

# ROOFTOPPERS



*Katherine Rundell*

# Contents

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- Chapter 1
- Chapter 2
- Chapter 3
- Chapter 4
- Chapter 5
- Chapter 6
- Chapter 7
- Chapter 8
- Chapter 9
- Chapter 10
- Chapter 11
- Chapter 12
- Chapter 13
- Chapter 14
- Chapter 15
- Chapter 16
- Chapter 17
- Chapter 18
- Chapter 19
- Chapter 20
- Chapter 21
- Chapter 22
- Chapter 23
- Chapter 24
- Chapter 25
- Chapter 26
- Chapter 27
- Chapter 28
- Chapter 29
- Chapter 30
- Chapter 31

*About Katherine Rundell*

To my brother, with love

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1

ON THE MORNING of its First Birthday, a baby was found floating in a cello case in the middle of the English Channel.

It was the only living thing for miles. Just the baby, and some dining room chairs, and the tip of a ship disappearing into the ocean. There had been music in the dining hall, and it was music so loud and so good that nobody had noticed the water flooding in over the carpet. The violins went on sawing for some time after the screaming had begun. Sometimes the shriek of a passenger would drown out with a high C.

The baby was found wrapped for warmth in the musical score of a Beethoven symphony. It had drifted almost a mile from the ship, and was the last to be rescued. The man who lifted it into the rescue boat was a fellow passenger, and a scholar. It is a scholar's job to notice things. He noticed that it was a girl, with hair the color of lightning, and the smile of a shy person.

Think of nighttime with a speaking voice. Or think how moonlight might talk, or think of ink, ink had vocal cords. Give those things a narrow aristocratic face with hooked eyebrows, and long arms and legs, and that is what the baby saw as she was lifted out of her cello case and up into safety. His name was Charles Maxim, and he determined, as he held her in his large hands—at arm's length as he would a leaky flowerpot—that he would keep her.

The baby was almost certainly one year old. They knew this because of the red rosette pinned to her front, which read, 1!

“Or rather,” said Charles Maxim, “the child is either one year old or she has come first in a competition. I believe babies are rarely keen participants in competitive sport. Shall we therefore assume it is the former?” The girl held on to his earlobe with a grubby finger and thumb. “Happy birthday, my child,” he said.

Charles did not only give the baby a birthday. He also gave her a name. He chose Sophie, on the first day, on the grounds that nobody could possibly object to it. “Your day has been dramatic and extraordinary enough, child,” he said. “It might be best to have the most ordinary name available. You can be Mary, or Betty, or Sophie. Or, at a stretch, Mildred. Your choice.” Sophie had smiled when he'd said “Sophie,” so Sophie it was. Then he fetched his coat, and folded her up in it, and took her

home in a carriage. It rained a little, but it did not worry either of them. Charles did not generally notice the weather, and Sophie had already survived a lot of water that day.

Charles had never really known a child before. He told Sophie as much on the way home: "I do, I'm afraid, understand books far more readily than I understand people. Books are so easy to get along with." The carriage ride took four hours; Charles held Sophie on the very edge of his knee and told her about himself, as though she were an acquaintance at a tea party. He was thirty-six years old, and six foot three. He spoke English to people and French to cats, and Latin to the birds. He had once nearly killed himself trying to read and ride a horse at the same time. "But I will be more careful," he said, "now that there is you, little cello child." Charles's home was beautiful, but it was not safe; it was full of all staircases and slippery floorboards and sharp corners. "I'll buy some smaller chairs," he said. "And we'll have thick red carpets! Although—how does one go about acquiring carpets? I don't suppose you know, Sophie?"

Unsurprisingly, Sophie did not answer. She was too young to talk, and she was asleep.

She woke when they drew up in a street smelling of trees and horse dung. Sophie loved the house at first sight. The bricks were painted the brightest white in London, and shone even in the dark. The basement was used to store the overflow of books and paintings and several brands of spiders, and the roof belonged to the birds. Charles lived in the space in between.

At home, after a hot bath in front of the stove, Sophie looked very white and fragile. Charles had not known that a baby was so terrifyingly tiny a thing. She felt too small in his arms. He was almost relieved when there was a knock at the door; he laid Sophie down carefully on a chair, with a Shakespearean play as a booster seat, and went down the stairs two at a time.

When he returned, he was accompanied by a large gray-haired woman; *Hamlet* was slightly damaged, and Sophie was looking embarrassed. Charles scooped her up and set her down—hesitating first over an umbrella stand in a corner, and then over the top of the stove—inside the sink. He smiled, and his eyebrows and eyes smiled too. "Please don't worry," he said. "We all have accidents, Sophie." Then he bowed at the woman. "Let me introduce you. Sophie, this is Miss Eliot, from the National Childcare Agency. Miss Eliot, this is Sophie, from the ocean."

The woman sighed—an official sort of sigh, it would have sounded, from Sophie's place in the sink—and frowned, and pulled clean clothes from a parcel. "Give her to me."

Charles took the clothes from her. "I took this child from the sea, ma'am." Sophie watched, with large eyes. "She has nobody to keep her safe. Whether I like it or not, she is my responsibility."

"Not forever."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The child is your *ward*. She is not your daughter." This was the sort of woman who spoke in italics. You would be willing to lay bets that her hobby was organizing people. "This is a temporary arrangement."

"I beg to differ," said Charles. "But we can fight about that later. The child is cold." He handed the undershirt to Sophie, who sucked on it. He took it back and put it on her. Then he hefted her in his arms, as though about to guess her weight at a fair, and looked at her closely. "You see? She seems very intelligent baby." Sophie's fingers, he saw, were long and thin, and clever. "And she has hair the color of lightning. How could you possibly resist her?"

"I'll have to come round, to check on her, and I really don't have the time to spare. *A man can't do this kind of thing alone.*"

"Certainly, please do come," said Charles—and he added, as if he couldn't stop himself, "if you feel that you absolutely can't stay away. I will endeavor to be grateful. But this child is my responsibility."

Do you understand?"

~~"But it's a *child*! You're a *man*!"~~

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"Your powers of observation are formidable," said Charles. "You are a credit to your optician."

"But what are you going to *do* with her?"

Charles looked bewildered. "I am going to love her. That should be enough, if the poetry I've read is anything to go by." Charles handed Sophie a red apple, then took it back and rubbed it on his sleeve until he could see his face in it. He said, "I am sure the secrets of child care, dark and mysterious though they no doubt are, are not impenetrable."

Charles set the baby on his knee, handed her the apple, and began to read out loud to her from *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

It was not, perhaps, the perfect way to begin a new life, but it showed potential.



THERE WAS, IN The Offices of The national Childcare Agency in Westminster, a cabinet, and in the cabinet, a red file marked “Guardians: Character Assessment.” In the red file, there was a smaller blue file marked “Maxim, Charles.” It read, “C. P. Maxim is bookish, as one would expect of a scholar—also apparently generous, awkward, industrious. He is unusually tall, but doctors’ reports suggest he is otherwise healthy. He is stubbornly certain of his ability to care for a female ward.”

Perhaps such things are contagious, because Sophie grew up tall and generous and bookish and awkward. By the time she turned seven, she had legs as long and thin as golf umbrellas, and a collection of stubborn certainties.

For her seventh birthday, Charles baked a chocolate cake. It was not an absolute success, because it had sagged in the middle, but Sophie declared loyally that that was her favorite kind of cake. “Because,” she said, “the dip leaves room for more icing. I like my icing to be extravagant.”

“I am glad to hear it,” said Charles. “Although, the word is traditionally pronounced ‘*extravagant*,’ I don’t believe. Happy probably seventh birthday, dear heart. How about a little birthday Shakespeare?”

Sophie had a habit of breaking plates, and so they had been eating their cake off the front cover of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Now Charles wiped it on his sleeve and opened at the middle. “Will you read me some Titania?”

Sophie made a face. “I’d rather be Puck.” She tried a few lines, but it was slow going. She waited until Charles was looking away, then dropped the book on the floor and did a handstand on it.

Charles laughed. “Bravo!” He applauded against the table. “You look the stuff that elves are made of.”

Sophie fell over into the kitchen table, stood up, and tried again against the door.

“Wonderful! You’re getting better, almost perfect.”

“Only almost?” Sophie wobbled, and squinted at him upside down. Her eyeballs were starting to burn, but she stayed where she was. “Aren’t my legs straight?”

“Almost. Your left knee looks a little uncertain. Anyway, no human is perfect. Nobody since Shakespeare.”

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Sophie thought about that later, in bed. "No human is perfect," Charles had said, but he was wrong. Charles was perfect. Charles had hair the same color as the banister, and eyes that had magic in them. He had inherited his house and all his clothes from his father. They had once been beautiful razzle-dazzle Savile Row one hundred percent silk, and were now fifty percent silk, fifty percent hole. Charles had no musical instruments, but he sang to her, and when Sophie was elsewhere, he sang to the birds, and to the wood lice that occasionally invaded the kitchen. His voice was pitch-perfect. It sounded like flying.

Sometimes the feeling of the sinking ship would come back to Sophie, in the middle of the night, and then she found that she needed desperately to climb things. Climbing was the only thing that made her feel safe. Charles allowed her to sleep on top of the wardrobe. He slept on the floor beneath her, just in case.

Sophie didn't entirely understand him. Charles ate little, and slept rarely, and he did not smile as often as other people. But he had kindness where other people had lungs, and politeness in his fingertips. If, when reading and walking at the same time, he bumped into a lamppost, he would apologize and check that the lamppost was unhurt.

One morning a week, Miss Eliot came to the house, "to sort out any problems." (Sophie could have said, "What problems?" but she soon learned to stay silent.) Miss Eliot would look around the house, which was peeling at the corners, and at the spiderwebs in the empty larder, and she would shake her head.

"What do you *eat*?"

It was true that food was more interesting in their house than in the homes of Sophie's friends. Sometimes Charles forgot about meat for months at a time. Clean plates seemed to break whenever Sophie came near them, and so he served roast potato chips on atlases of the world, spread open like the map of Hungary. In fact he would have been happy to live on cookies, and tea, and whisky at bedtime. When Sophie had first learned to read, Charles had kept the whisky in a bottle labeled CAT URINE, so that Sophie would not touch it, but she had uncorked the bottle and sipped it, and then she sniffed at the underside of the cat next door. They were not at all similar, though equally unpleasant.

"We have bread," said Sophie. "And fish in tins."

"You have *what*?" said Miss Eliot.

"I like fish in tins," said Sophie. "And we have ham."

"Do you? I've never seen a single slice of ham in this place."

"Every day! Or," Sophie added, because she was more honest than she found convenient, "definitely sometimes. And cheese. And apples. And I drink a whole pint of milk for breakfast."

"But how can Charles let you *live* like that? I don't think this can be good for a child. It's not *right*."

They managed, in fact, very well, but Miss Eliot never quite understood. When Miss Eliot said "right," Sophie thought, she meant "neat." Sophie and Charles did not live neatly, but neatness, Sophie thought, was not necessary for happiness.

"The thing is, Miss Eliot," said Sophie, "the thing is, I don't have the sort of face that ever looks neat. Charles says I have untidy eyes. Because of the fleck, you see." Sophie's skin was too pale, and she showed blotches in the cold, and her hair had never, in her memory, been without knots. Sophie did not mind, though, because in her memory of her mother she saw the same sort of hair and skin—and her mother, she felt sure, was beautiful. Her mother, she was sure, had smelled of cool air and soap, and had worn trousers with patches at the ankle.

The trousers, in fact, were perhaps the beginning of the troubles. When Sophie was nearing eight years old, she asked Charles for a pair of trousers.



"Trousers? Is that not rather unusual for women?"

"No," said Sophie. "I don't think so. My mother wears them."

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"Wore them, Sophie, my child."

"Wears them. Black ones. But I'd like mine to be red."

"Um. You wouldn't prefer a skirt?" He looked worried.

Sophie made a face. "No, I really do want trousers. Please."

There were no trousers in the shops that would fit her, only the gray shorts that boys wore at school. And, "Good heavens!" said Charles. "You look like a math lesson." So Charles sewed four pairs of shorts for himself in brightly colored cotton and gave them to her wrapped in newspaper. One of them had one leg longer than the other. Sophie loved them. Miss Eliot was shocked, and "*Girls*," she said, "don't wear trousers." But Sophie insisted that they did.

"My mother wears trousers. I know she does. She dances in them, when she plays her cello."

"She can't have," said Miss Eliot. It was always the same. "Women do not play the cello, Sophie. And you were *much* too young to remember. You must try to be more honest, Sophie."

"But she did. The trousers were black, and grayish at the knee. And she wore black shoes. I remember."

"You are imagining things, my dear." Miss Eliot's voice was like a window slamming shut.

"But I promise, I'm *not*."

"Sophie—"

"I'm not!" Sophie did not add, "You potato-faced old hag!" but she did very much want to. The problem was that a person could not grow up with Charles without becoming polite to her very bones. To be impolite felt, to Sophie, like wearing dirty underwear, but it was difficult to be polite when people talked about her mother. They were so very certain that she was making it up, and she was so very certain that they were wrong.

"Toenail eyes!" whispered Sophie. "Buzzard! I *do* remember." She felt a little better.

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Sophie did remember her mother, in fact, clear and sharp. She did not remember a father, but she remembered a swirl of hair, and two thin cloth-covered legs kicking to the beat of wonderful music, and that wouldn't have been possible if the legs had been covered in skirt.

Sophie was also sure she remembered, very clearly, seeing her mother clinging to a floating dog in the middle of the channel.

Everybody said, "A baby is too young to remember." They said, "You are remembering what you wish were true." She grew sick of hearing it. But Sophie remembered seeing her mother wave for help. She had heard her mother whistle. Whistles are very distinctive. No matter what the police said, she knew her mother had not gone down inside the ship. Sophie was stubbornly certain.

Sophie whispered to herself in the dark every night: "My mother is still alive, and she is going to come for me one day."

"She'll come for me," said Sophie to Charles.

Charles would shake his head. "That is almost impossible, dear heart."

"*Almost* impossible means still possible." Sophie tried to stand up straight and sound adult; people believed you more easily if you were taller. "You always say, 'Never ignore a possible.'"

"But, my child, it is so profoundly improbable that it's not worth building a life on. It would be like trying to build a house on the back of a dragonfly."

"She'll come for me," said Sophie to Miss Eliot.

Miss Eliot was more blunt. "Your mother is dead. No women survived," she said. "You mustn't allow yourself to get carried away."

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Sometimes it seemed difficult for the adults in Sophie's life to tell between "carried away" and "absolutely correct but unbelievably." Sophie felt herself flushing. "She will come," she said. "Or I'll go to her."

"No, Sophie. That is not how the world works." Miss Eliot was sure that Sophie was mistaken, but then Miss Eliot was also sure that cross-stitch was *vital*, and Charles was *impossible*, which just showed that adults weren't always right.

One day Sophie found some red paint and wrote the name of the ship, the *Queen Mary*, and the date of the storm on the white wall of the house, just in case her mother passed by.

Charles's face, when he found her, was too complicated for her to look at. But he helped her reach the high parts and wash the brushes afterward.

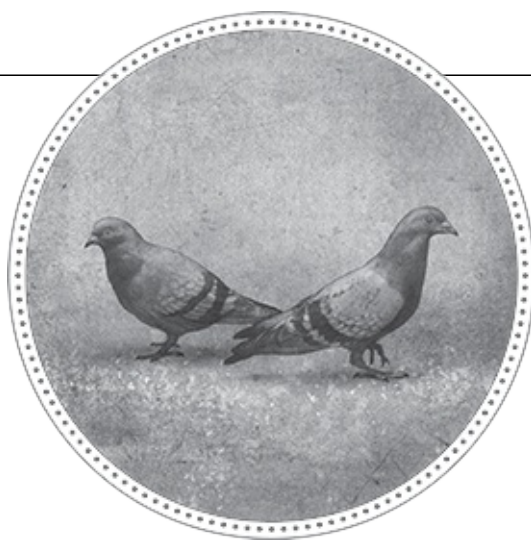
"A case," he said to Miss Eliot, "of the just in cases."

"But she's—"

"She is only doing as I have told her."

"You told her to vandalize your own house?"

"No. I have told her not to ignore life's possibilities."



MISS ELIOT DID not Approve of Charles, nor of Sophie. She disliked Charles's carelessness with money, and his lateness at dinner.

She disliked Sophie's watching, listening face. "It's not natural, in a little girl!" She hated their joint habit of writing each other notes on the wallpaper in the hall.

"It's not normal!" she said, scribbling on her notepad. "It's not healthy!"

"On the contrary," said Charles. "The more words in a house the better, Miss Eliot."

Miss Eliot also disliked Charles's hands, which were inky, and his hat, which was coming adrift around the brim. She disapproved of Sophie's clothes.

Charles was not good at shopping. He spent a day standing, bewildered, in the middle of Bond Street and came back with a parcel of boys' shirts. Miss Eliot was livid.

"You cannot let her wear that," she said. "People will think she is deranged."

Sophie looked down at herself. She fingered the material. It felt quite normal to her—still a little stiff from the shop, but otherwise fine. "How can you tell it's not a girl's shirt?" she asked.

"Boys' shirts button left over right. Blouses—please note, the word is '*blouses*'—button right over left. I am shocked that you don't know that."

Charles put down the newspaper behind which he had retreated. "You are shocked that she doesn't know about *buttons*? Buttons are rarely key players in international affairs."

"I beg your pardon?"

"I meant, she knows the things that are important. Not all of them, of course; she is still a child. But many."

Miss Eliot sniffed. "You'll forgive me; I may be old-fashioned, but I think buttons *do* matter."

"Sophie," said Charles, "knows all the capitals of all the countries of the world."

Sophie, standing in the doorway, whispered, "Almost."

"She knows how to read, and how to draw. She knows the difference between a tortoise and a turtle. She knows one tree from another, and how to climb them. Only this morning she was telling me what is the collective noun for toads."

"A knot," said Sophie. "It's a knot of toads."

“And she whistles. You would have to be extraordinarily unintelligent not to see that Sophie whistling is unusual. Extraordinarily unintelligent, or deaf.”

Charles might just as well not have spoken. Miss Eliot swept him aside with a single flick of her fingers. “She’ll need new shirts, please, Mr. Maxim. *Women’s* shirts. And, my Lord, those trousers!”

Sophie didn’t see the problem. Trousers were just skirts with extra sewing. “I need them,” she said. “Please let me keep them. You can’t climb in a skirt. Or, you can, but then everyone would see your underpants, and surely that would be worse?”

Miss Eliot frowned. She was not the sort of person who admitted to wearing underpants.

“We’ll let it pass for now. You’re still a child. But this can’t go on forever.”

“What? Why not?” Sophie touched the bookcase with her fingertips for luck. “Yes, it can. Why wouldn’t it?”

“It certainly can’t. England is no place for untrained women.”

Above all, Miss Eliot disliked Charles’s wish to take Sophie on sudden expeditions. London was dirty, she said, and Sophie would catch germs and bad habits.

On the day of Sophie’s probably ninth birthday, Charles stood her on a chair and polished her shoes while she ate toast with one hand and read a book with the other. She turned the pages with her teeth. Crumbs and spit coated the corners of the paper, but it was otherwise a satisfactory arrangement.

They were almost ready to leave the house for the concert hall, when Miss Eliot stormed in.

“You can’t take her out like that! She’s filthy! And don’t slouch, Sophie.”

Charles looked with interest at the top of Sophie’s head. “Is she?”

“Mr. Maxim!” barked Miss Eliot. “The girl has jam all down her top!”

“So she does.” Charles looked at Miss Eliot with courteous bewilderment. “Does it matter?” Then seeing Miss Eliot’s hand reach toward her clipboard, he took a cloth and sponged at Sophie, as gently as if she were a painting.

Miss Eliot sniffed. “There’s some on the sleeve, too.”

“The rain will wash the rest off, surely? It’s her birthday.”

“Dirt still applies on birthdays! You’re not taking her to a zoo.”

“I see. Would you rather I took her to the zoo?” Charles tipped his head to one side. He looked at Sophie thought, like a particularly well-mannered panther. “It may not be too late to change the tickets.”

“That isn’t what I meant! She’ll disgrace you. I would be embarrassed to be seen with her.”

Charles looked at Miss Eliot. Miss Eliot’s eyes dropped first.

“She has shining shoes and shining eyes,” said Charles. “That is smartness enough.” He handed Sophie the tickets to hold on to. “Happy birthday, my child.” He kissed her forehead—the once-yearly birthday kiss—and helped Sophie from her chair.

There are many ways, Sophie knew, of helping people from their chairs. It is a very revealing thing to do. Miss Eliot, for instance, would prod you off with a wooden spoon. Charles did it carefully by the fingertips, as though they were dancing—and he whistled the string section from *Così fan tu* all the way down the street.

“Music, Sophie! Music is mad and wonderful.”

“Yes!” Charles had kept her birthday plans a secret, but his excitement was contagious. She skipped alongside him. “What kind of music will it be?”

“Classical, Sophie.” His face was alight with happiness, and his fingers were twitching at the tips. “Clever, complicated music.”



“Oh. That’s . . . wonderful.” Sophie was an unpracticed liar. “That will be so good.” In fact, Sophie thought, she ~~would~~ rather have gone to the zoo. Sophie had heard almost no classical music, and she would have been quite happy to keep it that way. She liked folk songs, and music you could dance to. For very few just-turned-nine-year-olds, she imagined, could have said they liked classical music without lying a little.

The performance did not, as far as Sophie was concerned, start promisingly. The piano piece was long. The pianist had a mustache and made the sorts of faces that Sophie associated with being very itchy.

“Charles?” Sophie glanced at Charles and saw his lips were slightly open, and curved upward in an expression of very-listening happiness.

“Charles?”

“Yes, Sophie? And you must try to whisper.”

“Charles, how long does it go on for? I mean, it’s not that it’s not wonderful.” Sophie crossed her fingers behind her back. “It’s just that I . . . wondered.”

“Only an hour, my child, alas. I could live here, in this seat, couldn’t you?”

“Oh. An *hour*?” Sophie tried to sit still, but it was difficult. She sucked the end of her braid. She curled and uncurled her toes. She resolved, unsuccessfully, not to bite her thumbnail. She was at last on the borderland of sleep when three violins, a cello, and a viola came onstage, accompanied by the musicians.

When they began to play, the music was different. It was sweeter, and wilder. Sophie sat up properly and shifted forward until only half an inch of her bottom was on her seat. It was so beautiful that it was difficult for her to breathe. If music can shine, Sophie thought, this music shone. It was like all the voices in all the choirs in the city rolled into a single melody. Her chest felt oddly swollen.

“It’s like eight thousand birds, Charles! Charles! Isn’t it like eight thousand birds?”

“Yes! But shhh, Sophie.”

The melody quickened, and Sophie’s pulse kept time. It sounded at once familiar and new. It plucked at her fingers and feet.

Sophie’s legs wouldn’t stay still. She knelt up on her seat. After a moment, she risked a whisper. “Charles! Listen! The cello sings, Charles!”

When the music closed, she clapped until the rest of the audience had stopped and until her hands were hot and blotched with red. She clapped until everyone was staring at the girl with lightning-colored hair and a ladder in her stocking, whose eyes and shoes lit up the whole of the second row.

There was something in the music that felt familiar to Sophie. “It feels,” she said to Charles, “like home. Do you see what I mean? Like fresh air.”

“Does it? Then I think,” said Charles, “we must get you a cello.”

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The cello they bought was small but still too large to play comfortably in her bedroom. Charles unstuck the skylight in the attic, and on the days on which it did not rain, Sophie climbed onto the roof and played her cello, up amongst the leaf mold and the pigeons.

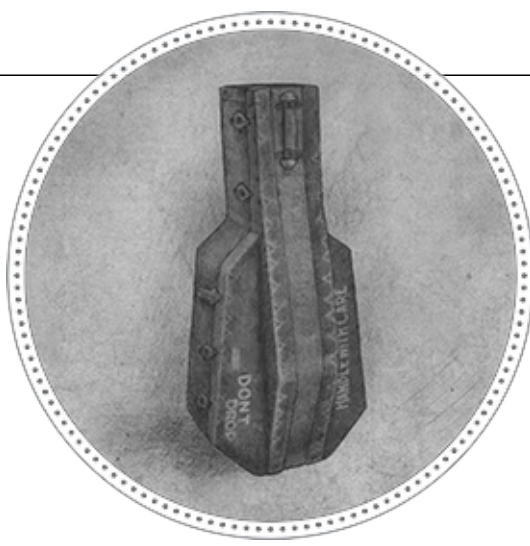
When the music went right, it drained all the itch and fret from the world and left it glowing. When she did stretch and blink and lay her bow down hours later, Sophie would feel tougher, and braver. It was, she thought, like having eaten a meal of cream and moonlight. When practice went badly, it was just a chore, like brushing her teeth. Sophie had worked out that the good and bad days divided half and half. It was worth it.

Nobody bothered her up on the rooftop. It was flat gray slate, with a stone balustrade running round the edge. ~~The balustrade came up to Sophie's chin; people below, looking up, could see only~~ shock of bright hair, and a bowing elbow.

"I love the sky." Sophie said it one night without thinking, at dinner. She bit her tongue; other girls laughed if you said things like that.

But Charles only laid a slice of pork pie on the Bible and nodded. He said, "I'm glad." He added dollop of mustard and handed Sophie the book. "Only weak thinkers do not love the sky."

Almost as soon as she could walk, Sophie could climb. She started with the trees, which are the quickest route to the sky. Charles came with her. He was not a "No, don't; hold tighter" sort of man. He stood underneath her and shouted. "Higher, Sophie! Yes, bravo! Watch out for the birds! Birds look wonderful from underneath!"



**T**HE ORIGINAL CELLO Case, Sophie's Life raft, was kept at the foot of her bed. For her eleven birthday, Charles sanded away the mildew and bought some paint.

"What color?" he asked.

"Red. Red is the opposite of sea colors." It was difficult for Sophie to love the sea.

Charles painted the cello case the brightest red he could find and set a lock in it. She stacked her precious things inside, and midnight snacks. She opened it only as a treat, or if she had one of her dark sea-nightmares.

If Sophie had known how important the cello case would prove to be, she would probably not have stored honey in it, which always manages to leak. But she did not know. It is impossible, Charles always said, to know everything.

Charles warned her not to think too much of the cello case. "Be careful not to treasure the wrong things in life," he said. "We cannot tell if it is rightfully yours, Sophie. You may not be able to keep it if someone may claim it."

"Yes, I know!" Sophie grinned. "Someone *will* claim it. My mother will. When she comes." Sophie spat on her palm and crossed her fingers for luck. It was like a reflex; she spat and crossed them a hundred times each night.

"The case may not have belonged to your mother. It might have been snatched up by her as the ship went down. Women very rarely play the cello, Sophie. In fact, I have never heard of a woman who does. A violin is more usual for a woman."

"No," said Sophie. "It was a cello. I know it was. I remember. I remember her fingers on the bow."

Charles bowed his head in a courteous nod, as he always did when he disagreed. "I remember the ship well, Sophie. I remember the band. But I do not remember, Sophie, any women with cellos."

"But I do."

"Sophie, no. The band was made up of men with mustaches and greased hair."

"I *remember*, Charles! I do!"

"I know." Charles's face was too sad to look at. Sophie scowled at her ankles instead. "But, dear heart, you were a baby."

“That doesn’t mean I don’t remember. I saw her, Charles, I really *did*. I remember the cello.” The arguments were always the same. *How do you make people believe you?* Sophie thought. It was too slow and too unwieldy. It was impossible.

“I saw her floating. I did!” She balled her fists. If she had not loved him so much, she would have spat at him.

“And yet, my child, I did not see her. I was there too.” He sighed so deeply that his breath ruffled the curtains. “I know it’s hard, Sophie. Life is so hard. My God, life is the hardest thing in the world. That is a thing people should mention more often.”

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Almost every night, Sophie went mother-watching. She snuffed the candle and sat on the windowsill with her legs swinging, watching the mothers on her street go by. The best ones had faces full of wisdom. Sometimes they carried sleeping children—fat babies, and toddlers with legs stuck out at peculiar angles. Sometimes they sang as they passed by under Sophie’s dangling feet.

On the evening of her eleventh birthday, though, Sophie took out her sketchbook. It was leather-bound and soft from being kept under her pillow. She drew in it every birthday.

Sophie’s pencil was bluntish, and she chewed at the lead to sharpen it. Then she closed her eyes and tried to remember. She drew a pair of black trousers, worn thin at the knee (“worn at the knee” was surprisingly difficult to draw, but she did her best), and on top of them the torso and head of a woman. She added hair. She had no colored pencils, but she bit at a hangnail and used a little blood to paint it red. Then, with her pencil over the face, Sophie hesitated.

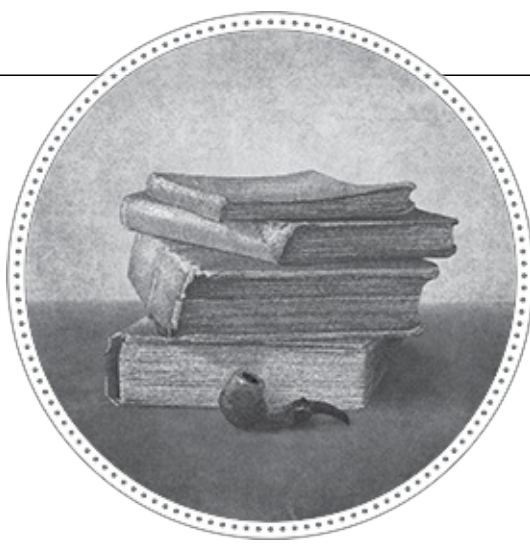
“Oh,” she whispered. And then, “Think.” And then, “Please.” But she could remember only a blur. At last Sophie drew a tree blowing in the wind, and then drew hair blowing across the face.

*Mothers are a thing you need, like air,* she thought, *and water.* Even paper mothers were better than nothing—even imaginary ones. Mothers were a place to put down your heart. They were a resting stop to recover your breath.

Under her picture, Sophie wrote “my mother.” Her finger was still bleeding, so she drew a flower behind the woman’s ear and colored it red.

Every night before she went to sleep, Sophie told herself stories in her head, in which her mother returned to find her. They were long and difficult to recall in the morning, but they ended in dancing. When she remembered her mother, she always remembered dancing.





MY THE TIME Sophie's Twelfth Birthday came around, she had almost stopped breaking plates and the books had been moved from the kitchen back to Charles's study. Charles called her in there to give her his present. It stood on the desk, a square tower wrapped in newspaper.

"What is it?" It looked the size of a bathroom cabinet, but even from someone as unusual as Charles, that seemed an unlikely gift.

"Open it."

Sophie tore off the paper. "Oh!" Her breath got tangled up somewhere on the way out. It was a stack of books, each bound in a different-colored leather. The leather glowed, despite the gray daylight outside.

"There are twelve. One for each year."

"They're beautiful. But . . . Charles, weren't they terribly expensive?" They looked as though they would be warm to touch. Leather like that wasn't cheap.

Charles shrugged. "Twelve is the right age to start collecting beautiful things. Each of these," he said, "was a favorite of mine."

"Thank you! Thank you."

"It's the things you read at the age you are now that stick. Books crowbar the world open for you."

"They're perfect." Sophie turned them over. She sniffed the insides. The paper smelled of brambles and tin kettles.

"I'm glad you think so. Although, if you turn down the corners of the pages like that, I shall have to bludgeon you to death with *Robinson Crusoe*."

When she had examined the last one (it was *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, and the illustrated plate in the front looked promising), Charles went to the windowsill and came back with a carton of ice cream. It was the size of Sophie's head.

"Happy birthday, my child." Sophie dipped in a finger, which was not allowed but could probably be gotten away with on her birthday. The ice cream was rich and sweet. Sophie dug out a chunk with Charles's ruler and grinned up at him.

"It's perfect. Thank you. It tastes exactly like birthdays should taste."

Charles believed food was better eaten in beautiful places: in gardens, or in the middle of lakes, or on boats. “I have a theory,” he said, “that the best place to eat ice cream is in the rain on the outside box of a four-horse carriage.”

Sophie squinted at him. It was sometimes difficult to tell if Charles was joking. “Is it?”

“You don’t believe me?” said Charles.

“No, I don’t.” Sophie struggled to keep a straight face. She could feel a laugh rising. It was like a sneeze; it filled her chest.

“Well, neither do I, to be honest. But it’s possible,” said Charles. “You and I will go out and test it. Never ignore a possible!”

“Fantastic!” Four-horse carriages were, Sophie thought, the best invention in the world. They made you feel like a warrior-queen. “Can we ask to have the horses gallop?”

“We can. Though I suggest that you change into your trousers first. Those skirts are fascinating creations; it’s as though you’ve mugged a librarian,” said Charles.

“Yes! I’ll be quick.” Sophie gathered up her books into her arms. She could only just see over them. “And then?”

“And then we will locate a cab. Very luckily, it happens to be raining.”

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Charles, it turned out, was right. The rain lashed against them as they thundered round corners, and made her ice cream run down over her wrist. The rain whipped her hair into wet snakes behind her. It made eating a challenge, but Sophie liked a challenge.

When they returned, streaming with water and stuffed with ice cream, there was a letter on the doormat. One look at the envelope made Sophie certain it was not a birthday card. All the happiness went out of her in a whoosh.

Charles read it with a tight-set face.

“What is it?” Sophie tried to read over his shoulder, but he was too tall. “Who’s it from? What do they want?”

“I’m not quite sure.” His face was transformed. He was unrecognizable as the man he had been only a minute before. “It seems there is to be an inspection.”

“Of what? Of me?”

“Of us. It’s from the National Childcare Agency. They say they have doubts about my ability to care for you, now that you are a young woman. They think I will be unable to teach you how to behave like a lady.”

“What? But that’s crazy!”

“Governments often are.”

“I’m only just twelve! I’m practically still eleven.”

“Nonetheless, they intend to come.”

“Who is ‘they’? Who sent it?”

“Two people; one is called Martin Eliot. The other name I can’t read.”

“But why? Why should two strangers get to decide about me? They don’t know me! Who’s Martin Eliot? He’s just a man!”

“I know these sorts of people. They’re not men. They’re mustaches with idiots attached.”

Sophie snorted with snotty laughter. She wiped her eyes. “So what do we do?”

“I suppose we should clean.” Together, she and Charles looked around the hall. It was clean enough already, she thought, if you didn’t count the poems she had copied onto the wallpaper, or the

spiderwebs. Sophie liked spiders, and always dusted around them.

~~“Do I have to move the spiders?”~~

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“I fear so,” said Charles. “And I will have to cut the ivy.” Last year an ivy vine had worked its way in through the window, and spread over one wall in the hall. It had settled like a Sunday hat over the portrait of Charles’s grandmother. Sophie loved it.

“Could you leave the part growing on Grandmother Pauline? They wouldn’t notice, would they?”

“I can try, certainly.” But Charles was clearly not thinking of grandmothers. “And then there’s you, Sophie.”

“What about me?” Sophie felt herself flushing. “Is there something wrong with me?”

“To me, of course, you are as close to perfect as a human can be. But I have a suspicion—though please do correct me if I’m wrong—that your hair will not meet with approval. No, not the front—here, at the back.”

Sophie groped around the back of her head. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Nothing is wrong with it, exactly. It’s just that it resembles a ball of string. I believe hair is more usually described as a curtain. Or a wave.”

“Oh!” It was true, she supposed. She had never read about a heroine with balls of hair. “Leave it to me.”

That night, Sophie went to battle with her hair. At first, her hair seemed to be winning. The knot was at the base of her neck, the most awkward place to reach. This was usually the way with knots. Grimly, Sophie tugged, until she had a handful of hair in her lap, but still the knot was enormous. She pulled vengefully, and the comb snapped in two and stayed there, hanging in her hair. She swore under her breath. *“Damn.”*

Sophie ran down to the kitchen and found the scissors. She wove them into the middle of the knot and bit down on her tongue for courage, and cut. It was surprisingly satisfying. When she had cut off the comb and most of the knot, she braided her hair into a thick rope over her shoulder. Unless you looked closely, she thought, you would barely notice. She felt gingerly at her scalp. Being ladylike was a painful enterprise.

On the day of the inspection, Sophie scrubbed at her hands until her fingernails shone and she rubbed half the skin off her knuckles. Charles polished her shoes with candle wax and a lump of coal, and, as they had no iron, pressed her clothes with a hot brick. Charles mopped the floor, and Sophie soaped the walls, until she had taken half the pattern off the wallpaper. She placed jars full of flowers all over the house. Everything smelled of rose petals and soap.

“I think it looks fine,” she said. Sophie had always loved the house, and it seemed especially handsome today. “I think it looks perfect.”

Then they hovered by the door, unable to sit still. At the last minute, a thought occurred to Sophie.

“How long do I have until they come?” she asked Charles.

“Three minutes, or thereabouts. Why?”

“I’ll be right back.” She took the stairs four at a time. In her bedroom, she powdered her nose with talcum powder and rubbed red paint on her cheeks and lips. There was no mirror. She hoped it looked right.

Charles blinked when she came down. Sophie’s suspicions that her cheeks were more “clown” than “gracious young lady” deepened, but before either had time to say anything, the doorbell rang.

The woman on the doorstep had a clipboard, and an expression like a damp sock. The man next to her had a briefcase and elaborate facial hair. Sophie thought he looked faintly familiar.

Charles whispered, “Mustache,” and Sophie fought not to laugh.

They led the pair into the sitting room. The couple refused all offers of tea and began the questioning at once. Sophie winced away from them. It was like being under fire.

“Why isn’t the child at school?” said the woman.

Sophie waited to see if Charles would answer. When he didn’t, she said, “I don’t go to school.”

“Why not?” said the man.

“I learn from Charles.”

“Do you have proper lessons?” The woman looked skeptical.

“Yes!” said Sophie. “Of course I do.” A useful sentence popped into her head. “Charles says ‘Without knowledge, you see only half the world.’”

“Hmph. And these lessons take place every day?”

“Yes,” lied Sophie. In fact, they did lessons whenever either of them remembered. Sophie found very easy to forget.

“Can you read?” said the woman.

“Yes, of course!” That was stupid. Sophie couldn’t remember not being able to read, any more than she could remember not being able to walk.

“Can you do mathematics?”

“Um. Yes,” said Sophie. That was true. Sort of. “Although, I hate the seven times table. I like the eights and nines, though.”

“Can you recite your catechism?”

“No.” Sophie’s insides grew colder. “I don’t know what that is. Is he a poet? I can do most of Shakespeare, if you’d like.”

“No, thank you. That will not be necessary. Can you cook?”

Sophie nodded.

“Plain cooking, pastry, a fine trifle for dinner parties?”

“Um. Yes, I think so.” It wasn’t a lie, she told herself firmly. She’d never made a trifle, but anyone who could read could cook, as long as you had the right books.

“You can’t be eating well; you slouch, and you’re too pale. Why is she so pale?”

For the first time, Charles spoke. “She is not too pale. She is cut from the stuff of the moon.”

The woman snorted; the man was distracted, looking around the room. “Is this where you do lessons?” he asked Sophie.

“We mostly do them—” She had been going to say “on the roof,” but Charles widened his eyes in warning, and his head gave the subtlest of shakes. “Yes,” she said. “Mostly in here.”

“Then where do you keep your blackboard?”

Sophie couldn’t think of a convincing answer to that one. She told the truth. “We don’t have a blackboard.”

“And how do you expect to learn anything without a blackboard?” asked the woman.

“Well, I have books. And paper. And,” Sophie said, brightening, “I’m also allowed to write on the walls, and draw, as long as I don’t do it in the parlor. Or the hall, unless I do it behind the coat stand.”

For some reason, the woman was not appeased by this. She stood, and turned to the man. “Shall we begin? I dread to think what we’ll find.”

The pair marched through the house as though they were planning to buy it. They inspected the sheets for holes and the curtains for dust, and looked in the larder. They took notes of the rows of cheeses and jars of jam. Finally, they marched up to Sophie’s attic room and looked through her chest of drawers.

The woman drew out the red trousers, and the man shook his head sadly. The green pair—which



had accrued some interesting stains around the ankle—made the woman shudder.

~~“Unacceptable!” she said. “I find it shocking, Mr. Maxim, that you let this go on.”~~

Sophie said, “But he doesn’t *let it go on*, at all. I mean—they’re mine. They’re nothing to do with Charles.”

“Please hold your tongue, child.”

Sophie longed to hit her. Charles moved to stand closer to Sophie, but he said nothing. He had barely spoken, and he kept silent all the way downstairs, and only as he shook their hands did he speak a few words to the inspectors. Sophie strained, but could not hear. She closed the door behind them and sank down on the mat.

“What did they say? Did I do all right?” She chewed on the end of her braid. “I hated them. Didn’t you? I wanted to spit. That man! He had a face like a baboon.”

“He did seem excellent proof of the theory of evolution, didn’t he? And the woman! I have more wrought-iron railings with more human generosity.”

“What were they saying, when they left?”

“They said they are going to submit a report.”

“That wasn’t all, though, was it? You were talking for longer than that.”

“I think we’d better have a talk. Where is the best place for talking? The kitchen?”

Sophie didn’t want to be anywhere the inspectors had passed through. The house felt damp and clammy in their wake. “No, the roof.”

“Of course. I’ll fetch some whisky. Why don’t you run down to the kitchen and fetch the cream jug? It helps to have cream, I think, on days like these.”

Sophie ran. The cream jug was cooling in the icebox. There was jam, and a loaf fresh from the oven; she added that. She found Charles perched on the chimney pot.

“Sit down. Have a little whisky.” He looked about the rooftop for a glass, then handed her the bottle. “Take a gulp.” The whisky made Sophie cough and spit, but he said, “Think of it as medicine. Yes, well done. Are you all right?”

“Yes, of course. What’s going on? What did they say?”

“Sophie. You must try to believe what I am going to tell you. You must try to understand. Can you do that for me?”

“Of course I can,” said Sophie. She stared at him indignantly. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Don’t be too sure, my love. Believing things is a talent.”

“Fine. I’ll believe you. What is it?”

“Have some bread and jam. You can dip it in the cream jug.”

“What *is* it, Charles?”

Charles took some bread and rolled it between his finger and thumb. “First of all, it will break my heart if they take you away. You have been the great green adventure of my life. Without you my days would be unlit.” He glanced down at her. “Do you understand that, Sophie? Do you believe me?”

Sophie nodded. She flushed, in the way she always did when people said nice things about her. “Yes, I think I do.”

“But there is nothing I can do to stop these people. You are not legally mine. Legally, you are the property of the state. Do you understand that?”

“No, I don’t. That’s stupid!”

“I could not agree more. It is nonetheless the case, my child.”

“How can I belong to the state? The state isn’t a person. The state can’t love anyone.”

“I know. But, I believe, they intend to take you. The pair didn’t say anything definite. But the

hinted.”

Sophie’s whole body suddenly felt cold. “They can’t.”

“They can, my darling. Governments can do both great and stupid things.”

“What if we ran away? To another country? We could go to America.”

“They’d stop us, Sophie. They would tell the police I was kidnapping you.”

“How do you know? I bet they wouldn’t!” Sophie jumped to her feet and tugged at his hand, his sleeve, his hair. “Let’s leave. We can just go, Charles. We don’t need to tell anyone. Before they send in their report. Please!” He hadn’t moved. She took hold of his sleeve. “*Please.*”

“I’m so sorry, dear heart.” He looked twice as old as he had looked that morning, and she almost heard his neck bones creak as he shook his head. “They would come and fetch you back, my darling. There are people in this world who come out in a rash at the sight of a broken rule. Miss Eliot is one such person. Martin Eliot is another.”

Sophie jumped up. “*Eliot!* I knew he looked familiar! Charles, do you think they’re related?”

“Good Lord! Yes, in fact, quite possibly. My God! She once said her brother worked in government.”

“The witch!” Somehow, the idea of Miss Eliot helped. Anger was easier than misery. “I won’t give up, you know.” It made her feel tougher, and meatier, just to say it. “I won’t go.”

It was one thing to vow to be tough. When the letter came, toughness felt very difficult.

It arrived on a gray Monday morning. It was addressed to Charles, but she would have opened anyway, had he not taken it gently from her. She watched his face, but it was wary and tight—impossible to guess.

“Can I see? Let me see?” she asked, before he could possibly be finished. “What does it say? Is it good? Can I stay? You have to say I can. Let me see?”

Charles said, “It’s . . . it’s not . . .” For once, he seemed to be without words. He handed it to her. Sophie held it up to the light.

*D*EAR MR. MAXIM,  
We, the undersigned, write to inform you of  
CHANGES IN OUR POLICY  
on the guardianship of female persons  
aged between twelve and eighteen years.

Sophie scowled. “Why do they have to talk like that?” She hated official letters. They made her feel nervous. The people who wrote them sounded like they had filing cabinets where their hearts should be.

“Read on, Sophie.” Charles’s voice was darker than usual.

The committee has come to  
THE UNANIMOUS CONCLUSION  
that a young woman  
SHOULD NOT BE RAISED  
by a single man unrelated to her,

except in unusual circumstances.

---

In the case of your ward,  
SOPHIA MAXIM,  
it was felt certain elements of her  
upbringing have been  
ABSOLUTELY UNSUITABLE  
for a female child.

“What do they mean, ‘certain elements?’” Sophie stabbed at the paper with her finger. “I don’t understand!”

“I don’t know. I can guess.”

“They mean my trousers, don’t they?” she said. “That’s mad! They’re evil!”

“Keep reading,” said Charles.

We must therefore inform you that  
YOUR WARD WILL BE REMOVED  
from your charge and enrolled in  
SAINT CATHERINE’S ORPHANAGE  
in north Leicestershire. Noncompliance will  
result in a court order against you and a maximum  
of fifteen years penal servitude.  
The committee’s decision is final  
AND EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY.

“‘Penal servitude’? What does that mean?”

“Jail,” said Charles.

The child care officer of your borough,  
Miss Susan Eliot, will collect your ward on  
WEDNESDAY THE FIFTH OF JUNE.

Yours sincerely,  
*Martin Eliot*

Sophie felt suddenly hollow. She fished about for something to say. “They spelled my name wrong.”

“They did.”

“If they have to break my heart, they could at least have spelled my name right.” She looked at Charles. He did not seem to be reacting.

“Charles?” A tear was making its way down her face. She licked it angrily away. She said, “Please say something.”

“So you understood the letter?”

“They’re taking me away from you. They’re taking you away from me.”

“They intend to try, certainly.”

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She didn’t want to touch the letter. She dropped it, and stood on it. Then she picked it up and read it again. She couldn’t bear that “absolutely unsuitable.” “Do you think if I’d worn skirts? And if I didn’t slouch? Or if I was prettier? Or, I don’t know, sweeter? Would they have let me stay?”

Charles shook his head. She was astonished to see that he was silently weeping.

“What now?” She slipped her hand into his pocket, and drew out his handkerchief and placed it in his hand. “Here. Charles, please say something. What do we do now?”

“I am so sorry, my child.” She had never seen a man look so white. “I fear there is nothing.”

Quite suddenly Sophie couldn’t bear it. She pelted up to her bedroom, tripping over the stairs. The tears in her eyes were making the world blur. Before she had time to think, Sophie grabbed hold of the poker and swung it at the cello case. It split with a crack. She swung again, at the pitcher of water beside her bed, which shattered over her blanket and pillow. Sophie heard an exclamation below, and footsteps running up the stairs. She stamped and kicked. The cello case splintered, and shards of painted wood flew across the room.

If you have never broken up a wooden box with a poker, it is worth trying. Slowly, Sophie felt her breath become more manageable.

“I won’t go,” she whispered with each swing. “I *won’t*.”

After a while, although the tears and snot still ran down her face, they did not choke her. She found a rhythm—*smash*, breathe, *crash*, breathe.

“I won’t go,” she whispered. “No.” *Smash*. “No.” *Crash*. “No.”

It took her some minutes to realize that Charles was standing in the doorway.

“Still alive, dear heart?”

“Oh! I was just—”

“Quite. Very sensible.” He surveyed the room, then led her by the hand to the bathroom. “The tub calls for hot water.”

He would say nothing else, and Sophie could think of nothing to do but to sit curled on a pile of towels, hiccupping and sniffing, while he put every pot they owned on the stove downstairs to boil and added dried lemon peel and mint to the tub until it steamed. “Stay in for half an hour. I have some things to attend to.”

Sophie couldn’t bear to sit still in the tub. Instead she stamped to the window and back again, and thumped the wall, until Charles’s voice floated up the stairs. “Get in the tub, Sophie, and do some splashing. You will be surprised at what a difference splashing can make.”

Sophie had forgotten that the bathroom floorboards were directly above the kitchen. She sighed and undressed, tugging vindictively at her boots. “All right!” she called. “I’m in now.”

Having said it, she had to get in or it would be a lie. The hot water came up to her belly button and the lemon peel lapped against her legs. Once her body was covered in hot water, all the fight seemed to go out of it. Sophie sagged, and lay in the tub. Her heart sagged too. She could think of nothing.

When, at last, she clambered out, she made it only as far as her bedroom rug before her legs collapsed and she dropped down, still wrapped in her towel. She lay there, half-awake, and went on with her staring at nothing.

Gradually, the nothing changed into a something. A small dot of light was playing against the wall, and she had been staring at it unseeingly for many minutes.

She turned back to the pile of splintered wood that had once been her cello case, to see what was

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