

THE  
**SUPREME**  
**LIE**

GERALDINE McCAUGHREAN

For my marvellous brother NEIL, who started me writing.  
(And IWONA, of course, who entered the family like  
a beam of sunshine.)

THE  
**SUPREME**  
**LIE**

First published in the UK in 2021 by Usborne Publishing Ltd., Usborne House,  
83-85 Saffron Hill, London EC1N 8RT, England, [usborne.com](http://usborne.com)

Text copyright © Geraldine McCaughrean, 2021

The right of Geraldine McCaughrean to be identified as the author  
of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright,  
Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

Cover illustration by Leo Nickolls

Map and inside illustrations by Keith Robinson  
Illustrations © Usborne Publishing Ltd, 2021

The name Usborne and the Balloon logo are Trade Marks of  
Usborne Publishing Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,  
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means,  
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without the  
prior permission of the publisher.

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues are products  
of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to  
actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

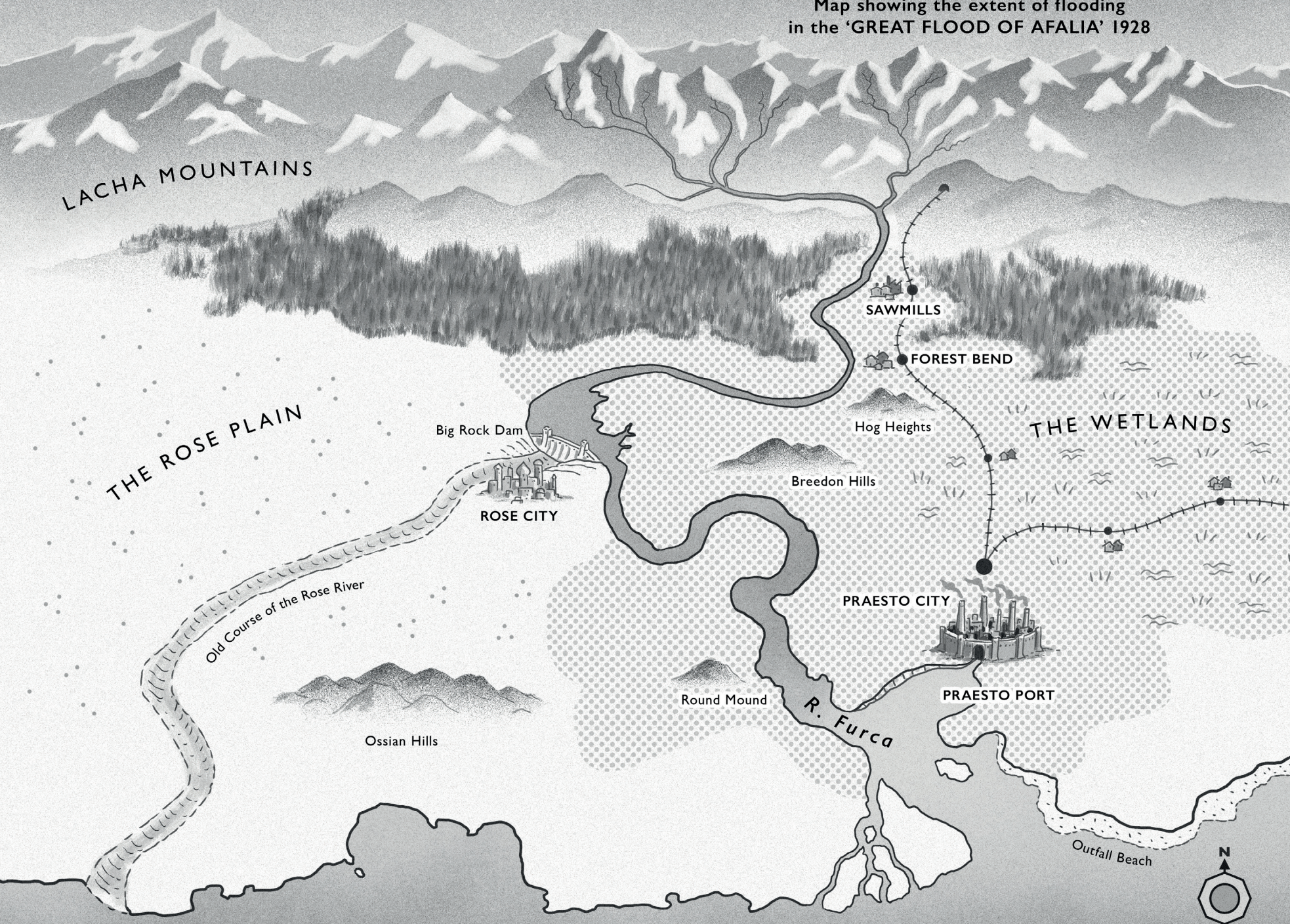
ISBN 9781474970686 05604/1 JFMAMJJASON /20

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY.





Map showing the extent of flooding  
in the 'GREAT FLOOD OF AFALIA' 1928





# The Voice

IN ATRAMENTO EST VERITAS

## SENATE IN CRISIS FLOOD TALKS WILL THE GATES BE SHUT?

As readers are all too aware, two months of rain have swollen the Furca River into a raging torrent. Its waters will soon reach our city's walls and could even flood in through the four Great Gates.

Already, the low-lying centre of the city is sodden with groundwater and rainfall. It is rumoured that the basements there are flooding.

The Senate will meet today with Madame Suprema to discuss what can be done. Many are hoping she will command the gates be closed – something that has not happened within living memory.

The Department of Public Safety has warned against panic. "Ultimately, Praesto's walls and the Great Gates will protect us all from harm," said a spokesperson yesterday.

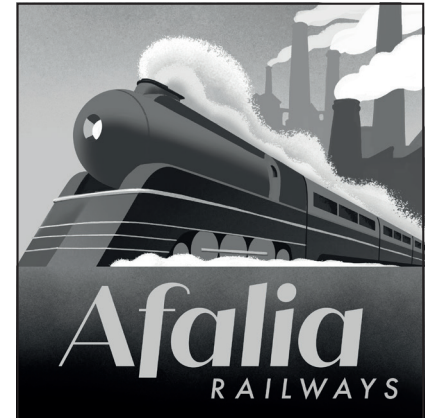
Worries grow for those  
outside the walls

Of greater concern, however, to readers of *The Voice*, is the welfare of people living outside the safety of Praesto City, in the farms, riverside settlements and timberlands. Could Rose City, being further north, let us know what they are seeing? Have they been contacted?

---

TODAY'S ANAGRAM:  
BELL NOW TOOTING

---



### IMPORTANT NOTICE

Afalia Railways regret that, in the event of more rain, no trains will run from North Gate Terminus after Monday noon. Easterly services, suspended last week, will not restart. Passengers' safety must come first.

## CHAPTER ONE

# Whether the Weather Will or Won't

PRAESTO CITY

In a mansion at the top of Praesto's highest hill, the maid Gloria sat on the stairs, reading the newspaper while she waited for the visitors to arrive. She was nervous about serving teas and coffees to so many people, and not spilling anything on anyone important. And the newspaper worried her with its talk of flooding up north. She tried to picture her home in Sawmills, water lapping at the door and the chickens all sitting on their coops to keep from drowning; the shirts on the wash-line dipping their cuffs in the muddy flood. She dared not even picture water *inside* the shack: Ma was so house-proud, so particular about keeping the rag-rugs clean...

When Gloria looked at her hands, she realized she had gripped the newspaper so tightly that her fingers were black with newsprint. She ought to wash. There was a white dog, asleep on the crimson hall carpet, too, who really shouldn't

be there, what with the Senators coming. Gloria would have to sweep up the white hairs before they arrived.

But Daisy was such a soothing sight, breathing out sighs of contentment, dreaming with her paws. All over the city, dogs had been howling and carrying on, sensing something was wrong with the weather, trying to warn their people... Gloria had heard them. Not Daisy. If there really were bad things coming, no scent of it had reached her leathery nose or made her hackles rise. Gloria went and sat beside her, so that the two of them could feel safe and carefree together. The dog rolled onto her back without waking, and stretched out luxuriously. "*Wish you were mine,*" Gloria whispered, and the dog's tail thump-thumped on the carpet.

The doorbell startled them both. Gloria leaped up in panic. Daisy merely lifted her head to see if food had come to call.

It was only Madame's husband, his hat-brim full of rain and his trouser cuffs sodden.

"Have they arrived?" he asked.

"No, sir. Not yet."

While he was still trying to close his umbrella, the dog seized her chance to escape into the garden and stand in the rain. She squeezed between his long legs, leaving white hairs in the arch of his trousers.

A voice called from the Grand Salon: "Is that you, Timmy?"

Gloria peeled him out of his wet coat, opened the double

doors to the Salon, and announced him, as if he were a visitor. "Mr Timor is home, Madame."

Madame, a doll-sized woman of regal majesty, with tiny feet, sharp fingers and an even sharper voice, lay along her sofa, cradling a second, smaller dog in her shawl. She wore net gloves and, when she was expecting visitors (as she was now), a wide-brimmed hat with a veil. Her face had not been seen by the world-at-large for several years, though her bright red lipstick glowed through the veil. The pug was new to the household. With his flat, snuffling face and bulging eyes, he had quite stolen Madame's heart away from Daisy.

"Did you go to the railway station as I told you?" she asked, recoiling from her husband's cold, rain-wet hands.

"They're planning to run a train at two o'clock," he said, "and then no more until the rain lets up. They're worried about the track flooding or embankments collapsing. But the rails are still above water as far as anyone can tell. The train's there already and a lot of people are aboard it. Apparently, this morning's paper said folk up north are getting flooded out of their houses. I suppose the crowds at the station have got relations up there and want to help out. If this weather forecast of yours turns out to be bad, they'll be going nowhere. Has it arrived yet?"

"The weather people are due at ten, along with half the Senate. And look at your trousers, Timmy. Do something about them."

On his way to change, Mr Timor passed the hall cupboard where the maid was rummaging about for umbrellas.

As soon as Gloria heard the cars arriving, she knew to carry umbrellas out to the Senators to shelter them on their walk up the drive. The umbrellas had seen a lot of outings over the last few weeks. For Gloria, it was a chance to see powerful people up close and hear what kind of things they talked about. Disappointingly, they were only complaining about the rain, which the wind was blowing in all directions at once.

The Senators cast glum looks at the sodden dog in the garden. Then they put on hopeful smiles and entered into the presence of Madame Suprema, ruling head of Afalia.

Madame held sway over the great walled city of Praesto, with its forest of factory chimneys and its swarming, soot-stained streets. But her realm was far larger than that. Beyond the city's ancient, encircling walls lay the whole of the Furca river basin, the cliffs and forests and wetlands and farms of all Afalia. These, too, were the Suprema's domain.

The visiting Senators did not bow, but their shoulders stooped in deference to the tiny lady on the vast sofa. Despite her size, the Suprema commanded a respect bordering on fear. But they, too, were eager to know if the weather people had arrived yet. One dared to voice his anxiety.

"Is it time to declare a State of Emergency, Madame?"

"And just what would that achieve, Mr Kovet, beyond panic in the streets?" said Madame scornfully. "There is really nothing to worry about. I'm sure the meteorologists will put our minds at rest. This filthy rain will stop and the sun will shine."

"But, Madame! Have you not seen today's newspaper? About the telegrams from the north? The river near to bursting? Houses flooded? It's raining like this the whole length of the river! And now it's in the newspaper, everyone is getting anxious. We could at least close the city gates. Have *you* heard anything about the towns in the north, Madame?"

"Not a word," said Madame Suprema. "And who believes every rumour they read in the newspaper?"

"Quite a number of people, I'm afraid, ma'am," said the Senator for Home Affairs. "It has, after all, been raining for *two months!*"

"And? Do they suppose Praesto City – bound round by high walls that have defended it from wind, war and water for centuries – will suddenly be swept away by a spell of rain?" Madame gave a bell-like laugh, which was a cue for everyone else to smile and shake their heads.

"No, but *outside* the walls..." began the Senator for Agriculture. "The farmers and foresters and smallholders and—"

"That is precisely why I have asked the best meteorologists

in the country to give us the true facts – here – today. One cannot base policy on half a dozen telegrams from a few backwoodsmen.”

“But since yesterday the telegrams have stopped coming...”

“Well, there you are then,” purred the Suprema.

“I mean, the telegraph poles must be down – washed away – struck by lightning – who knows? You’ve only got to look over the walls, ma’am, to see how the river levels are rising! These people wanting to travel north – should we let them go? I mean, is it safe for them to go?”

The Suprema made a noise, something between a sneeze and a snort. “It’s their money to waste, but if they have any wits, they’ll stay here where they’re safe.”

“We should stop them going anyway,” growled the Senator for Labour. “Can’t have the workforce gallivanting off to visit family.”

“Perfectly right,” said Madame Suprema. “I’m glad *someone* is keeping a sense of proportion.”

Out of sight, Gloria had lingered to listen by the parlour door, her arms full of wet umbrellas that were dripping onto her shoes. “Why don’t they just send up a plane to take a look?” she murmured under her breath.

“Quite,” said a voice, and she was dismayed to find the Suprema’s husband standing right behind her. He, too, had been listening. He stepped round her now and into the room.

“Why not send up a plane to take a look?” he asked. “We do have an Air Force.”

The Senators turned towards him as one.

“Leave us, Timmy,” said his wife sharply. “You should not be here. You know you are not entitled to attend Senate meetings.”

“Even so...”

“The weather has hardly been suitable for flying, Timmy. Now go.”

Everyone in the room waited in embarrassed silence until Timor shrugged and left again, blushing a little.

The meteorologists – a man and a woman – arrived, having travelled to Foremost Mansion by bus. Their long grey raincoats dripped on the hall carpet. Their faces were as grey as their coats. Bowing awkwardly to Madame Suprema, they brought out a damp envelope and, unsure which of them should hand it over, presented it jointly into her net-gloved hands.

“I’m sorry...” murmured the woman.

Madame Suprema cut her off with, “Don’t apologize. You are not very late. But we are eager to read your findings.” Then the veiled face tilted quizzically, as if surprised they were still there. “I have instructed my chauffeur to drive you home in the limousine. Wait for him by the gate. We mustn’t keep you from your work.”

Not until they had gone did Madame Suprema open the



envelope and read the paragraphs typed below the crest of the Society of Meteorology. There was a long and agonizing silence; perhaps the veil made reading difficult. Then the red lips parted in a broad smile.

“Good news, gentlemen, ladies! The weather forecast is for the rain to die out very soon and be replaced by hot, dry weather. It is already sunnier upriver. We have the full assurance of the Meteorological Society. Close the city gates? Ha! Close the railway station? Storm in a teacup.”

The room breathed out a single sigh. The Senators congratulated each other and heaped admiration on Madame Suprema, as if she personally had arranged a change in the weather. Then they left, telling each other that they had known all along there was no danger.

Their leaving allowed the dog Daisy to dash back through the open front door and into the parlour, where she shook herself dry. Astoundingly, the Suprema did not curse her or banish the dog to the scullery. She simply screwed up the letter and batted it playfully at Daisy, who caught it in her mouth.

“You there! Girl!” called the Suprema. “Pack for me, will you? I have laid the things that I wish to take out on my bed. And be quick. I am leaving on the afternoon train. You may come with me – the dogs will need someone to mind them.”

Gloria gasped. “Oh! Thank you, Madame!”

Timor walked in on the remark. “*Leaving? Why? Where?*”

His wife patted his sleeve playfully. “I think we should see for ourselves if there's any truth in the newspaper's gloomy rumours. If a few poor souls *have* been flooded out, I can spread comfort and joy. Anything less might lose me popularity with the public, don't you think?” And she slid Boz the off her lap in a thudding heap and went to speak to the cook.

Daisy appealed to Gloria for help. The ball of paper had wedged behind her top teeth and she could neither spit it out nor chew it. Gloria tugged the paper free, then hugged Daisy fiercely (despite her being wet as a sponge).

“Herself's going north, and she says we can go too!” Gloria told her. “We're going north, Daze! On the train! I haven't been on a train since I come down here from home. It'll maybe stop at Sawmills and you could meet my folks! D'you think she'd let us? While she's busy being kind to people? And think! The sun'll be shining, and nobody will be drowning, 'cos the weather's going to get fine again! So Grandpa *won't* have to climb on the roof with his bad leg, and the chickens *won't* drown – 'cos you know how close-to-the-ground chickens are and they might've drowned, mightn't they? I want you to meet *everybody*...”

And then Gloria was gone, upstairs, to bang suitcases about with a noise like the thunder banging outside. Daisy looked around for the screw of paper, in case it was worth another chew. But that was gone too. Boz had probably eaten it. So,

she lay on her side and thought about her hackles and why exactly they were bristling. Boz the pug couldn't be the reason. Somehow Daisy was not heartbroken to lose the love of the woman with sharp fingers. For a long time now, Daisy's heart had been given wholly to Gloria, with a bit held back for The Husband. And the cook, of course.

The good news would not reach the people in the streets until tomorrow. Tomorrow they would be laughing again, fearless of the puddles and overflowing gutters, knowing sunshine was on its way! Tomorrow Gloria would be happy, too. Right now, she was struggling to push a wheelbarrow with three suitcases in it...as well as a parcel of unspoken questions. Why had they not waited for Appis the chauffeur to come back from taking the weather people home? She had never known Madame go *anywhere* on foot and in the rain.

And why the big opera cloak with the deep hood? Madame generally enjoyed jolting gasps from people who caught a glimpse of her as she passed by.

And why on earth had Madame sacked Cook? Cook made the best cheese soufflé in all of anywhere! What would happen the next time a foreign bigwig visited and there was no Cook to make a soufflé?

Where were the Civil Guards to clear a path for her along the crowded platform? Why was Madame having to share an

umbrella with her husband, when she generally had some security guard holding it over her at arm's length?

The crowds at the station had *clearly* not heard the good news about the weather. The train building up steam in Praesto Station North was full to bursting with passengers, and the platform was swarming with people still trying to board it. Guards, porters, footplate-men and hired-muscle had formed a cordon to stop them, but men and women were crawling under the carriages to try and force the windows open on the far side. There was no disguising their desperation to go north. Gloria instantly pictured her family wading waist-deep through water, penniless, homeless, nibbled by water rats – or worse! – and resolved to ask Madame's permission to visit home.

As soon as the Suprema was in the shelter of the station, Timor closed the umbrella and took over pushing the wheelbarrow, carving a path through the crowds. A porter with a rounders bat blocked their path to the first-class coaches at the front. He jerked his head to indicate the tightly-packed carriages.

Gloria fully expected Madame to snap her fingers and commandeer the whole train for her own use. But no!

"Timmy, pay the man," she hissed, and Timor dutifully took out his wallet. Ten, forty, sixty afal changed hands, and the boy with the bat set about emptying one carriage of passengers.

“No luggage,” said the porter, pushing the wheelbarrow away with one foot.

Astonishingly, Madame did not throw back her hood and render the man speechless with awe at finding himself in the presence of the Suprema herself. She simply snapped her fingers in her husband’s direction.

Timor pulled out his wallet again, but the porter held his ground. “We’ll store it for you.”

The luggage was not the only casualty.

“No dogs,” said a guard, pointing his rolled-up green flag at Daisy.

“My good man,” snapped Madame, “her grandmother was the very first golden retriever to set foot on Afalian soil!”

“No dogs, no luggage,” said the guard.

Gloria feared for the man’s job. Surely at any moment Madame would say, *Out of my way, you fool! Am I not Madame Suprema, ruler of all Afalia?* But no. She simply pulled her hood further forward and said, “In that case, Gloria, I’m afraid you must stay behind and Daisy can sit in your seat.”

“No dogs, no luggage, no maids,” said the guard, relishing his power.

“For the love of... Just get in,” said Timor with uncharacteristic heat, and bundled his wife aboard. He thrust a key into Gloria’s hand and told her, “Mind the house till we get back.” His eyes did not once meet hers as he added, “Back soon, I’m sure. Put Daisy in the luggage van, there’s a

good girl.” He put the leash into her other hand, then stepped aboard and slammed the carriage door.

Bewildered, Gloria continued to stare into the compartment with its fancy drapes, plush seats and chance of seeing home, until Madame scowled at her and waved her away.

People were climbing onto the train roof now. The driver loosed off an ear-splitting jet of steam.

The luggage van in the middle of the train was (of course) already full of people, and the door had been locked to keep out more. Gloria tried to tell them that the rain would stop soon, but they would not open up. Gloria tried to lift Daisy onto the train roof, but no one up-top was ready to lend a hand, and it was beyond her strength to raise a full-grown retriever high over her head. Daisy subsided on top of her, and they both sank to the ground.

Back in the first-class carriage, Boz wriggled out from under Madame Suprema’s cloak and she sat him on her lap, laughing softly at the victory she had won over the officious guard. Her husband did not sit down, but stood with his forehead against the window, his breath fogging the glass.

“So. We are going upcountry to spread comfort and joy, are we?” he said. “To see how we can help the folk who’ve been flooded out. Then we’ll be back. Right?”



Madame crooned softly to the pug.

“*Right*, Suprema?”

His wife did not look at him. She was holding up Boz in two hands and staring him full in his round, flat face. Her reflection was bent out of shape by his bulging eyes and it annoyed her. “I do hope Daisy’s alright in the luggage van. That maid is such a useless object. I hope there are no other dogs in there with fleas or dirty minds.”

Timor opened the window, the better to breathe. “Gloria’s a good girl,” he said.

Madame gave a snort. “A maid is a maid, Timmy. A golden retriever is a rarity.”

And then she said, quite suddenly, out of the blue:

“You’re wrong. They never forgive a disaster.”

“Wrong? What did I say?” Timor asked, but she ignored him and carried on as if she was talking in her sleep, and certainly not to him.

“‘Our golden opportunity,’ you said. But the people – all those wretched little people... They have to find someone to blame. You’ll see. And it was always going to be me. ‘Why did she let it happen?’ they’ll say. ‘Why didn’t she DO something? Make it right. Make everything the way it was.’ How absolutely I despise them...”

Timor leaned out of the carriage window (despite the notice saying it was forbidden) and looked back along the platform. He caught sight of Gloria and Daisy standing

helpless beside the luggage-van door. And he felt a sudden need to get off and help. For once, he did not ask the permission of his wife.

“I might be able to get her onto the roof,” he told Gloria. “If I kneel down, do you think you can get her over my shoulders?” And he went down on all fours beside Daisy. Despite his beautiful woollen coat with its fancy collar, he looked somehow frayed and worn out. Wearing Daisy like a shawl, he walked his hands up the side of the train in order to get to his feet. As he did so, they all three flinched at the shrill blast of the train’s whistle, and the luggage van gave a jerk. The train had started to move.

“Run, sir!” squealed Gloria. “You’ll miss it! Never mind us! Run!”

But Timor did not run. He stood there, still bowed down by the golden retriever. Their eyes – girl, man and dog – flickered left-to-right, left-to-right, faster and faster as the train gathered speed in front of their very noses. It left a silent station in its wake.

“Will Madame be gone long, sir?” asked Gloria.

“God knows... I mean... There’s no telling. She wants to see for herself how bad things are for folk upstream.”

“I got folk upstream,” said Gloria.

“Oh. I’m sorry... I mean, I’m sure they’re alright.”

On the walk back to the house, Timor wheeled the wheelbarrow full of luggage.

“I hope the rain stops really soon. How would Madame get back here, sir, if the train tracks got flooded?”

“No idea,” he said, and then, “*Catapult*, perhaps!” with such unexpected venom that Gloria knew she had asked one question too many and dropped back to walk behind him where she belonged.

She talked to the dog instead. “Funny she laid out all her best dresses to go where it’s muddy. And sacked Cook! Who’s gonna cook her dinner when she comes home?”

Daisy wagged her tail, not having understood anything that had been said all morning, but relieved to be away from the whistling and hot hiss of the railway station, and happy to be with the two people she loved best.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Washout

FOREST BEND, NORTHERN AFALIA

Much earlier that day, far away to the north, Clem Wollen and his parents had sat on the floor of their shack, and listened to a storm that threatened everything they held dear. Their dog Heinz moved uneasily from lap to lap, wishing they had believed him sooner.

Danger has a smell. It prickles at the back of the nose. *Smell that?* it says. *Something is wrong.* All over the village, dogs had been smelling the danger and barking. Week upon week, the raindrops had been blasting smells out of the soft ground, swirling them into a rich stew of scents. But strongest of all was the smell of danger. *Look to your loved ones,* it said. *Tell them. Warn them.* And Heinz had tried with all his might.

They believed him now.

The everlasting rain hammered on the roof and rattled