

Praise for *Scarlet Ibis*:

'Gill Lewis has established herself as the principal contemporary writer of animal stories . . . perhaps the most uplifting novel I have read this year.'

Lorna Bradbury, *Telegraph*

'tackles racism, isolation and the importance of acceptance and belonging with great sensitivity and intelligence'

Sally Morris, *Daily Mail*

'Lewis's confident, economical prose takes the reader up, up and away.'

Alex O'Connell, *The Times*

'I absolutely loved this: a deeply moving account of two siblings sent to live with foster families.'

Fiona Noble, *Bookseller*

'Gill Lewis makes you feel as though you are there with Scarlet and Red fighting their fights and feeling their pain'

Charlotte Seager, *Guardian*

'A touching story that embraces tough but realistic issues—disability and fostering—and which handles them sensitively and positively'

Parents in Touch

'In one word, this book was perfect.'

Agnieszka Czuchra, *Jersey Evening Post*

'Lewis handles a complex subject with enormous sensitivity in this poignant tale'

Marilyn Brocklehurst, *Bookseller*

Praise for Gill Lewis:

'Opens your eyes, touches your heart, and is so engaging it almost turns the pages for you.'

Michael Morpurgo

'moving and inspirational'

Martin Chilton, *Telegraph*

'One of the strongest voices in support of the natural world writing for children today.'

Jill Murphy, *The Bookbag*

'Breathtaking. Poignant. Unforgettable.'

Virginia McKenna, Founder of the Born Free Foundation

'A beautifully told, nail-biting tale, that will inspire and empower anyone who reads it.'

Kate Humble

'A lyrical, emotive, engrossing adventure.'

Sunday Times

'An uplifting and beautifully told tale . . . with much to appeal to fans of Lauren St John and Michael Morpurgo.'

Bookseller

Scarlet Ibis

Gill Lewis

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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

It was brilliant and very realistic!!'

AISLING, AGE 11

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

EMMA, AGE 10

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

HARRY, AGE 13

'Scarlet Ibis is really good. The description is magic.

I think Gill is one of the best authors ever!'

EVA, AGE 10

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

ISABELLA, AGE 11

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

CHARLOTTE, AGE 11

'Scarlet Ibis is an unputdownable tale of family reunion. I read it all in one go and it made me want to read all the other books by Gill Lewis.'

JONAH, AGE 10





CHAPTER 1

‘Be careful, Red,’ I say.

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

I stare at the space between us. ‘I can see crocodiles.’

‘Caimans,’ he says. ‘We’re not in Africa.’

‘OK, caimans,’ I say.

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

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

Red’s hands clench and unclench in small fists.

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

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

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

'Caroni Swamp,' he says.

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

'What then?' says Red.

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

'Just you and me?' says Red.

'Just you and me,' I say.

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

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

‘Just you and me?’ says Red.

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

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

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

‘Night Red,’ I whisper.

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

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

'It will,' I say.

'When?'

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

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

'Scarlet!'

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

'Scarlet, where are you?'

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

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

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

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

‘What are you looking for?’ I say.

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

‘I locked them in the bathroom cupboard.’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Won't be long,' I yell.

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

It feels that way to me too.

We're safe up here.

Out of reach.

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

'*Titanic*,' says Mum.

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

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

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

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

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

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



CHAPTER 2

‘Scarlet . . . wake up!’

I feel my duvet being tugged away from me, so I hold on tight and bury my head deeper in my pillow.

‘Scarlet!’

I open my eyes and try to blink the sleep away. The digital clock flashes 6.15 a.m. ‘Go back to sleep, Red.’ I say. ‘Too early.’

Red pulls my duvet away. He’s jigging on the spot. He can’t keep still. ‘The egg! It’s happening, Scarlet. Come on!’

I wrap my duvet around me and follow him into his room. Outside, a pale grey dawn is bringing colour back across the rooftops. A sliver of golden light between the clouds promises the sun.

Red is crouched beside the window, his face pressed against the glass. 'Look, Scarlet!'

I kneel down beside him and look into the tangle of sticks and plastic. The mother pigeon is nowhere to be seen, but the small white egg has split in half. I can see the chick inside, curled up, folded and squashed inside the shell. It's straining to get out.

'It's stuck, Scarlet.' Red opens the window until it locks on the safety catch and tries to reach his arm through the small gap. 'It needs help.'

I pull Red back. 'It'll be fine, Red. It has to do this for itself.' I wrap my duvet around Red, too, and we sit and watch the small chick fight its way into the world. 'See?' I say, hugging him tight against me. 'The struggle makes him stronger. Sometimes it's ones like him that become the highest flyers.'

The chick doesn't look like a pigeon. It looks prehistoric, a strange mix of duck and dinosaur, with pinkish-grey skin, stubby un-feathered wings, and a large beak. It sits back on its legs, its mouth gaping open, wanting food. Even now, a minute old, it seems hard to believe it could have fitted into the small shell. Wet orange feathers are matted down against its head and body, but as the sun breaks through the clouds the feathers dry into an orange fuzz of fluff.

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I smile and poke Red in the ribs. 'Know who it reminds me of?'

Red frowns. 'Who?'

'You,' I say.

Red leans closer to the window, his face serious. 'You think so?'

'I think so,' I say. 'We'll have to call him Red as well.'

Red studies the chick as it tries to flap its stubby wings. 'But I'm Red,' he says. He points to the chick. 'He's Little Red.'

My alarm clock blares from my bedroom. 'Time to move,' I say. 'Get ready for school.'

Red scowls. 'Not today.'

'Little Red will be fine until you get home. See . . . the mother pigeon's coming back to feed him.'

The mother pigeon lands in a flurry of feathers and she struts along the ledge, inspecting her chick and pulling sticks into place around it. Red watches the chick push its beak into her mouth and drink a pale watery liquid brought up from her stomach. It looks gross, but Red is fascinated.

'Come on, Red,' I say. 'Time to get dressed.'

'He might fall,' says Red.

The nest is wedged in the corner of the window ledge, a

small hop away from the edge. 'Pigeons have been nesting on buildings and cliffs for years,' I say. 'He'll be fine.'

I help Red with his buttons and his socks and then check on Mum. She's fast asleep, her curtains closed. The room smells stale with smoke, so I open the windows to let a little fresh air inside. The ashtray on her bedside table is now full of stubs. It was empty when I went to bed. I write a note and leave it by her bed: *Mrs Gideon coming at 2 p.m. today. Love you, S & R xxx*

I just hope she's awake in time to read it.

I can't concentrate in class. It's the last lesson of the day: geography with Mr Barnes. Or more like geography with Amar and Chalkie, as they're mucking about, flicking paper up the front. Mr Barnes has got no control. Our Year Seven class is known in the staffroom as the Nightmare Class, something Amar and Chalkie claim as their personal achievement.

But I'm not thinking about geography, or Amar and Chalkie. I'm thinking about Mum, knowing that Mrs Gideon is there in our house, right now. I wish I'd had time to buy some more food for the fridge. There's nothing in it now. Mum had eaten the rest of the bread in the night,

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so I had to buy Red a bacon butty from the station for his breakfast. I've got less than a tenner left until Mum gets her benefits next week, and I don't want to break into zoo money. I promised Red we'd go on Sunday.

Amar and Chalkie and the rest of the class are out of their seats and surging through the door before the bell even stops ringing. Mr Barnes looks like he's just survived a tsunami; stunned and relieved he's made it through another lesson. I squeeze out with the others, shoulder my bag, and run along the back streets to Red's school. It's faster than taking the bus in Friday traffic. I want to avoid Sita and her mum too. I don't want them poking their noses into our problems.

Red's in the hall in afterschool care. The other kids are kicking softballs around, but Red is sitting on his own, as usual. His learning support assistant only comes into school in the mornings. Red's by the window, moving his hands and making shadow patterns on the floor. I stand behind him and watch his shadow bird stretch its wings out wide and fly. It soars, wild and free across the strip of sunlight. It's like the part of him no one else can see, except for me.

'Red?' I say.

He snatches his hands away and spins around, his frown tight across his face. The shadow bird has gone.

'Come on, Red. Let's get home.'

Mrs Evans, the school cleaner stops us on the way out. I think she must live at the school. She does a bit of everything; dinner lady, lollipop lady, cleaner. She's always here.

She leans on her mop. 'Glad I caught you, Scarlet.' She looks around, checking no one else can overhear her. 'Ray's on early shift on the zoo gates on Sunday,' she says. 'Get there before ten if you can.'

I smile and nod. Mrs Evans has had a soft spot for Red since he started at the school. She'd seen Red's fascination with birds and the way they followed him around the playground. She'd convinced her husband to sneak us in the zoo for free and he's been doing it ever since. Once a month, Ray lets us in. Mrs Evans reaches down and ruffles Red's hair. 'Good day, Red?'

Red hides his face in my coat and presses against me.

'He's fine,' I say.

'You're in your own world, aren't you Red?' she says. 'Best place I reckon.'

I take Red's hand. 'We'd better go,' I say. 'Thank you. Tell Ray we'll be there early.'

We stop in the express supermarket on the way home and I buy cheese and bread and some broken biscuits from the reduced-to-clear bin. I've got £5.60 left, which has to

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last us the whole weekend. Red wants to buy some birdseed for the mother pigeon, but it's too expensive and I tell him we'll have to give it crusts of bread instead. I take Red's bag as we walk up the stairwell to our flat. I wonder what the Penguin has put in her assessment. I've kept my fingers crossed all day that Mum will be OK.

I push the door to our flat and frown because it's on the catch. My heart starts thumping in my chest. Mum usually keeps the door locked.

I push the door open wider. 'Mum?'

'Scarlet!' Mrs Gideon turns to face me, a smile pulled across her face. She even looks like a penguin with her black trouser suit and great big beaky nose.

I look beyond her to Mum, sitting at the table. Mum is wearing her green shirt and jeans. Her hair's pulled back in a neat ponytail. I think she might even have some make-up on.

Mrs Gideon beams at Red, too. 'I was a bit late today, but at least this way I get to see all of you.'

Red keeps his eyes on the floor and leans into me. I give him a nudge. 'Why don't you put your bag in your room.'

I put the shopping on the table and glance between Mum and Mrs Gideon.

Mum smiles. 'I've been showing Mrs Gideon your school report, telling her what a clever girl you are.'

I glance across at the Penguin. She's got one up on me already, using Mum to snoop into my school reports.

'You're a hard worker,' says Mrs Gideon. She leans forward and winks. 'Maybe you could put a bit of that effort into keeping your room tidy. Your mum could do with a bit of help around the flat.'

I drop my eyes and smile. 'I'll try,' I say, but I want to jump up and punch the air. I've managed to fool the old Penguin, this time at least.

When Mrs Gideon leaves, I shut the door behind her and slide the chain across. It feels like our flat's been holding its breath, waiting for her to go. I rest my head against the door and feel the relief flood from me, too.

Mum pulls a pack of cigarettes from the back pocket of her jeans.

I put the kettle on and sit down next to her. 'What did she say?'

Mum taps the cigarette packet on the table. 'The usual. She asked a lot of questions.'

'What sort?'

'All sorts,' says Mum. 'Specially about Red. She wanted to know all about Red.'

I feel my mouth go dry. 'Red's fine,' I say. 'Just fine. You told her that, didn't you? You told her Red is fine?'

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Mum takes a cigarette and twirls it in her fingers. 'She wanted to know all about the feathers again.'

'You didn't tell her, did you?'

Mum scowls at me. 'Course I did. I even showed her them. Red had put them under his bed.'

I jump up and fling the chair back.

'Scarlet!'

But I don't listen. I'm already running down the hall to Red's room.

'Red?' I whisper.

Red's sitting on his bed, his head clutched in his arms. He's rocking backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards. The wooden feather box lies open on the floor, the feathers scattered as if some strange exotic bird has been savaged in his room. Red hates anyone but me touching his feathers.

I sit next to him on the bed and put my hand on his back. 'Red, it's me, Scarlet.'

Red's blocked me out. He's blocked out the entire world. I pick up the magpie feather, the one we found the other day. I try to press it in his hand.

'Red, feel this one,' I say. 'It's the magpie feather. Feel it.'

Red rocks faster but clutches the feather in his hand.

‘Look at it, Red,’ I say. ‘Look at it.’

But his eyes are tight, tight shut and he draws his arms further around his head.

I start laying the feathers out on the floor, naming them as I put them in order. ‘Blackbird, blue tit, guinea fowl, herring gull, house sparrow, lilac-breasted roller, mallard, ostrich, rock dove . . .’

I keep going, the birds’ names coming out in a steady rhythm in my voice. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Red stop rocking and slowly uncurl. He slides down beside me and watches.

‘ . . . song thrush, tanager . . . ’

Red picks up a small green feather and places it down between the soft ostrich feather and the silvery rock dove feather. ‘Ring-necked parakeet,’ he says.

I smile, and we take turns to place the feathers out in front of us in a long row.

They’re in order now, on the floor and in his mind. He counts them all again, mouthing their names, fixing them inside his head.

‘We’ll find some more on Sunday,’ I say.

‘A scarlet ibis feather?’ asks Red. His eyes are wide, wide open.

I ruffle his hair. ‘Let’s hope so. We’ll just have to see.’

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‘Fish fingers and chips for tea,’ I say.

Mum nods, but she’s staring out across the houses. Ash drifts down from her cigarette end to the floor. She doesn’t even seem to notice.

I open the window to let the smoke from the room. The safety catch only lets it open a hand’s width. I wish we could throw the windows open wide, but we can’t, not after what happened last summer. That’s when the penguins got involved.

I slide the fish fingers and the chips onto a baking tray and put them in the oven. I’m laying the table when I hear the knock at the door.

‘I’ll get it,’ I yell to Mum.

I put my hand up to the catch, making sure the chain is across. You can’t be too careful. Not many people come up here.

I open the door a crack and peer out. Sita and her mum are standing outside.

Sita’s mum smiles and holds up something wrapped in brown paper. She’s out of her checkout uniform and wearing a long green sari. Swirls of gold run through the material. ‘We’ve brought you some banana cake,’ she says.

I take the chain off the catch and stick my head out to see if they are with anyone, but they're on their own.

Sita's mum pushes the cake into my hands. 'Is everything OK, Scarlet?' she asks. 'I met Mrs Gideon on the stairs earlier.'

I look at her, and then at Sita. Sita smiles and stares down at the floor. Sita and I used to be friends. Best friends. But that was before last summer. I know it was Sita who told her mum about Red climbing out on the window ledge of our flat, dressed in the wings we'd made for him. I know it was Sita's mum who had called the penguins and told them all about my mum, too. That's why they took Red and me away the first time.

'Everything's fine,' I say.

Sita's mum takes a step closer. 'Sure?'

'Sure,' I say. I glance back to the kitchen. 'I have to go. Tea's ready.' I start shutting the door. 'Thank you for the cake.'

I push the door and hear the click. I slide the chain across and deadlock the door. I won't ever let them in again. This is our place. The world can spin and spin and spin around us, but we're safe up here.

Mum and Red and me.

We're just fine, the three of us.

And I won't let anyone ever change that again.