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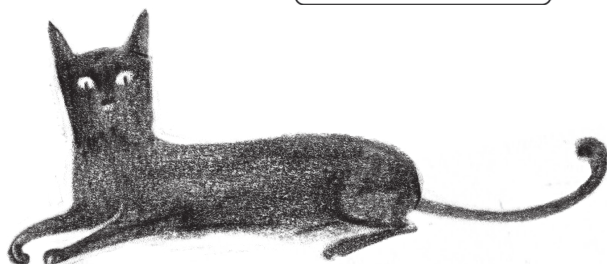
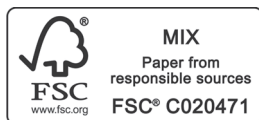
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NICK LAKE

THE  
HOUSE  
WITH  
A DRAGON  
IN IT

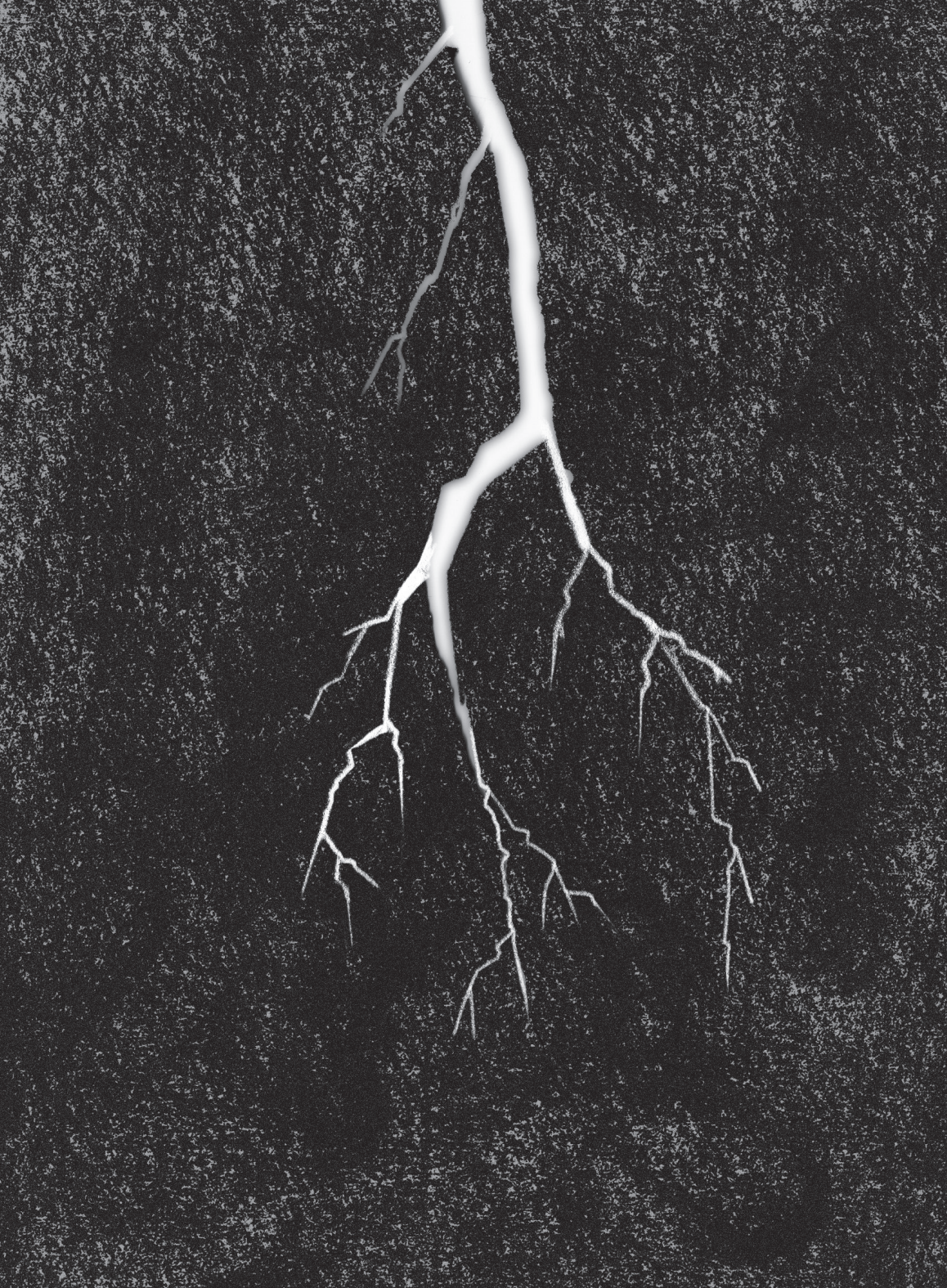
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*All my books are for Hannah.  
This one, in particular, is also for Lyra.*  
N.L.

*For Rory, Tilly, Tyler, Romeo and Vinny*  
E.G.





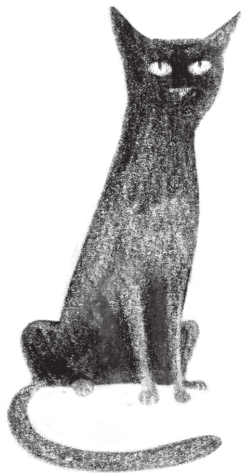


# Prologue

When Summer was little, her real mum used to tell her that if she ever saw a glass bottle lying on the ground, she should not pick it up in case a witch was inside.

She said that one day Summer might know why, but she hoped not.





# Chapter 1

The sinkhole opened up in the middle of Sunday lunch. In the middle of the living room, too. The hole appeared just after Summer had shouted something really loudly, almost as if her shouting had made it happen. What she shouted, precisely, to the man at the other end of the table was, ‘You’re not my dad!’

Which was *accurate* – Mr Pattinson was her foster father – but perhaps not *useful or kind*, as her Year Five teacher would have told her. It was, in Summer’s opinion, deserved, though, seeing as Mr Pattinson wouldn’t let her eat her roast beef with all the trimmings until she’d said grace, and she didn’t want to say grace.

‘You’re not my dad!’ she said, really quite loudly – and then the living-room floor fell in.

Not in a small way, either, if living rooms can even fall in



different ways. No, the noise was exactly the sound of an entire room collapsing into a massive great hole in the ground that hadn't been there a moment before. Which is to say, it was loud.

They all got up from the table and rushed through to the living room in a tangle of limbs. Summer bashed into one of the Original Children, Oscar, or he bashed into her more likely. She almost tripped when the littler Original Child, Ethan, got under her feet in his haste to see the damage.

They all stood and stared.

For once, Mrs Pattinson had nothing to say. (Mrs Pattinson always had quite a lot to say and, when Summer had shouted, was opening her mouth, presumably to say quite a lot about politeness, when the living room turned into a crater.)

'Um . . .' said Mr Pattinson, which was actually something *he* said quite a lot.

Summer had pointed this out once, in what she thought was a reasonable response to him laughing about how much she supposedly said 'like', and it turned out Not To Be Polite. Mrs Pattinson had strong views about what was polite and what wasn't.

'That's a big hole,' said Oscar. (Who could be relied upon to make the observation so obvious and stupid that no one



else would bother to make it.)

‘Where’s the TV?’ said Ethan. (Who liked watching TV.)

‘It’s, like, in the big hole,’ said Summer because she knew it would annoy Mr Pattinson.

But Mr Pattinson wasn’t paying attention. He was just looking at the huge great enormous hole where the living room had been. It was big, and deep, and steep-sided, and if you peered down into it – which Summer did – you got an impression of moisture, and blackness, and a sort of raw chasm that didn’t belong in a house. There was a lot of jagged-looking rock.

The sofa had fallen into it, and the coffee table, and the armchairs, and the unit with the TV on it. Bears, too.

Mrs Pattinson was one of those people who collected things. Someone had once given her a bear figurine, and then everyone thought she liked them, and kept getting them for Christmas or birthday presents, until she had dozens, in different sizes, materials and colours. Summer knew that she didn’t like them because Mrs Pattinson would often say, ‘I don’t even like bears very much.’ By some grown-up logic for grown-ups, though, it seemed she couldn’t simply *tell* people this. Perhaps it would Not Be Polite.

Now the bears were in the hole, existing in a new world of rock and water.

Summer knew how they felt. Her life had always been a thing out of place. Her life was a mole, blind and blinking in the daylight; it was a woolly jumper shrunk in the wash so it didn't fit right; it was people saying to her *home is where the heart is*, and yet her heart was right there with her, in her chest, all the time. And it wasn't. Ever. Home.

Mr Pattinson had taken his phone out of his pocket. 'I'll, um, phone the insurance company,' he said.

'It's Sunday,' said Mrs Pattinson. 'They won't be open.'

'But it's an emergency.'

'Yes,' she said. 'And you didn't get the twenty-four-hour seven-day-a-week home emergency cover, remember? You said it was too expensive. Because of the house being so old.'

The way she said this – which was the way she said many things, or at least so it seemed to Summer – made it both a statement and an accusation.

'Um . . .'

'Do you think the potatoes are getting cold?' asked Oscar. Oscar was a growing boy – that was what his parents said.

'Oscar!' said his mother.



*Nick Lake*

‘What? There’s a big hole, I know. But it’s still lunchtime.’

So they went back to the kitchen, except for Ethan and Summer. Ethan only came up to Summer’s waist, and she rather liked him.

‘Deep,’ he said, looking at the hole.

‘Yes,’ she said.

‘Like you.’

She turned to him, startled. ‘What do you mean?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. But it’s true.’ Then he turned and ran into the kitchen.

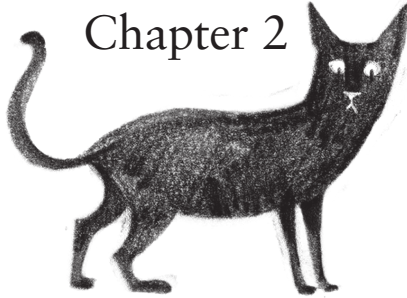
Summer followed.

And, for the rest of the day, she kept following – following the rules, following the chart for her chores, following the meal plan. Because she was afraid it had been her, shouting, that had made the hole open up. Because she was afraid she was difficult – a thing out of place – and that was why people didn’t want her. Mothers.

Every time she passed the hole, all afternoon, she was drawn to look at it, down into its depths. It felt to her – and this was why Summer was worried about her shouting – that in some way she didn’t quite understand it was *for* her.

That it was waiting for her.

## Chapter 2



Summer's school uniform was itchy. It was the first new, not-hand-me-down school uniform she'd had, which she had to admit to being a bit grateful for, but the cotton hadn't softened and settled yet, and it clung uncomfortably in places.

She wasn't paying much attention to it, though: she was standing as quietly as she could, so as not to get in the way. The woman from the council, plus the builder Mr Pattinson knew from when they'd had the house done up, as well as the insurance-appointed surveyor man, were looking at the hole. Occasionally, the surveyor man, peering down, would tut or click his tongue.

'I'll say it again,' he said. 'This hole isn't right.'

'You *can* say that again,' said Mrs Pattinson. 'It's in the middle of our living room.'

The man tutted again. He wore an ill-fitting blue suit with no tie, and had a pen in his breast pocket.

‘It just shouldn’t be here,’ he said. ‘This is oolitic limestone – all the way down, it looks like. There’s no evidence of a water table – no signs of subsidence or mud. No cracking to the rest of the room. It’s just . . . a huge hole in the rock. It’s as if it’s always been here.’

‘Well, it hasn’t,’ said Mr Pattinson dryly. ‘I think we’d have noticed.’

Summer smiled, despite herself. He could be quite funny.

‘Can you fill it in?’ said Mrs Pattinson, looking at the surveyor, then the builder. ‘With concrete or something?’

‘Aw man,’ said the builder. ‘That’s a ruddy big hole, that is, pet. I cannae fill that wi’ concrete. Best case, you put a slab on it, but even then you’d have to dig the whole room out to nearly a metre and do the insulation an’ that. It’s regulation.’

Except he didn’t say ‘ruddy’; he said another worse word, and after that he glanced at Summer and mumbled an apology. Mrs Pattinson glared at him.

‘Indeed,’ said the woman from the council. ‘Insulation, membrane, all of that.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ said the insurance

surveyor, looking at the hole. ‘I’ll have to talk to the company. See what they say. It’ll be a considerable job, and the question of liability . . . I mean, one wonders if the wooden floor was put over it, back in the day.’

‘You’re saying someone put a house on top of a massive hole and just . . . covered it up?’ said Mr Pattinson.

‘These old houses, they contain all sort of horrors,’ said the surveyor.

Summer shivered a little. Was she imagining a chill breeze coming from the hole?

‘Do you have anything else to say?’ said Mrs Pattinson to the woman from the council.

‘I’ll need to speak to my superiors,’ she said.

‘Wonderful,’ said Mr Pattinson. ‘So, in the meantime, we have to live with the hole?’

‘You should erect some sort of fencing,’ said the surveyor. ‘Don’t want a child falling in there. It’s deep.’

‘Ah can do that for you, like,’ said the builder. ‘Cheaper than filling it in.’

‘One would hope so,’ said Mr Pattinson.

They kept discussing it for a little while, in those hushed tones that adults use when they’re cross, but won’t show it,



and Summer peered at the hole while they talked. She was quite glad all these people were here – it meant she'd been able to get into the house right after school, rather than waiting for it to be unlocked. Or going to After-school Club, which was something she would basically eat her own toes before doing. Deep down, at the bottom of the rock sides of the hole, she thought she saw a glimmer of light, but then it was gone.

She didn't know what oolitic meant, or whatever the surveyor man had said, but she sort of knew what he was getting at: there was something *geological* about the hole. Like a textbook illustration; a cut-away diagram that said *rock* and *old*. Not old like the house, but much, much older.

After five minutes or so, with no conclusion about the hole and who was going to pay for it or what to do with it, the adults – apart from Mr and Mrs Pattinson – left, and soon after that the door banged open, and Oscar and Ethan were back, dropped off by other parents after football or violin or whatever it was they'd been doing.

They raced into the living room, dropping their stuff, and gazed excitedly at the hole.

'Slow down!' said Mrs Pattinson, from where she was

closing the front door after them. ‘You’ll fall in.’

‘It’s still there,’ said Oscar.

Summer rolled her eyes at him, but he didn’t see.

‘It’ll be staying,’ said Mr Pattinson, coming into the room, ‘if the surveyor is to be believed. And the builder.’

‘*Really?*’ said Ethan.

‘Well, I really hope not,’ said Mr Pattinson. ‘But Rick doesn’t know what to do with it.’

‘Rick said that?’ said Oscar. ‘When he did the extension, he was always telling you what had to be done.’

Mr Pattinson coughed, lightly. ‘Well, he didn’t exactly say he didn’t *know* what to do, but he didn’t quite have a solution, either.’

‘Oh. So what *did* he—’

‘He said,’ said Summer, remembering the man’s accent, ‘*Haway, man, that’s a big hole, pet. I cannae fill that.*’

She did it without thinking. People’s voices – some people’s anyway – had always got inside her. As if the sound came in through her ears and stayed in her head, moving around. Like butterflies. And she could open her mouth and let them out.

Mr Pattinson laughed, surprised. ‘That was spot on,’ he

said. ‘Not exactly what he said, but very impressive.’

Mrs Pattinson was looking cross. ‘We don’t swear in this house, Summer,’ she said.

‘I—’ began Summer, but Oscar was looking at her, wide-eyed, and Ethan was pulling on her arm.

‘Do Dad!’ he said. ‘Do Dad!’

Summer glanced at Mr Pattinson, who nodded, smiling. Summer still felt like this might make him angry, but he was telling her to do it, right?

‘Can you . . . say something?’ she said. ‘Anything. Talk about football, or work, or something.’

Mr Pattinson spoke for a few seconds about golf. Summer wasn’t really paying attention to the words, but to the sounds in them. He hadn’t grown up here; not in England. There was another song under his breath, a different tune to the vowels. Wales? He had also lived, she thought, somewhere further away for a bit, or his parents had. She got most of her knowledge from TV, and she thought this had a hint of . . . not Australia. New Zealand, maybe?

Whatever it was – she felt it settle, with the other parts of his voice, into a compact shape. The butterflies opened their wings.

‘*Clean your room, boys,*’ she said, facing Ethan and Oscar. ‘*And be snappy about it.*’ Going deep in timbre, letting a bit of song in, a bit of a different light, from the other side of the world.

Oscar and Ethan laughed, delighted.

Mrs Pattinson even forced a little smile. ‘On that note, I’d better get back to work,’ she said. ‘You all right to cook, darling?’

Mr Pattinson nodded and followed her into the kitchen, saying something about leftover roast beef.

Oscar turned to Summer and gave her a high five, and then he and Ethan left the room, too, chattering about a goal one of them had scored. Definitely football.

Summer stayed and looked at the hole for a bit.

The hole stayed, too. That day – and for several days afterwards.

The insurance company called and said they couldn’t do anything about it because it was an ‘act of God’, which Summer thought was ironic given all the saying of grace that went on in the house.

Mr Pattinson got some police-line-do-not-cross tape from somewhere, and strung it across the living-room door while



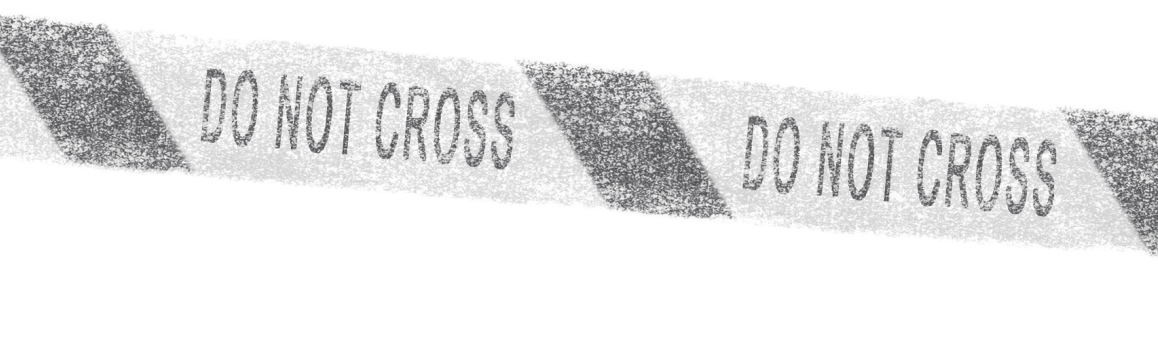


*Nick Lake*

they waited for Rick to come and put up some proper fencing. Summer wasn't sure where he'd found it – Mr Pattinson wasn't a police officer. He was a civil engineer, whatever that was. Summer thought it sounded like an engineer could fill the hole in, but when she said this he laughed, and said not that kind.

In time, Summer almost got used to the hole – despite the weird pull it had on her, the way it made her want to look deep into it, to where that spark of light had seemed to appear, washing the limestone red. She learned to ignore it – the way the rest of the family seemed to do quite naturally.

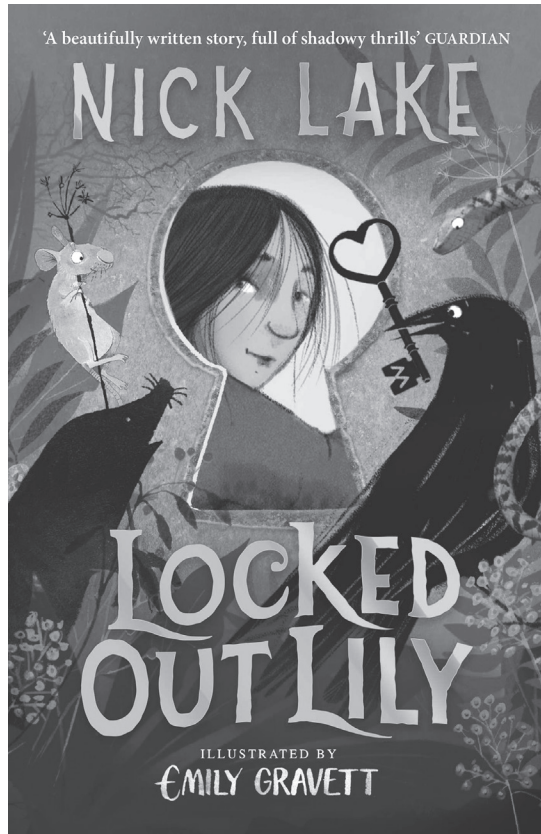
Until the night she was getting a glass of water from the kitchen, and the hole began to smoke, in the narrow, conical depths, and a voice from far down inside it spoke to her.



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