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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 Accidental Stowaway* is her third 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 puppy, Dusty.

Also by Judith Eagle

The Secret Starling

The Pear Affair

THE
ACCIDENTAL
STOWAWAY

Judith Eagle

ILLUSTRATED BY KIM GEYER

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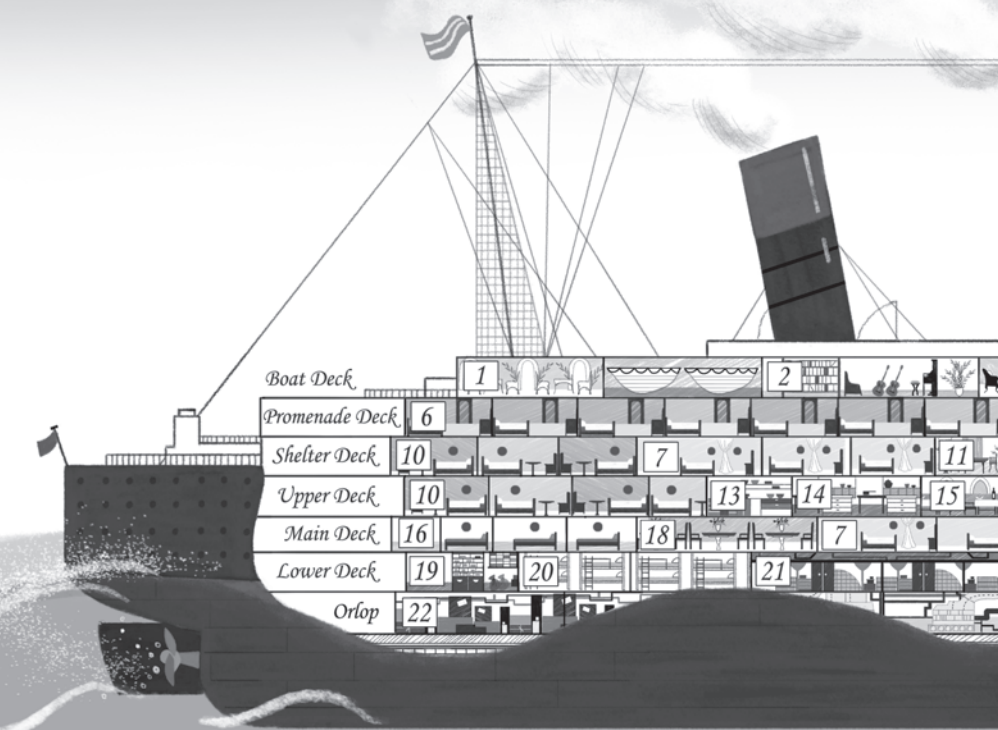


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Chapter One

Right from the start she was known as ‘Crosspatch’. Her real name was Esme Leonard but no one ever called her that.

In the London hospital where she had been born, it was a doctor who observed she should win a medal for grumpiness. The nurses raised their eyebrows but, in all honesty, they agreed. The baby never gurgled but always frowned! And no matter how much they tickled and cooed, her cross little face remained resolutely crumpled.

‘Crosspatch needs her nappy changing!’ they’d call to one another.

‘It’s time for Crosspatch’s bath!’

‘My word,’ they’d laugh, as though it was the funniest thing in the whole wide world, ‘look at the face on that!’

Over time the name was shortened and, like a label on a parcel, it had stuck. To make matters worse, it seemed like Patch *was* a parcel. Not a fancy one, all done up with shiny paper and ribbons; more of a plain brown one, with paper that has been used several times. The kind of parcel that no one wants to receive and everyone is always passing on.

‘They tell me you are impossible,’ Mr Ringe would say, and her heart would give a little thud.

‘A ruffian.’ Thud. Thud.

‘A wild animal.’ Thud. Thud. Thud.

Mr Ringe was the craggy-faced, somewhat gaunt solicitor in charge of securing Patch a home.

Passed from pillar to post, that was how *she* saw it. Her mother had run away when she was born; her father had died ages ago of something to do with weak lungs. She couldn’t remember either of them. These were just the plain, hard facts.

Her journey had started in her father’s three-storey house in Kensington, with a nursery at the top and a kitchen at the bottom. She had since been delivered to an aunt in Surrey, a grandmother in Northumberland,

an uncle in Essex, and a second-cousin-twice-removed in Islington.

The aunt's house had been like a palace, with horses and stables and butlers in uniform. The grandmother had lived in less majestic circumstances, but that didn't stop her endless fussing about manners and etiquette. Then there had been the uncle, who practised a kind of godly austerity in his rambling vicarage. And finally the second-cousin-twice-removed, a most disgruntled individual who lived in a flat in a mansion block with only one maid and a measly allowance.

It was a bit like descending a very long staircase, the advantage being that along the way Patch had acquired an array of skills: she could ride a horse; she knew exactly what cutlery to use at a six-course dinner; she could stretch a chicken to make it last for several meals (the trick was to boil it and serve it with suet pudding); and she could unravel a whole jumper and (with just one extra ball of wool) knit it back together again a size or two larger.

Her downfall were the scrapes she was always getting into, not, *she* thought, all of her own making.

The aunt's children – spoiled boys, all three of them – had insisted on calling her 'No-mama' and in the end there was nothing to do *but* punch them.

The grandmother had so many rules to remember it made Patch's head spin, the worst by a mile being, 'You mustn't speak unless you are spoken to.' How on earth could Patch, who always had something to say, manage that? The uncle believed that little girls should only read Bible stories. So *of course* Patch had been forced to creep into the library at dead of night, frantically tear pages from the forbidden books and devour them in secret.

Unsurprisingly, Patch barely managed more than a few years in each place before being sent back to Mr Ringe.

'You have been found wanting,' he would say with an air of profound weariness, 'yet again.'

On her twelfth birthday the second-cousin-twice-removed declared Patch 'unmanageable' because she'd shouted at her in public, comparing her to a gargoyle and calling her a child hater. Patch was sent back to Mr Ringe with a long note full of grievances, ending with the declaration that the second-cousin-twice-removed never, ever wanted to see the child again.

'Well,' announced Mr Ringe, pulling despondently at his right ear, which Patch couldn't help noticing was fractionally larger than his left one, 'I would've preferred a bit more notice. While we await instructions, temporary arrangements will have to be made.'

‘Instructions’ were something Mr Ringe often alluded to. Who made them, or where they came from, was a mystery that was never shared with Patch. Patch stared hard at the solicitor and he stared back. Hard stares were one of her specialities. Mr Ringe blinked first and awarded her one of his historically long sighs. ‘The thing is, young Patch, we have quite run out of relatives.’

It was Meg, the second-cousin-twice-removed’s maid-of-all-work, who came to the rescue. Meg was the sort of person who left little cakes in Patch’s pockets when she was sent to bed without any tea, and, more than a few times, she’d lent Patch her comics. The comics were full of adventure and derring-do – about girls just like Patch, but with better luck, who became top-notch spies or ran away to join the circus.

‘A girl like that, in a home like ours?’ Meg’s mother had said when she had been sent for. Mrs Jenkins didn’t mean to sound rude but she was a practical woman. Life in Lambeth was rough and tumble. She wasn’t sure if this odd little girl would survive.

‘Patch will be fine,’ said Meg firmly. ‘She’s as tough as old boots, aren’t you Patch?’

‘I am,’ Patch agreed, looking down at the lace-up boots peeping out from under her red dress. She clicked

the heels together twice and tapped the toes. It was the sort of 'theatrical gesture' that would have driven the second-cousin-twice-removed mad. It was true that Patch *did* have quite fervent theatrical ambitions.

'And Mum won't be out of pocket, will she Mr Ringe?' asked Meg.

'A stipend will be paid for the girl's board and lodging,' concurred the cadaverous gentleman, and Patch saw, quick as lightning, the doubt in Mrs Jenkins's eyes disappear.

And it *had* been fine. More than fine.

Patch was adaptable. You had to be if you were a parcel, constantly being passed from pillar to post. Soon she had added to her repertoire of skills: talking pure cockney like she had been born to it, zooming around on one roller skate, which was all the rage, and minding Mrs Jenkins's youngest – who didn't seem to have a name; everyone just called it Baby – on one hip like the other girls in the street.

At the Jenkinses' there wasn't time to be cross. Even if she had been, they probably wouldn't have noticed.

Still, Patch was careful not to get too attached. She knew that once 'instructions' had been received, a new summons would arrive.

And it did.

Mr Ringe's brief note, delivered by the postman as Patch was gobbling down her breakfast bread and dripping, hinted that it was time for the parcel to be posted on. And when she arrived at the solicitor's office later that day, he wasted no time in delivering his news, rapping out the words in a tense staccato.

'Instructions have been received. You are to go to a friend. A *family* friend. Teaches at a girls' school. In Liverpool. Says she'll take you in. Best you can hope for. Given the circumstances.'

'Who sends these Instructions?' asked Patch, her face growing hot. A family friend? Who she'd never heard of? It sounded suspicious. She didn't trust the idea for one minute.

'Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies,' said Mr Ringe at his most infuriating. It was no good arguing; Patch had tried before and always got nowhere. So instead she kicked the solicitor's desk leg hard and watched a pile of probably very important papers fall with a satisfying thud to the floor. They looked like they had landed in a terrible muddle. Good.

She wanted to shout that she already knew this friend of her mother's would soon get fed up and pass her on like everyone else. She wanted to tell him that it was probably best if they just let her take care of herself.

But instead she put on her crossiest face, a scowl of the highest order, just so Mr Ringe didn't forget who he was dealing with. Then she nodded and squared her shoulders. She would bid farewell to the dear Jenkinses. She would go to Liverpool, to this 'family friend'. She would try to be a pupil at the school just as proposed.

Because Patch Leonard was brave as well as cross. A survivor, just like the girls in the comics.

And anyway, deep down inside her leather boots her feet were starting to itch.

A train journey. A new city.

A teeny, tiny part of Patch actually quite liked being on the move.