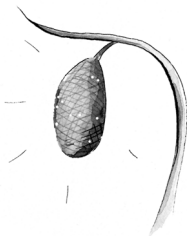


chapter one
DECISION



So here's the situation. You've won tickets for your whole family to take a vacation anywhere you like. What do you do?

Most normal people would start with the Internet, or a brochure or two, perhaps a travel agent. My parents? Thirteen different road maps, two atlases, and a box of pushpins. That's what you need to plan a vacation in *our* house. And this was day three of planning. Remember, I said *normal* people do it the other way — the easy way.

I grabbed a magazine and left them to it.

* * *

“How about the Poconos?” Dad asked, opening up the fourth map and laying it on top of the others across the kitchen table. “We’ve never been there.”

“Yes, we have. Don’t you remember? We were on our way to visit friends and ran out of gas, so we had to stay there for the night.”

“Oh, yes. A little hilly, wasn’t it?”

Mom leaned farther across the map, knocking a cup of cold coffee all over the mountain range—and herself. “What about Florida?” she asked, wiping her shirt with a tea towel.

“Too far.”

“New York?”

“Too near.”

I got up from my stool and joined them at the table. “Mom. Dad. You know, this is . . .”

Dad looked up as my voice trailed off. Mom was too busy opening the box of pushpins to notice the hesitation in my voice. “Come on, let’s just stick one of these in a place and go for it,” she said. She was on a mission. She started rolling up the tea towel that she’d just used to mop up the coffee. “We’ll do it blindfolded,” she announced firmly.

“‘This is’ what?” Dad asked, stopping to look at me. “What is it, sweetheart?”

This is supposed to be my vacation, I wanted to say.
This is my prize.

I'd won it at the school's talent show at the end of the year. Tickets for my parents and me to go anywhere we liked. Anywhere *I* liked. I was the one who'd won them! We'd been planning to go in the summer, but my parents had had lots of parties booked. Their party-entertaining business is at its busiest in the summer, so we'd ended up having to postpone the trip to my fall-break vacation.

I looked into Dad's eyes. They were dark and tired. He smiled his goofy smile at me, and I couldn't help softening. He deserved a vacation as much as I did. So did Mom. They'd both worked really hard all summer without a real break at all. At least I'd had a week away at Charlotte's — if you could count that.

I took Dad's hand in mine. "This is fun," I said, forcing a smile. "Go on — I'll go first."

Mom stood behind me and tied the tea towel around my head. "No peeping, now," she said. "Just stick the pin in the map, and wherever it lands, that's where we'll go!"

"Unless it's in the middle of a city," Dad said.

"Or in the middle of the ocean," Mom added.

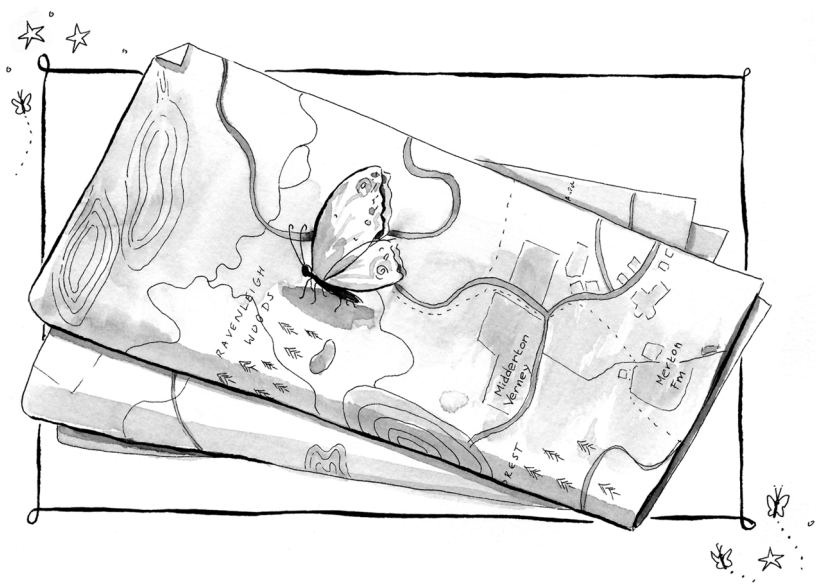
“Or a building site,” I chipped in, finally letting their puppy-dog enthusiasm infect me. I reached into the box of pushpins and took one out. I was about to stick it into the map when Dad grabbed my arm. “Wait!” he yelled.

“What?”

“Look!” he said, ignoring the fact that I had a coffee-stained tea towel wrapped over my eyes. I pulled the towel off and rubbed my face.

I saw it right away. A butterfly, fluttering over the map. It must have flown in through the window.

“It’s beautiful,” Mom said.



“I’ve never seen markings like that before,” Dad added, silently bending over the table. “So intricate.”

“So pretty,” I said, watching as it flew the length of the map, twisting this way and that, in tight little circles and figure eights. Its wings buzzing and vibrating, it hovered just above the map, as though searching for the perfect place to land.

It finally chose a spot in the top corner of the map, and we all leaned in to take a closer look.

“Careful,” Mom whispered. “Don’t want to frighten it away.”

The butterfly maneuvered slowly across the map, wings open, like an airplane taxiing to the runway. Its wings were so delicate. They looked as though they’d been made from the thinnest silk in the world and decorated with the tiniest brushes that could possibly exist. Dark purple lines wriggled all around the tips, which were dotted with baby pink spots. Dark purple faded to ocean blue at the center of each wing.

“Amazing,” I said.

“Nature’s incredible, isn’t it?” Dad murmured.

“Hang on a sec.” Mom tilted her head to peer under the butterfly on the map. “Look at that,” she said.

“We are looking at it,” Dad said with a laugh. “Can’t you see us? This is us looking at it.”

“Not at the butterfly!” Mom said, pointing at the map. “At where it’s landed.”

The map showed a patch of green bushes and stick pictures of trees, with a straggly blue line weaving in between them.

“A forest with a river running through it,” Dad said. “What about it?”

“It’s exactly what we’re looking for!” Mom said.

“It’s certainly not in the middle of a city,” I said.

“Or in the middle of the ocean,” Dad added, winking at me.

“Or a building site!” Mom concluded.

“Ravenleigh Woods,” I read from just below the butterfly’s wings. “Sounds nice.”

“Doesn’t it?” Mom said dreamily. “Kind of romantic.”

“That’s where we’re going, then?” Dad asked.

Mom and I looked at each other. The butterfly fluttered its wings. “Yes!” I said.

“Why not?” Mom agreed. “A butterfly’s as good as a pushpin.”

Which is quite a strange thing to say, if you think

about it, but I rarely question the way my parents' minds work. At this point I was just happy a decision had been made. Anything that meant we could get rid of the maps that were beginning to take over the house.

"Good. I agree. I'll start checking out local B&Bs," Dad said. He squeezed my hand before pulling Mom over toward him. Twirling her in a circle, he danced her across the kitchen floor. Mom's skirt flowed around her as Dad spun her. While they giggled and whirled around the kitchen, I started putting away the maps.

The butterfly was still sitting in the same spot. I stopped and looked at it again. It turned to face me, its tiny, goggly bug eyes trained on mine.

"Hey, I know you're only a butterfly and all that, but you just did me a big favor," I said. "It's taken us three days to make that decision!"

And you know what? A moment later, I swear the butterfly replied. I mean, I know that it didn't really give an *actual* reply — obviously. It was probably the wind blowing through the window, ruffling the maps. But it sounded like words. And it sounded as though it came from the butterfly.

See you there.

I glanced over my shoulder to see if Mom and Dad had heard it, but they were too busy jiving around the kitchen to notice anything else. It was just the wind. I laughed at myself. I was at it again.

You see, an incredible thing happened to me a little while ago. I had a fairy of my very own! Honestly, it's true. Well, she wasn't actually *mine*. Daisy always made sure to point out that she didn't *belong* to me—but she was on an assignment that involved giving me three wishes. By the time she'd finished, it had become more than an assignment. We became like real friends—best friends, even.

That was months ago now, and it seemed I still couldn't stop hoping to find magic everywhere. To be honest, it was more that I wanted Daisy to come back. I looked for evidence of fairies and magic in everything. I was even trying to convince myself that a butterfly had talked to me now! I laughed out loud as I looked back at the map.

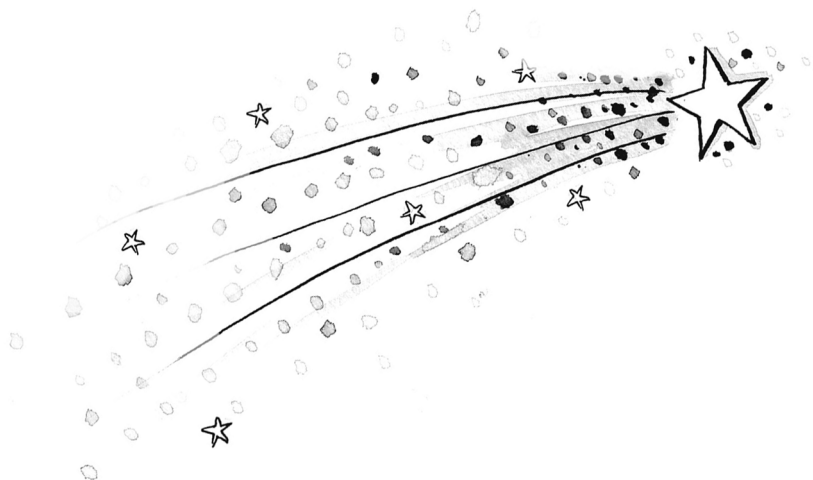
But, just for fun, I whispered back, "Yeah, see you there."

The second I'd spoken, the butterfly slowly opened and closed its wings, as if it were clapping. Then it inched up off the map, rising like a

helicopter. It was almost as though it had waited for me to reply before leaving.

A moment later, it flew straight out the window — and was gone.

I shook my head, laughing quietly at myself. Then I folded up the map and thought nothing more of it.



I waited on the highest branch of the farthest tree in the forest, as I'd been told. The view was incredible from up here. The tops of the trees waved in the breeze, their leaves rustling softly, as though they were whispering to the rest of the forest to be quiet.

Shhhhhhhhhhh.

A patch of sunlight flickered in between the leaves, growing into a sparkling fan on the forest's floor. Tiny triangular rainbows danced in its light.

My supervisor had arrived.

"Good work, Daisy. You did well."

"Is she coming?"

“They’ll be here next week.”

Next week! I was really going to see Philippa again, after all this time! “I will be able to meet up with her, won’t I?” I asked.

“Daisy, we can’t make any promises. Your special mission was to bring her here. You’ve done that, and we’re grateful. But you still have your own job to get on with at Triple D.”

“A job where she’ll be right on the doorstep!”

“Even so. We can’t allow any distractions from our main objective.”

“Which is what?” I asked briskly. I knew better than to talk to FGSunray239 disrespectfully, but I couldn’t stop myself. Spikes of annoyance were growing inside me so sharply they were making my wings itch.

The sunlight faded slightly. “I’m afraid I can’t tell you that.”

“Why not? If it concerns Philippa, it concerns me. She’s my friend.” *My best friend*, I added under my breath.

“Daisy, in your previous assignment with this client, you showed a high level of personal involvement.”

“So? I completed the job, didn’t I?”

“You did indeed—and you did it very well.” FGSunray239 smiled, and the treetops sparkled for a moment, as if

grateful for her warmth. “Your compassion for the child was fully in keeping with your assignment. But too much personal attachment can be dangerous, and in your case it made you careless.”

“Careless? What do you mean?”

“I’m referring to your ability to keep confidential information to yourself. For this reason, your role in this part of the assignment is now over.”

“I won’t do it again,” I said feebly—although in my heart I wasn’t so sure. I wanted to share *everything* with Philippa! That was what you did with a best friend, wasn’t it?

“Maybe you wouldn’t,” FGSunray239 said. “But we can’t take any risks. A high degree of confidentiality is needed for this mission, or it will fail. And Daisy . . .”

“What?” I looked up, dazzled by the light shining brightly before me.

“A high-ranking fairy godmother is watching this case very closely and has let us know, in no uncertain terms, that we must *not* allow this mission to fail.”

Despite the warmth of the sunlight all around, I felt a shiver sneak through me, making my wings flutter and twitch. “I understand,” I said.

“Good. Now put this extra task out of your mind and

go back to your job. You have work to do. There's a new delivery waiting for you."

And with that, FGSunray239 disappeared, taking the sparkling light with her and leaving the trees to continue whispering among themselves.

chapter two
THE COTTAGE



Well, this is nice, isn't it?" Mom called from the living room as Dad and I lugged our bags into the kitchen.

We'd decided to rent a cottage in the end. We'd managed to track down a couple of B&Bs in the area, but they were full. There was a big swanky hotel about five miles down the road, with two swimming pools and a Jacuzzi and entertainment every night, but Mom and Dad didn't want that. "Not our scene," they said.

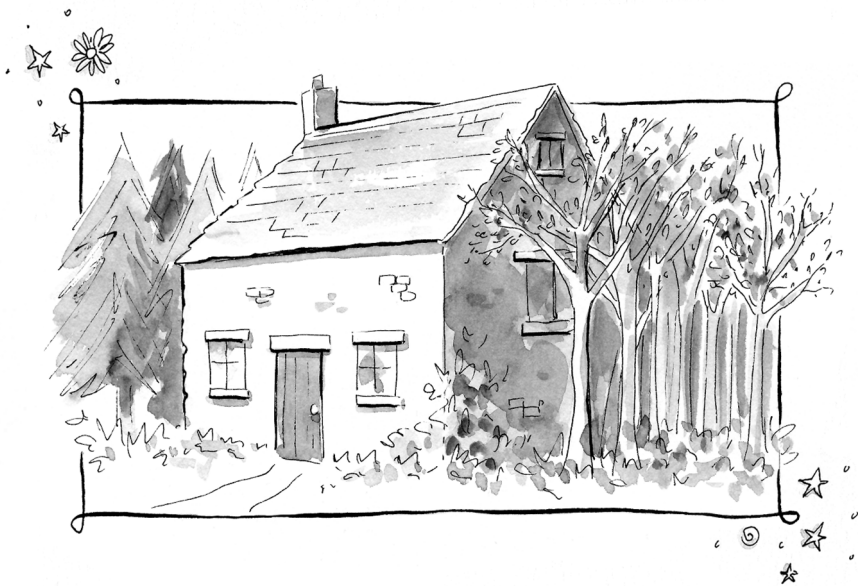
I would have argued — swimming every day for

a week in a heated pool; how could that not be anyone's scene? — till I saw the hotel's dress code. The brochure said guests had to be "neatly attired at all times." At mealtimes, ties for the men and evening dresses for women were "encouraged." The thought of my parents dressed up in evening wear was the biggest laugh I'd had all year. They didn't often stray from their jeans and tie-dyed T-shirts with Greenpeace slogans on them.

And the idea of having to accompany them seven nights in a row while they tried to behave like normal grown-ups was a stress that even two swimming pools and a Jacuzzi couldn't outweigh. No, the rented cottage would be just fine. The compromise was that they'd said we'd see if we could get guest passes and go swimming for a day while we were here.

A fence ran around the cottage, beyond which tall, thin trees stretched almost higher than I could see, their branches reaching out toward the roof and tickling the upstairs windows. There was a gate behind the cottage that led directly into the forest.

"It's all right here," Dad said, opening every door he could find and sticking his nose in every cupboard. There were two patio doors leading from the



kitchen out to a small garden. A few rays of late-afternoon sun beamed in, lighting up a small patch on the floor.

I joined Mom in the living room. A fireplace was filled with logs, and a comfy sofa and two big cozy-looking chairs stood facing it, all ready to be snuggled into. Behind them, shelves were stacked from floor to ceiling with books and games.

“Scrabble,” Mom said. “Great! But I bet half the letters are missing.”

I headed upstairs to check out the bedrooms.

The floorboards creaked and groaned as I

inspected each room. At the end of the corridor, there was a big double bedroom with a four-poster bed and a connected bathroom. That would be Mom and Dad's room, no doubt. At the other end of the corridor, the floor sloped past another bathroom and down to a second bedroom. It had a four-poster bed, too, with curtains draped all around it. Yikes — a bit too much for me!

I was turning to go back downstairs when I noticed another staircase in the hall. It was more like a ladder, with chunky wooden steps leading almost vertically up to a trapdoor. It sort of reminded me of our tree house at home.

I climbed the stairs and stuck my head through the trapdoor. Another bedroom. Smaller than the other two, it had just a single bed with a tiny table next to it. A long wooden beam stretched across the ceiling. A square window with a big metal frame sat in the middle of a low stone wall on one side. The front half of the ceiling sloped down all the way to the floor. I hitched myself up into the room. There was only just enough room to stand! It was like a secret den.

I wondered who used to live in this room. It must

have been a child. A grown-up would have been too tall. Maybe it was a girl like me. Someone I could have been friends with. I would have enjoyed coming over to visit and hanging out with her up here.

When we'd booked the cottage, the owners had said we were almost the first to rent it. The family who used to live here had only sold it to them in the last year. I couldn't help wondering where the family had gone to and why they would sell such a lovely house.

Either way, this was definitely going to be my room!

I ran downstairs to get my bags. Mom was still exploring the living room. "They've got lots of games," she said vaguely as I got my bags from the kitchen and dragged them past her.

Dad had found some leaflets and spread them out on the table in the middle of the living room. "Lots going on around here," he said, flicking through the leaflets. "Hey, there's salsa dancing on Tuesdays."

I prepared myself for a week of being embarrassed by my parents. Which was quite easy to do. My parents embarrassed me most of the time, so I was pretty much always prepared.

“There’s a stone circle near here, too,” Dad murmured.

“Ooh, is there a full moon this week?” Mom replied, coming into the kitchen and joining him at the table. I tried not to despair as I headed back upstairs with my bags.

I lay on the bed, looking around my bedroom. It was like a sanctuary, my own little hiding place from the world. The only thing wrong with it was—well, it would have been nice to share it. I felt a little bubble of sadness rise inside me. If this had been like our old vacations, Charlotte would probably have been with me.

Charlotte’s my best friend. Or *was* my best friend. It was still really hard to admit that we’d grown apart. She and her family moved away last year, and our lives had quickly started going in different directions. We kept in touch for a while with e-mails and an occasional phone call. I even went to stay with her in the summer, but it was a disaster. It was so strange; despite knowing each other nearly all our lives, we found we didn’t have anything to say to each other after the first couple of

days. I spent most of the week wanting to go home. Things hadn't been the same between us since I'd met Daisy.

Charlotte is one of those types who thinks reality is reality. Which, when you put it like that, is quite hard to argue with, I suppose. But I think there's more to life than just the things that make sense!

When it was simply a case of our having different opinions, it wasn't so important. I didn't mind Charlotte laughing at my theories about how rays of sun poking through a cloud might be channels for carrying messages from another dimension. I kind of laughed at it myself, and it was part of the fun we shared.

But it all changed with Daisy. Daisy really *was* a fairy! A fairy godmother! Or fairy godsister; that was what we decided she'd be called. It made more sense, seeing as she was the same age as me. But the point is — she was real. And no amount of logical argument could convince me that she wasn't. I *saw* her, *talked* to her, made *friends* with her. And she changed my life when she gave me three wishes — even if the biggest change was that I discovered my life was pretty good as it was.

Once I knew that fairies existed for real, I wasn't OK with Charlotte laughing at me anymore. I tried telling her about Daisy in a letter. I'd hoped that maybe this one time, she'd believe me, that she'd see I was telling her something that really mattered to me. So when her response was to give me the usual stream of facts and figures explaining why fairies were a physical impossibility, well, I guess something changed for me after that.

From then on, I stopped wanting to share things with Charlotte so much. What was the point? For one thing, she was living hundreds of miles away, and from the sound of her e-mails, she was getting more and more involved in her new life and further away from the one we used to share. And for another, why bother trying to explain things to someone who tells you that the things you really believe in are a bunch of jokes and nonsense?

I actually did ask her if she wanted to come on vacation with us. Part of me wanted her to, hoping that perhaps we'd get our old friendship back if we spent some time together, away from all her new things—just the two of us with my parents. But a bigger part of me was nervous that if she did,

we'd end up spending another week having nothing to say to each other. So when she said that she couldn't leave her pony and her new puppy, I was honestly more relieved than disappointed. It felt horrible to admit it, but it was true.

It didn't stop me from feeling a bit lonely now; although when I thought about the week ahead, it was Daisy I wished I could be sharing it with, not Charlotte.

But Daisy was even more out of my life than Charlotte. She'd done her assignment, and that was that. No matter how much I wished I could see her again, or looked for scraps of evidence that she was still around, it was probably time I faced that truth as well. Daisy was gone, and she wasn't coming back. Charlotte and I had grown apart. And I still hadn't found a new best friend at school. Which meant that right now, things weren't going so well, actually.

I slowly unpacked my clothes, putting them away in the tiny chest of drawers under the window.

"Philippa!" Mom called from landing. "We're going out to explore the village. You coming?"

"Two minutes," I called down. I threw the rest of my clothes on the bed and joined them downstairs.

Mom was unwrapping a dish she'd brought from home and putting it in the oven. "Lentil bake," she said. "Should be ready in half an hour."

"Right; let's hit the town!" Dad said with a grin. Then, looping my arm in his, he made me copy his silly walk all the way into the village.

Well, I always had Mom and Dad, I reminded myself. They might be the ditziest dingbats on the planet, but at least they hadn't deserted me.

Hitting the town didn't take long.

There were three main roads that led into the center of the village, where a group of shops and a couple of restaurants huddled around a cobbled square. A secondhand bookshop, three gift shops, a grocery store, and a deli. They were mostly closed, so we had to settle for window shopping.

Mom spotted some clay dragons in the window of one of the gift shops; it was called Potluck. "Oh, look at these!" she enthused. "We have to come back and get one of them."

Dad peered through the glass, his head cocked almost upside down. "Not at that price, we don't!" he sputtered. "Nearly two hundred dollars for that one!"

I scanned the shopwindow. As well as the dragons — which took up half the window — there were brightly painted cups and saucers, enormous plates with writing all around the edges, photo frames with prints of baby-size feet in blues and pinks all over them, plant pots, piggy banks, all huddled together on the wide shelves.

“Oh, look,” Mom said. She was pointing to a poster in the middle of the window.

“‘Make a mug. Paint a plate. Pottery sessions for the whole family,’” I read.

“That sounds like fun, don’t you think?” Mom squealed excitedly. “We could make things for each other.”

“Good idea. At two hundred dollars apiece, it’s about time one of us became a professional dragon-maker!” Dad said with a wink. Then he looked more closely. “Hey, that’s the same as one of the leaflets in the cottage,” he said. “Said something about a special offer this week: half price or something.”

“What d’you think? Shall we check it out one day?” Mom asked, looking at me.

At least it would keep me busy; it might even

stop me from feeling so miserable and lonely. “Why not?” I said.

“Right. That’s settled,” Dad said. Then, grabbing my arm and looping it back over his, he silly-walked me back to the cottage.

“Almost dinnertime!” he announced. “There’s a slice of lentil bake in that kitchen with my name on it.”

Which, knowing the bizarreness of my mom’s dishes, there probably was.

Mom poked her head through the trapdoor. “You sure you’ll be OK up here, sweetheart?” she asked.

“Of course I will,” I replied over the top of the blankets. I loved my little den, even if the bed did sag like a deep well in the middle, and the blankets itched a bit and felt tight all around the edges where they were tucked in. It was still cozy.

“As long as you’re sure,” Mom said, hitching herself up the steps and crawling over to the side of my bed. “Night-night, darling,” she said, kissing my forehead. “Sleep well. Sweet dreams.”

“You, too,” I replied. Once she’d gone, I switched off my light and shut my eyes, suddenly tired out.

Maybe it was from spending all day putting on a happy face for my parents. I didn't want to do anything to spoil their vacation. And anyway, I guess I was glad to be away from home as well. I just wished I had someone to share the trip with.

I turned over, pulling the covers with me, but I couldn't get comfortable. Moments later, I threw them off again, restless and indecisive.

The blankets made my arms itch, and my back was starting to ache from the dip in the mattress. I shifted to the edge of the bed and turned over again.

It was no use. I couldn't sleep. How long had I been lying here? As I tossed and turned, I grew more and more irritable. Desperate for sleep, I tried counting sheep, counting clouds, counting stars — but nothing worked.

I pushed the blankets to the bottom of the bed. It was a hot night. Why was it so hot? Why couldn't I sleep when I was so tired?

My mind raced and scrambled, until eventually I drifted off into a jerky, dreamless sleep.

Tap, tap, tap.

What was that? Something had woken me. I lifted my head off the pillow and listened. Nothing. I let

my head drop back down on the pillow again and was on the verge of falling back to sleep, when —

Tappity-tap, tap, tap.

What was it? Something at the window? My head was heavy and full of sleep.

I peered into the darkness of my bedroom. Nothing. It was probably just one of those huge trees that stretched higher than the roof, its branches hitting the windowpane, scratching at the glass.

I pressed the pillow over my ear and tried to settle back to sleep. But the tapping carried on, growing louder and more insistent.

Tap, tap, taptaptaptap, TAP!

Eventually, I dragged myself out of bed. Kneeling down at the window, I lifted the latch and pushed the window frame. Nothing happened. I pushed harder, but the window was jammed. I pushed again and again, bashing at the frame with my fist. Nothing. Frustration grew inside me, coiling up like a tight spring in my chest.

Come on, open! What's wrong with you?

I peered at the frame through the glow from the bedside lamp. It had been painted down. Surely paint couldn't be that strong? *One more try.*

I hit the frame as hard as I could with the palm of my hand. Finally the window creaked and the paint cracked. I bashed again, nudging it open, bit by bit, but then my hand slipped and I hit the glass, too. It splintered all along the edge and I froze, silently watching to see if the glass was going to shatter and fall out of its frame.

A tiny sliver had split from the side, but apart from that, it was still in one piece. There was a crack running along the edge of the glass, but you could hardly see it. I decided not to worry about it. One tiny piece of glass missing from the edge of the frame wasn't going to hurt anyone!

I opened the window, and the night air rushed in to meet me, fanning my face and soothing my rattled mind.

I leaned out of the window, sticking my face right out and taking a few deep breaths. It felt as if I were breathing the whole forest into me, and I shivered as its cool stillness seeped into the room.

A tiny crescent moon hung low in the sky, as though dangling from an invisible string, like a hammock, lazy and peaceful. The night was completely still.

That was when I realized—there were no branches near my bedroom. Nothing in scratching distance of the window at all. Had I imagined the tapping? I couldn't have—it had woken me up!

But there was nothing here.

Something caught my eye, glinting against the blackness. It was flickering in the ivy below the window, catching the tiny bit of light from the moon.

It glinted again, just out of reach, not near enough to have caused the tapping. Then I saw what it was. The glass—the splinter that had broken from the window—it was stuck in something. I reached down toward it. My hand touched something smooth and feathery. Yikes! I yanked my hand back.

But I was intrigued. What *was* it? I reached out again and unhooked the whatever-it-was as carefully as I could. Bringing it inside, I sat down on the bed and examined it. A metal hoop, with feathers looped all around the edges. The circle was filled with tiny pieces of material all carefully sewn and woven together. The material was so delicate and thin, like a see-through skin of the smallest animal in the world. I'd never seen anything like it. Right

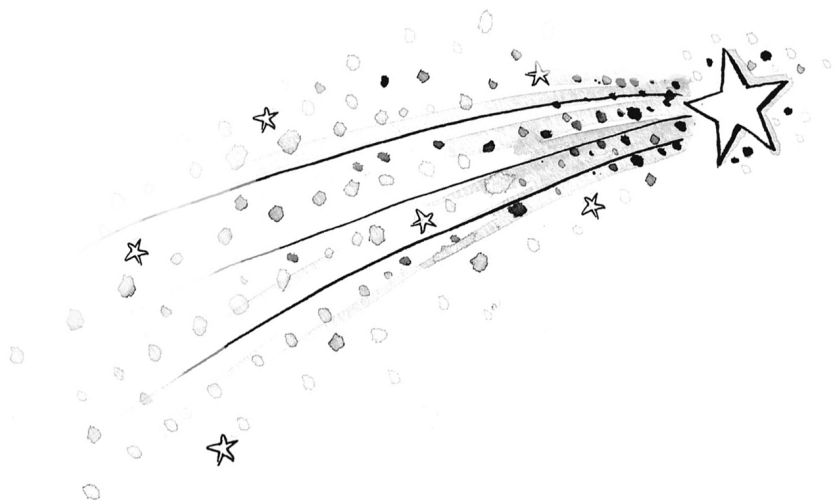
in the center of the delicate skin, the shard of glass had pierced it and was lodged, like an archer's arrow on a bull's-eye.

I got up and shut the window. Then I hooked the feathery thing onto a jagged piece of wood sticking out of the beam above my bed.

Lying down again, I stared up at it, thinking that it reminded me of one of those mobiles you hang above babies' cradles and wishing it had a little wind-up machine inside so that it would turn around and around and play "Rock-a-Bye Baby." The thought made me smile. Or perhaps it was some kind of feathery lucky charm, like a symbol that ancient tribes used to worship. A feathered charm — yes, I liked that idea!

I was finally getting sleepy. Yawning, I told myself something that Dad used to say to me when I was little: if I made sure I still had a smile on my face as I fell asleep, I'd be certain to have happy dreams.

But then, what did Dad know?



Another minute and she'd have woken up—I'm sure she would have. Then I could have seen her.

I couldn't risk waiting, though. I'd sneaked out when I had a spare five minutes. I knew it wasn't long enough—and I knew I'd been warned not to. But still. What did they expect me to do? Sit around doing nothing while my best friend in the world was just down the road?

Well, they could think again. I just had to think of a way to sneak back tomorrow night.

But how? For a moment, I hesitated. Was I crazy? I knew ATC would be watching me closely on this assignment. I had to prove they could trust me, and I didn't want to blow it.

But on the other wing, I had Philippa right here, literally on my doorstep!

No. I couldn't ignore her. I wasn't going to waste another day. I *had* to see her.

I'd think of something. I'd find a way.