenty-five sounds fun. And then two weeks of holidays?'

'Yes,' everyone agreed.

I won't tell you everything she said, mainly because I don't know. I always drift off when teachers talk. They say many pointless things.

'As usual, I will take girls to town for afternoon tea on their birthdays. You will work *very* hard, and you will *all* behave with respect and ...'

Do you see what I mean? Pointless.

I did tune in when she said: 'Bad news! Matron is away this year! She's travelling the Northern Climes! But good news! We have a new nurse! Nurse Sydelle!'

It was bad news that Matron was away. She's part-Faery, takes care of us when we're ill and bakes treats. I wouldn't know whether this Nurse Sydelle was 'good news' or not until I'd met her.

Eventually Principal Hortense listed our teachers, starting at the top—Grade 8—and working her way down.

My sister Imogen's teacher (Grade 7) turned out to be Mr Dar-Healey. He's a lively man who does tumbles in the air whenever a child gives a correct answer.

Principal Hortense skipped over Grade 6 and went straight

to Grade 5. *Strange*, I thought. *She's forgotten how to count.* But it was backwards counting, so maybe she found that trickier.

My sister Astrid's teacher (Grade 4) turned out to be Ms Saji. Gentle Ms Saji only joined the school last year.

When Principal Hortense had reached the Kindergarten teacher and stopped, Hetty Rattlestone sang out: 'You've forgotten Grade 6!'

'Observant, Hetty!' Principal Hortense twinkled. 'But *wrong!* I did not *forget* Grade 6, I *saved* it on purpose! It's the most exciting news! Are you ready?'

We agreed that we were ready.

'Professor Jonston has retired! So we have *a new teacher at Katherine Valley Boarding School!*'

I was suddenly anxious. The ghost cat was slinking around my legs now, twirling between my ankles.

Principal Hortense grinned so hugely you could see where her teeth grew from her gums. 'A teacher from *far, far* away!'

The ghost cat froze.

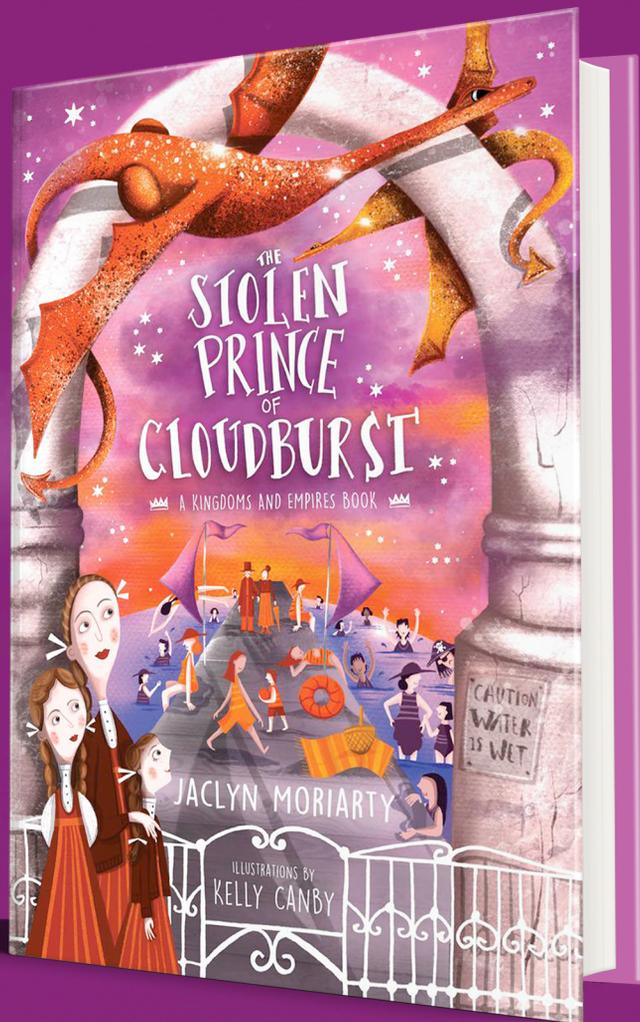
'Her name is Mrs Pollock! She's arriving tomorrow! And she's from—now just a moment, what was the place called? Cattlefork? Donkeyslipper? Guess-what-Isles? No. It's ...'

A pause. 'What?' various girls called.

'That's right. She's from Horseshoe Island off the coast of the Kingdom of Storms!'

The ghost cat leapt into the air and sunk its claws into my throat.

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