

Praise for Judith Eagle:

SHORTLISTED

Edward Stanford Children's Travel Book of the Year Award
Young Quills Award – Best Historical Fiction

‘One of the best children's books I've read all year.’

The Literary Review

‘Absolutely adored it!’

Emma Carroll, author of *Letters from the Lighthouse*

‘A riveting adventure . . . Eagle's writing grips the reader.’

Guardian

‘Exciting, funny and full of warmth.’

LoveReading4Kids

‘Full of suspense and mystery!’

Evie, aged 11, *National Geographic Kids*

‘Absolutely sparkling, enchanting storytelling.’

Hilary McKay, author of *The Skylarks' War*

‘A page-turning adventure.’

Nicola Penfold, author of *Where the World turns Wild*

‘A brilliantly written and illustrated mystery . . .
this is a gem of a book and is storytelling at its best.’

Kevin Cobane, *VIP Reading*

‘A cracking read with superb storytelling.’

BookTrust

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Judith Eagle's career has included stints as a stylist, fashion editor and features writer. She now spends her mornings writing and her afternoons working in a secondary school library. Judith lives with her family and her cat Stockwell in South London. *The Stolen Songbird* is her fourth novel.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Kim Geyer studied textile design before taking up children's book illustration. She lives in London with lots of pets and kids – her biggest inspiration. Kim loves ice cream and sherbert Dip Dabs and being taken for walks by her dog, Dusty.

Also by Judith Eagle

The Secret Starling

The Pear Affair

The Accidental Stowaway

THE **S**TOLEN
SONGBIRD

Judith Eagle

ILLUSTRATED BY KIM GEYER

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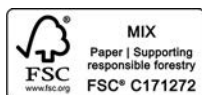
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For Lucy and Margot



Prologue

1940

They left early, when it was still dark – before the lady who was meant to be looking after them woke up. They walked for miles and miles, through fields and woods, and along narrow twisting lanes banked by hedgerows. They didn't have a map, and the signposts that could've helped them were blacked out. It was common knowledge that the enemy must be thwarted at all costs.

As dawn broke, they shared the hunk of bread they'd stolen from the larder. They'd had to be

quick – quick as lightning – the boy grabbing it when no one was looking, the girl hastily shoving it under her jumper. They worked as a team. They *were* a team, having grown up together since the girl had been orphaned, years and years earlier, and taken in by the boy's family.

Swallowing the last of the crumbs, they pressed on. To pass the time, they took it in turns to whistle – they were good at whistling – and they tried to outdo each other, showing off their prowess, with wilder and wilder and more complicated tunes.

At last, they came to a bus stop, and a bus that took them to Tonbridge, and then a train. Arriving at Charing Cross they turned out their pockets. Three conkers, two marbles and a boiled sweet. But no more money.

'We'll have to walk,' said the girl. Neither of them minded. They would've walked to the ends of the earth if they had to. They were going home.

It was dusk now, and the scents of London filled the air: soot, cabbage, chips and vinegar – smells that followed them up Saint Martin's Lane, along Tottenham Court Road, and up again to Camden Town. Other things were familiar too: the trams rattling by, the carts and the cars, the shops still

open for business even though some of them were boarded up.

But it *wasn't* the same. For a start, there were people walking about in uniform and some of them were wearing tin hats.

'Wardens,' said the girl authoritatively. She was knowledgeable. Read the newspapers, knew everything. 'They help people find shelter when the bombs come.'

The air raids hadn't seemed real when they were in the countryside, but now they could see the evidence: great gaps where buildings had crumpled in on themselves; glimpses of streets where on one side there were mounds of rubble, and on the other side houses still standing, but with all the windows blown out. In a house on one corner, a hole gaped so big you could actually see straight inside. The wallpaper was a pretty rose print, pale pink blooms with green leaves, just like the girl had in her own bedroom.

She'd see it for herself soon.

By the time they had climbed the hill to Hampstead, their feet were dragging.

'Nearly there,' said the boy as they skirted past the houses that faced the heath.

It was still warm, right at the tail end of September,

and the front gardens were a mass of Michaelmas daisies and blowsy roses. The girl breathed deeply. She could already see the lamp by the gate. She remembered how its golden light glinted on the ivy and the laurel bushes. For the first time in ages, her chest relaxed.

They had just reached the drive when the wailing rose up. It started low and got higher and higher. It sounded eerie, like the shriek of a banshee, making the hairs on the back of the girl's neck prickle and stand on end.

'I think that means an air raid . . .' she said, her chest tightening again.

'We'll be quick,' said the boy firmly – now he was here, he couldn't wait any longer. 'Let's get him first and then we'll surprise her.'

The boy rushed along the side of the house towards the back garden. The girl could almost feel his joyful anticipation. She waited, listening out for the happy cries that would make the long arduous day worth it, but instead the sirens wailed again. She glanced up at the house, properly worried now. It was still dark.

'He's not here!' burst out the boy as he reappeared. 'She got rid of him!'

'She wouldn't do that, silly. Go back and check in the shed,' said the girl. 'Perhaps—'

High above came a droning sound. The girl looked up and for the first time felt a sharp blade of fear.

‘Quick! We need to go in,’ she shouted. They would go down to the cellar. They’d be safe there. She darted towards the house, trusting the boy to follow her. The droning was deafening now, like a swarm of bees.

She heard a rumbling noise, like faraway thunder, and then, much, much closer, a swish and a dull thwump followed by a shudder. A wall of air rushed at her, lifting her up and flinging her to the ground.

* * *

She lay quite still.

Everything was choked in black: billowing clouds of smoke in her eyes and her nose and her mouth, making her cough and splutter. A shower of dust and debris rained down. Fingers of fire leapt into the sky. Cinders floated in the air.

It was like being caught in a terrifying dream with dancing devils and hellish furnaces and . . .

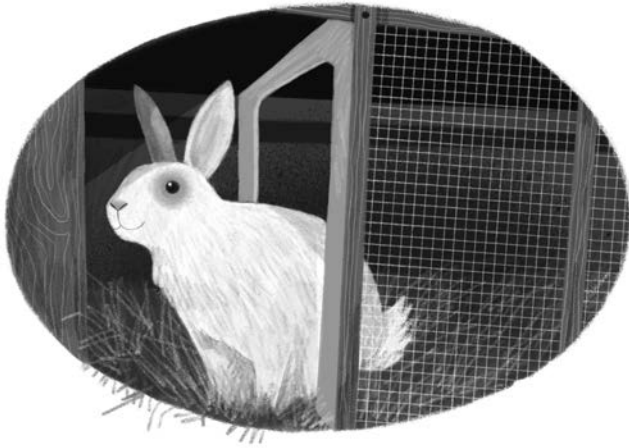
Except it wasn’t a dream. It was real.

Much later, she got to her feet. The sky had turned a dirty, bruised yellow. Her ears were ringing.

Something very, very bad had happened.

'I can't see you, where are you?' the girl called to the boy.

But there was no answer.



Chapter One

1959

NINETEEN YEARS LATER

He was a large rabbit, at least the weight of five bags of sugar, but Caro Monday was strong.

Reaching into the hutch she hauled him out. It was a sizeable hutch, taking up a quarter of the cobbled yard, smelling of sweet hay and sawdust. The rabbit sighed happily and flumped against Caro as she wrapped her arms around him. His ears were soft as velvet, supremely comforting in the chill of the late afternoon air.

‘I won’t go, she can’t make me,’ she whispered into his warm fur. The rabbit, who was all white, apart from one ginger ear and a matching patch over his left eye, gave a little snuffle and she knew he was agreeing. ‘You understand me,’ she said. ‘We’ll wait here for Mum. She *will* come.’

But where *was* Mum? She was meant to have arrived home yesterday. Caro had been crossing the days off on the calendar, listening out for the familiar sound of her whistling ‘The Flower Duet’ as she walked up the street. It was the start of the school holidays and she had promised to help Caro build an outdoor gym. There was going to be a beam for balancing on, a pole to climb, and maybe even a trapeze. Once it was built, she would be able to start her training in earnest.

Caro was so looking forward to it she’d got out Jacinta’s tools in readiness: the saw, the hammer, the pliers, and the nails in their screw-top jars. She had spent weeks scouring the Rubbles for the most useful odds and ends; she had collected all the scrap wood she could find. She and Horace had even marked out an area in the Rubbles where the gym was going to be constructed, and had cleared the ground, making sure it was tidy, level, and ready for building.

But building things was her mother’s forte, and if

Jacinta didn't show up today, and Ronnie got her way, Caro couldn't see how she could build the gym on her own. And if she didn't have a gym, how could she practise? And if she couldn't practise, how was she ever going to make her mark?

Behind Caro, the door opened, and a chink of light illuminated the small yard. From inside the pub, the familiar sounds of clinking glasses and the hubbub of conversation drifted out, along with a whiff of tobacco, whisky and beer. The rabbit, who was named His Nibs and tended towards an air of refinement, sneezed.

'Caro,' said Veronica Rudd as she stepped outside, 'we've been through this a thousand times. My sister is poorly, she needs my help. And I need yours.'

Put like that it sounded so simple. But Caro knew it was far from simple. Veronica's sister lived miles away, 'up north'. 'Needing help' meant leaving the pub and leaving Caro.

And the problem was, Caro couldn't be left on her own.

Veronica Rudd was a fierce-looking woman – you had to be to run a pub, even if it was a tiny one tucked into a cramped space, under the arches, just along from the station at Waterloo. She rubbed her hands on

her flowered pinny and sighed. As usual she was run off her feet: whizzing between the bar and the back kitchen, peeling potatoes for Caro's tea, totting up the monthly accounts, keeping the customers happy and pulling pints. But besides being fierce, Veronica Rudd was also fair; she loved Caro as if she was her own child. And Caro loved her back – for her fierceness, for her capability, for always being there. But Caro was stubborn, and Ronnie was stubborn too. 'A pint of bitter, Mrs Rudd, if you please,' called a customer from the saloon.

In answer, the publican kicked the door shut. If they wanted a drink, they'd have to wait. And wait they would; nobody dared quarrel with Ronnie Rudd. The real name of the establishment was The Railway Tavern. But everyone stuck to calling it Mrs Rudd's Pub.

'I'm not going to Great Aunt Mary's, Ronnie!' Caro burst out. His Nibs agreed with a sort of short, shocked quiver. 'I'd rather be sent away to boarding school!' At least there might be a gym there. 'If Mum knew what you were planning, she'd have a fit.'

'Boarding school!' Ronnie Rudd shuddered. 'Jacinta would like that even less.'

It was true that Jacinta Monday was particularly

passionate about Caro's freedom. Having been brought up in the strictest of circumstances herself, she was determined her daughter should not be similarly confined. Caro was allowed to roam all over the place. Across the river, up to Holborn, even as far as Camden Town. Passers-by would often stop and stare. It wasn't every day you saw a wiry girl and a ginger-eared rabbit bounding up and down London's busy thoroughfares.

'All right, then, just let me stay in the pub!' Caro pleaded. For all her fearlessness, Caro Monday did not like change. Yes, she loved her freedom, she loved to explore. But that was because the pub was always there to come home to afterwards. It was her anchor. She couldn't think of anything worse than being cast away into a stranger's home. She didn't understand why she couldn't just stay in Waterloo even though Ronnie wouldn't be there to look after her.

She nudged His Nibs back into his hutch, and watched as he made himself comfortable and started to munch on some fresh carrot tops.

'If Toby's allowed, why not me?'

Toby lived in the attic room at the top of the pub. He was employed to collect and wash the glasses and do heavy things, like unload the crates and change

the beer barrels. In actual fact, he spent more time admiring his own reflection in the ancient spotted mirror in the saloon bar, or hanging around in the street, smoking and chatting with his friends. He didn't seem remotely interested in Caro and she wasn't remotely interested in him.

But just as Ronnie had decided to give him his marching orders, he'd come up trumps.

'Toby *won't* be on his own,' Ronnie explained. 'It's a stroke of luck his mother used to run a pub. She's going to mind this place for me. I can't ask her to look after you as well.'

'But, Ronnie! I don't *need* looking after. I can look after myself. And anyway, Mum is bound to get your telegram any day now!' wailed Caro. 'As soon as she does, she'll come home.'

But the trouble was, everything had happened so quickly: Ronnie's sister having the operation; Ronnie announcing she would have to leave the pub for a while so she could go and visit her.

They'd thought it would be OK because Mum would be home by then. But the first telegram had been sent a week ago, to the Manaus Opera House in the middle of the Amazon rainforest. The second had gone off a few days later, and then another one yesterday.

Neither Caro nor Ronnie could understand why they'd heard nothing back. Ronnie said *try not to worry*, but that was easier said than done.

'It won't be so bad, you'll see,' said Ronnie, drawing Caro close. Her pinafore was patterned with tiny violets and daisies. She smelled of cinnamon and nutmeg and her hug made Caro feel, for a moment, safe. But as quick as it had come, the moment passed. Ronnie was wrong. It *would* be bad. How could it not be when Caro couldn't remember a time without the woman who, in partnership with Jacinta, had looked after her since she was a baby.

Caro had heard the story so many times it had stitched itself into their family history: how, eleven years ago, caught out in the rain, Ronnie had taken shelter in the Sunset Club, in Soho.

How, once inside, time seemed to stop as Ronnie sat transfixed, watching Jacinta Monday whistle her way through her repertoire.

How, when the applause finally died away, Ronnie didn't leave with the rest of the audience, but went backstage to ask the whistler for an autograph.

And *that* was when she saw the baby: tiny, pink-cheeked, asleep in a drawer in Jacinta's dressing room, and . . .

In one fell swoop, Ronnie fell in love with Caro just as much as she had with Jacinta.

The trio had been together ever since. They were a family and Caro called Ronnie her 'other mother'.

'Remember, Caro,' Ronnie was saying, back in the here and now, 'Great Aunt Mary has another ward as well – a boy called Albert – so you'll have company.'

Caro jerked back. She knew all about Great Aunt Mary: *Gam*, she called her in her head. Strict, cold-hearted, stuck in the Victorian age. She had been her mother's guardian until she was sixteen, at which point, unable to stand it any longer, Jacinta had run away.

Barely a word had been exchanged since. And now Caro couldn't understand why Ronnie was sending her to stay with someone her mother quite clearly detested.

'Why can't I stay with Horace?' she asked. She and Horace Braithwaite were best friends. They had known each other since they were three years old and had stuck together through thick and thin – a necessity at school, where they'd been picked on. Caro because she had two mums; Horace because his family were Bajan.

'You're different, be proud of it,' Ronnie and Jacinta had said.

'You're better than them, they'd better believe it,' said Mrs Braithwaite.

So Horace and Caro had banded up, fought their corner and, apart from by their sworn enemies, the Bully Boys, they weren't picked on any more.

Staying with Horace would be perfect, thought Caro. It made much more sense than being packed off to Hampstead.

But 'Mrs Braithwaite has her hands full with little Edwin,' said Ronnie. 'And you know very well there's not an inch of spare space.'

'I'd sleep on the floor!' burst out Caro. 'Or let me come with you! I can help look after your sister. I'll be good, I'll do anything you ask me to!'

'I wish I could say yes,' said Ronnie, frowning. 'But Marjorie really has been very poorly. Maybe when her condition improves . . .'

They both knew the real problem was Mr Marjorie. Marjorie's husband Harry was in the navy and had somehow organised to be on manoeuvres when his wife came out of hospital. It should be him looking after her while she was recuperating, not Ronnie, thought Caro.

Caro turned back to the hutch and stuck her finger through the chicken wire to tickle the rabbit's nose.

'Oh, Caro,' said Ronnie. 'Don't you think I've been through all the possibilities? I'm at my wits' end. If

only Jacinta had come back when she was meant to, we wouldn't *be* in this pickle.'

Caro ignored her. It was more than a pickle. It was a catastrophe. 'Just you and me, then,' she said to His Nibs.

Ronnie gave an awkward cough.

Caro whirled round and saw that Ronnie's eyes had turned down at the corners, a sure sign that she was about to say something serious.

But what could be more serious than the fact that her sister was sick, that Jacinta Monday had gone missing, and that there would be no gym?

As realisation dawned, every bone in Caro's body seemed to crackle, and a whole host of butterflies inside her chest began to beat their wings. Jacinta had given His Nibs to Caro for a reason. To look after her when she was away. 'For extra love,' had been her actual words. And it had worked. When Caro was upset, His Nibs always calmed her. When she couldn't sleep, she would fetch him from his hutch and he would soothe her. How could she be expected to weather this change if they were to be separated? They'd never been separated before! Even on the few occasions when they'd been on holiday, he had been allowed to come too.

The thought of leaving him behind made Caro feel peculiarly dizzy and a bit sick.

‘Don’t tell me . . .’ She could hardly get the words out. ‘Am I not allowed to take him with me?’

‘We can’t expect your great-aunt to house a rabbit as well as you. How would you get his hutch there? It’s too complicated. He’ll be fine here; Toby can feed him—’

‘That ignoramus!’

In the fading light, Caro Monday turned red, then white, then red again. Not only was she being sent to stay with someone who had made her mother miserable; she wasn’t even allowed to take her one comfort, His Nibs, with her. She couldn’t believe Ronnie was even thinking it. Didn’t she understand that she wouldn’t survive?

Angrily, she shoved past Ronnie, stomped through the pub, ignoring the surprised stares of the regulars, and slammed out of the front door.

‘Got yer knickers in a twist, have ya?’ said Toby, who was loitering outside.

‘Oh, shut up,’ said Caro. And in a blind rush, she ran through the narrow tangle of streets, up Waterloo Road, past the Rubbles, past the shot tower and across the stretch of green in front of the Royal Festival Hall – bright white against the soot-blackened city, its great

glass windows casting huge puddles of light onto the River Thames.

The sky had darkened, the lamps had been lit, and specks of rain clung to the foggy air. Taking three at a time, Caro leapt up the steps to Hungerford Bridge. Below, the black waters of the river churned menacingly. To her left, a train screeched and wailed its way into Charing Cross. Above, the iron girders hulked like giant monsters. It was her place. The place she always came to when she was angry and upset. It was both terrible and wonderful at the same time.

Swiftly, Caro swung herself up so that one foot was planted on top of the railing and the other was jammed into the wire fence separating the narrow walkway from the railway track. Unlike His Nibs, who was afraid of heights, Caro Monday loved to climb. One day, she was going to travel the world just like her mother. Maybe as a gymnast. Or a tightrope walker. Or someone who could scale whole buildings using just her hands and feet.

But how could she do that if she didn't get the chance to practise? And practising meant she needed a gym. Throwing her head back, Caro howled, her voice in mad competition with the din of the train, the curl of her breath disappearing into the murky air.

No one could hear her. The city workers, who thronged the bridge during the rush hour, wouldn't be back until Monday morning. *They* weren't being sent away, holiday plans ruined and deprived of the company of their dear darling rabbit. The train rumbled past, clanking and sparking, and then it was gone and on the opposite side of the river Big Ben chimed six, a kind of finale, each *dong* thudding deep inside Caro's chest.

Tucking her legs over the railing, Caro swung upside down, so that she could see everything the wrong way up: Waterloo Bridge, the curve of the Thames, the dome of St Paul's.

'Caro!'

Caro flipped back up into a sitting position. It was Horace, dashing up the steps, jumping elegantly over the puddles, dressed in his school uniform even though it was a Sunday. Of course, on Horace, it didn't look like a school uniform. It looked like a suit, a particularly dashing suit, with a sage green handkerchief peeping out of his top pocket and a matching tie. Horace wanted to be a fashion designer when he grew up, like his hero, 'the little prince of fashion', Yves Saint Laurent. At twenty-three, Saint Laurent was the world's youngest couturier, famous for producing six

hundred drawings in fifteen days. Horace was always sketching nineteen to the dozen too. Caro wouldn't be surprised if he could produce six hundred drawings in *seven* days.

Caro jumped down from her perch, landing on the balls of her feet with her arms outstretched and her chest concave, like a Russian gymnast. Horace pushed his black-framed glasses back onto his nose and looked anxiously back the way he had come.

'What? Are the Bully Boys after you again?'

The Bully Boys were in the same year as Caro and Horace at South Square Secondary. They had hard faces and mean eyes and they were always starting fights with anyone who wasn't like them.

'They tried to get me,' said Horace. 'But I was too quick for them.' He put his fists up and danced on the spot like the greatest boxer of all time, Sugar Ray Robinson.

Caro knew Horace could fight his own corner. Still, she would've punched those ignoramuses right in their faces if she'd been there.

'Anyway, forget about them. Mrs Rudd sent me to get you,' said Horace. 'Says it's important. Says you have to come home right away.'

* * *

Back at the pub, Ronnie was waiting with Caro's best supper ever, 'the three-potato special', a plate piled high with mashed potato, roast potatoes and chips. Caro eyed the plate uneasily. Potatoes were Caro's favourite. Having three varieties all at once meant bad news.

Caro sat down at the table with a thump and picked up her fork. She was dimly aware that Ronnie had her coat on. And that her suitcase was by the door.

On the kitchen counter, the radio crackled. Something about an elderly lady who had just been burgled. 'They took my best soup tureen!' she said in a frail, wavery voice. 'It was a family heirloom!'

Ronnie clicked the radio off and sat down opposite Caro, regarding her solemnly.

'What's going on?' asked Caro. 'You've packed already? And why have you got your coat on? I thought you weren't going until the day after tomorrow!'

'I'm so sorry, Caro love, but the doctor phoned while you were out. They're ready to discharge Marjorie, and with Harry still away I've got no choice but to go immediately. I've shut the pub early and I'm catching the last train.'

Caro set her fork down with a crash. At least if

Ronnie had stuck to the original plan and left the day after tomorrow, there might've been the tiniest chance that Jacinta would've turned up in the nick of time.

But now?! It was really happening. She was actually going to have to go to this unknown great-aunt tomorrow!

A horrible feeling of dread crept over her.

'I still don't understand how you can ... I mean, Mum ... when she finds out ...' She could barely string the words together, she was so upset. Ronnie didn't seem to understand how terrible she was feeling. How scared she was and how frightening it was even *thinking* about being away from the pub.

'Your mum's stubborn ...' said Ronnie. She had a funny look on her face. Almost as if she were hiding something.

'Stubborn?!' cried Caro disbelievingly. 'But of course she is. Great Aunt Mary was awful to her, that's what she *always* said!'

'When we could squeeze any information out of her,' responded Ronnie quietly.

Caro picked up a chip and then put it down again. She wasn't remotely hungry. Even for potatoes.

It was true that Jacinta didn't like to talk about

certain things. In fact, mainly two things: The War and Great Aunt Mary. She always said, 'Don't waste your breath,' and changed the subject, and that was that. Caro and Ronnie had come to learn they were subjects best avoided.

'Thing is,' said Ronnie, 'what with Marjorie being ill and your mum going AWOL, it started me thinking. Family *is* important.'

'But we *are* a family!' said Caro. What was Ronnie getting at?

Ronnie met Caro's gaze and held it steadily. 'If anything were to happen to your mum – not that it will! – but just say it did ... maybe it's time to make amends ... with her family. *Your* family.'

'What do you mean, if anything happens to her?' Caro felt a chilly prickle of fear. What was Ronnie talking about? 'She'll be home soon. She's just got into one of her scrapes!'

Ronnie stood up. Kissed Caro's forehead. 'I'm sure you're right,' she said. 'But in the meantime, Toby's mum will be here first thing in the morning and Great Aunt Mary is expecting you in the afternoon. Can you manage? You'll need to pack a case. Take Jacinta's old one. And there's money in the teapot for your tube fare ...'

Despite the practical instructions, Caro had never seen Ronnie look so worried. In fact, it was more than worry, it was distress. A deeper frown had appeared than had ever been there before, and the corners of her eyes were so droopy it did something painful to Caro's heart.

'I'm sorry, Caro. We're just going to have to make the best of it. Do you think you can do that?'

'Yes,' she said, 'I suppose so.' Despite all her protestations, she didn't want to add to Ronnie's difficulties.

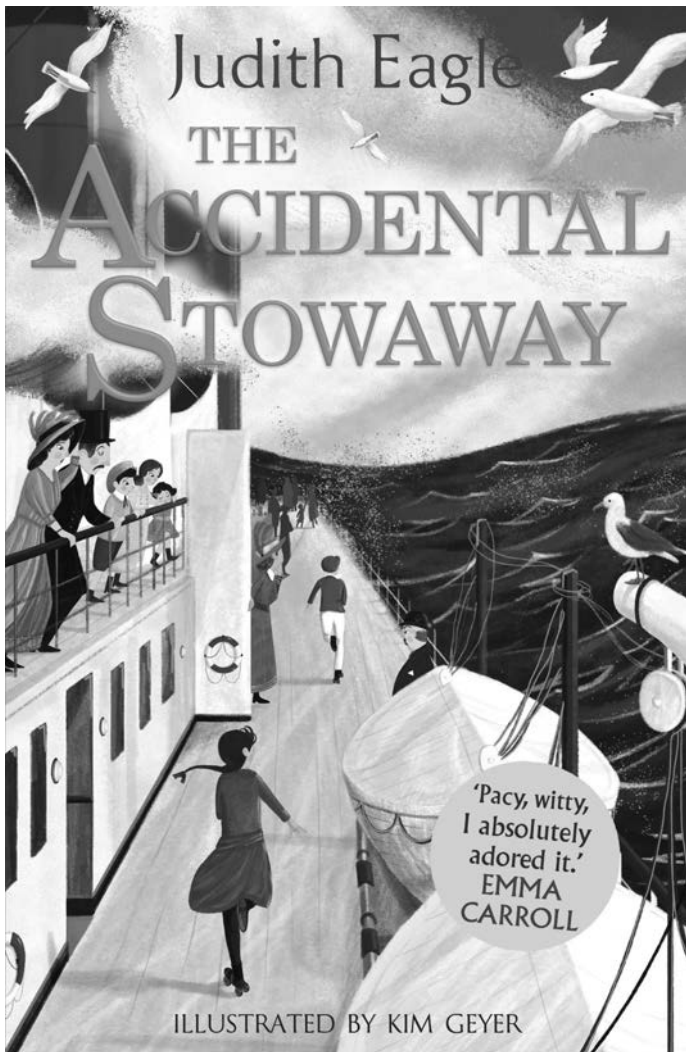
'And you promise to try and be polite to your great-aunt? Not cause any trouble?'

Was that an actual tear squeezing its way out of Ronnie's right eye? But Ronnie *never* cried.

In a flash Caro jumped up and clutched her other mother in a fierce hug. She wouldn't be selfish. She couldn't. 'Sorry, sorry, sorry! I promise I won't cause any trouble. I'll be polite. You go to Marjorie. I'll go to Hampstead and before we know it, Mum will be home.'

SHORTLISTED

Edward Stanford Children's Travel Book of the Year Award

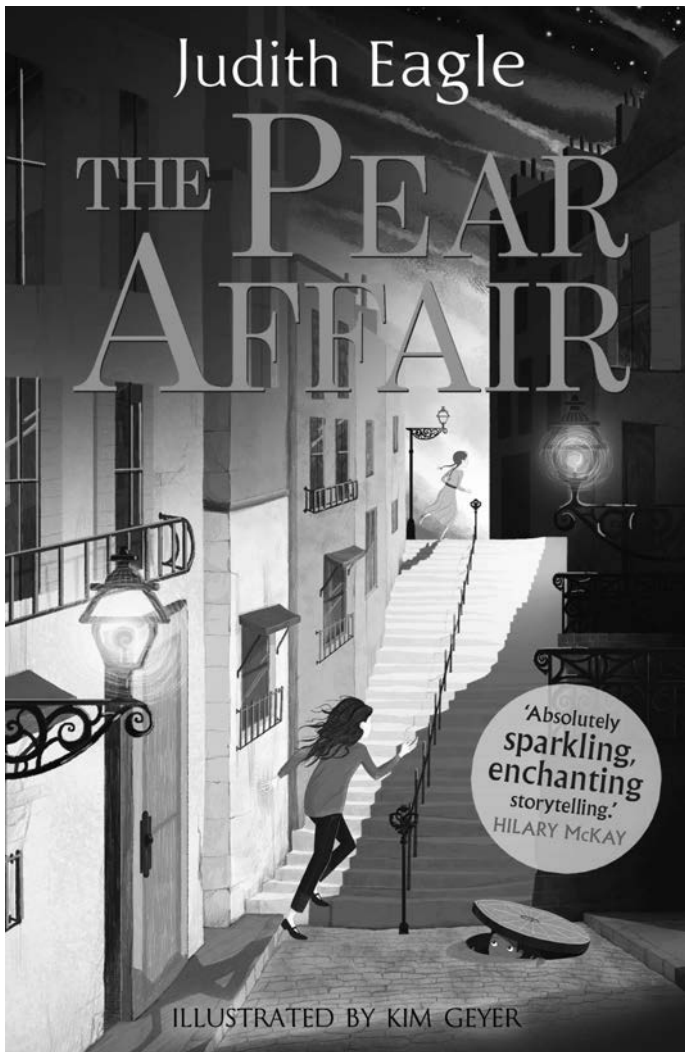


Liverpool, 1910

Patch finds adventure on every deck of the 'floating palace' she accidentally stows away on.

'FABULOUS!'

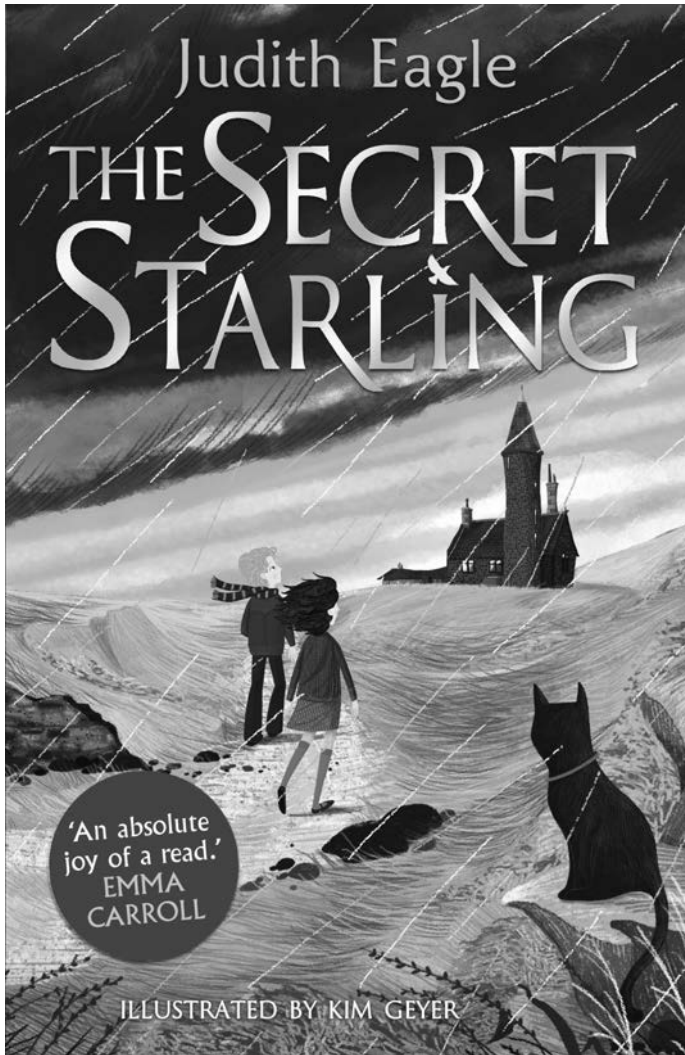
Emma Carroll, author of *Letters from the Lighthouse*



A spectacular adventure set through and under the streets of Paris. Nell must solve an extraordinary mystery in order to be reunited with her beloved Pear.

'A riveting adventure.'

The Guardian



Abandoned children running wild on the moors, evil child catchers, cunning cats and mysterious ballet shoes abound in this incredible novel.