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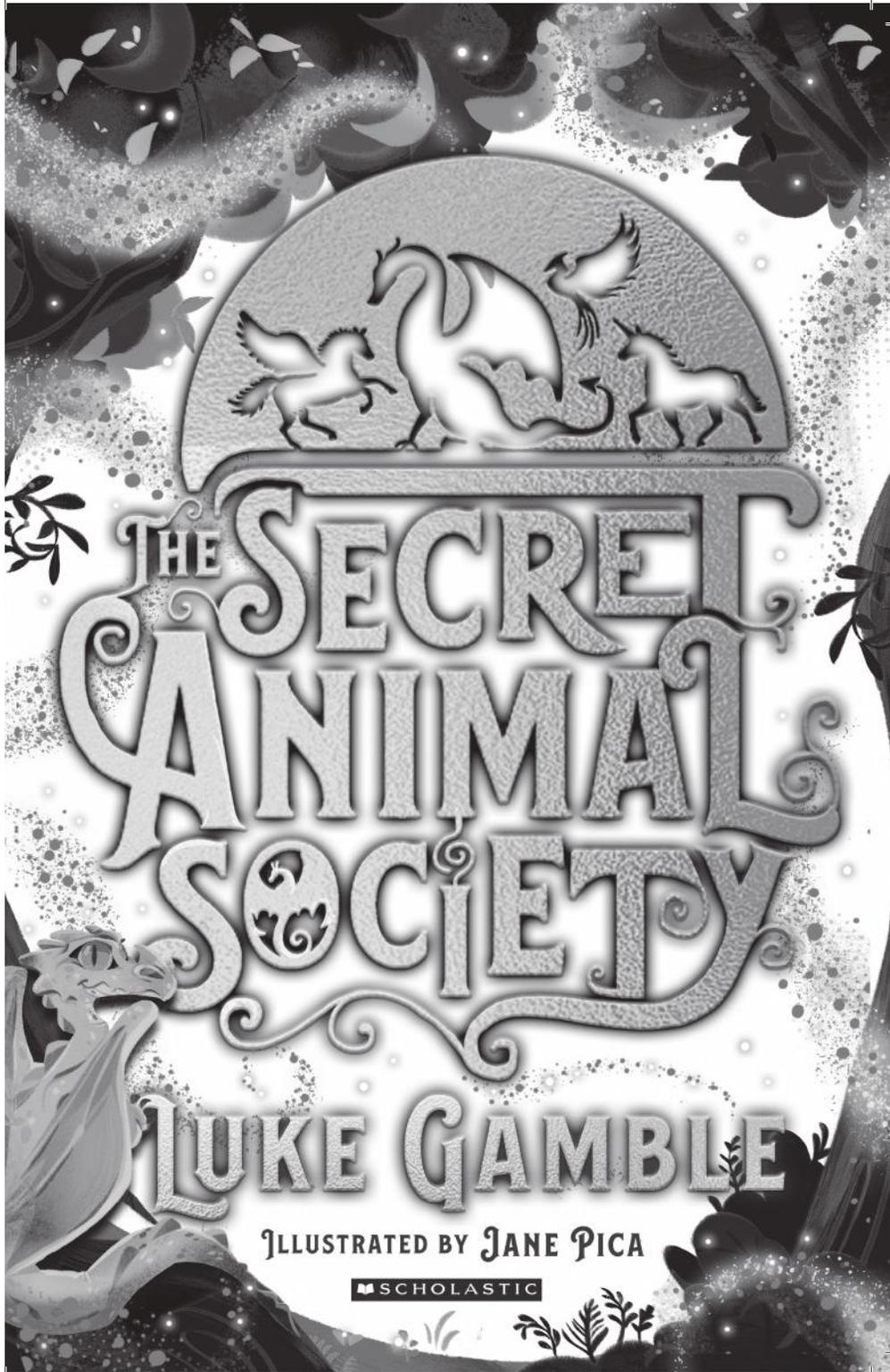
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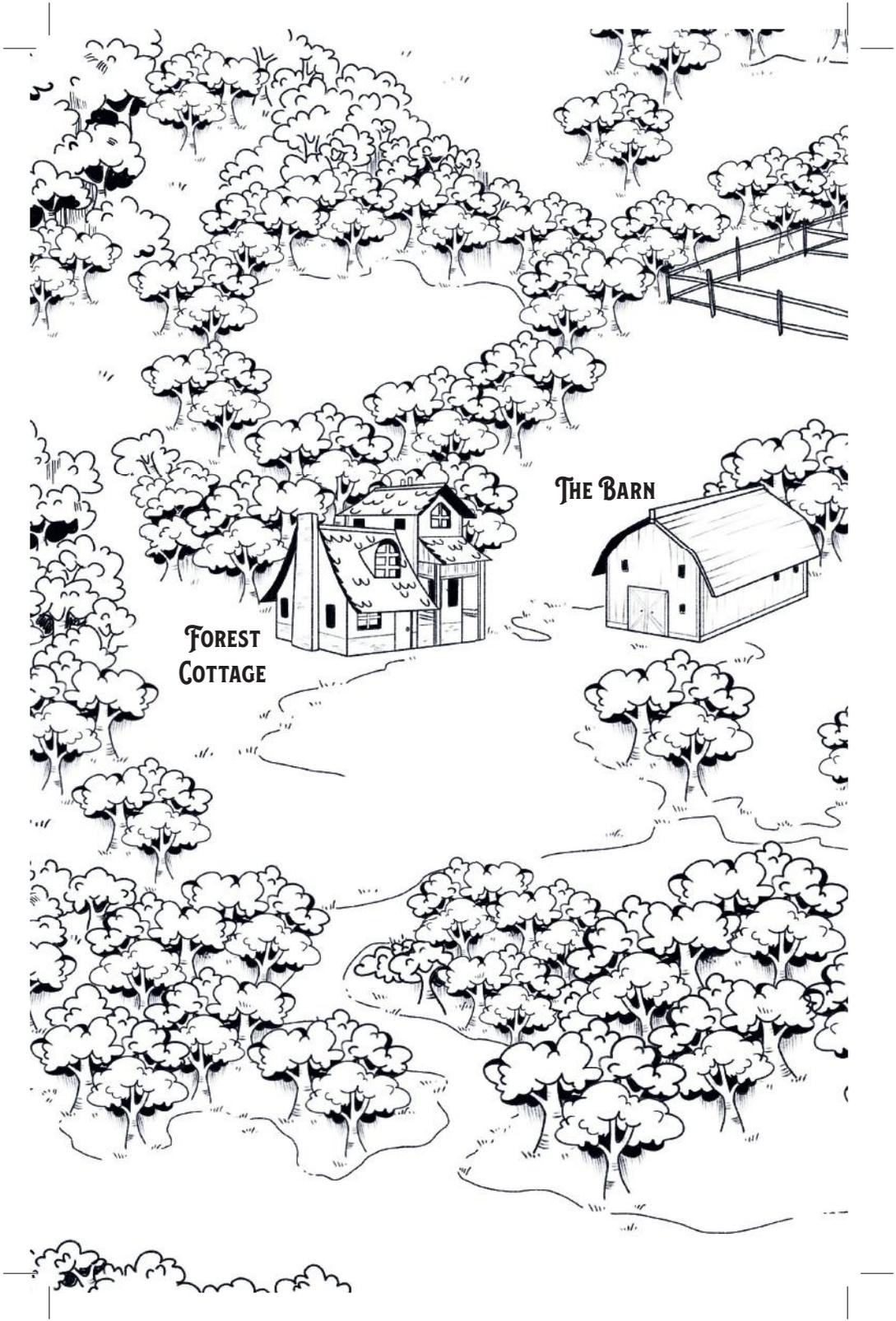
LUKE GAMBLE

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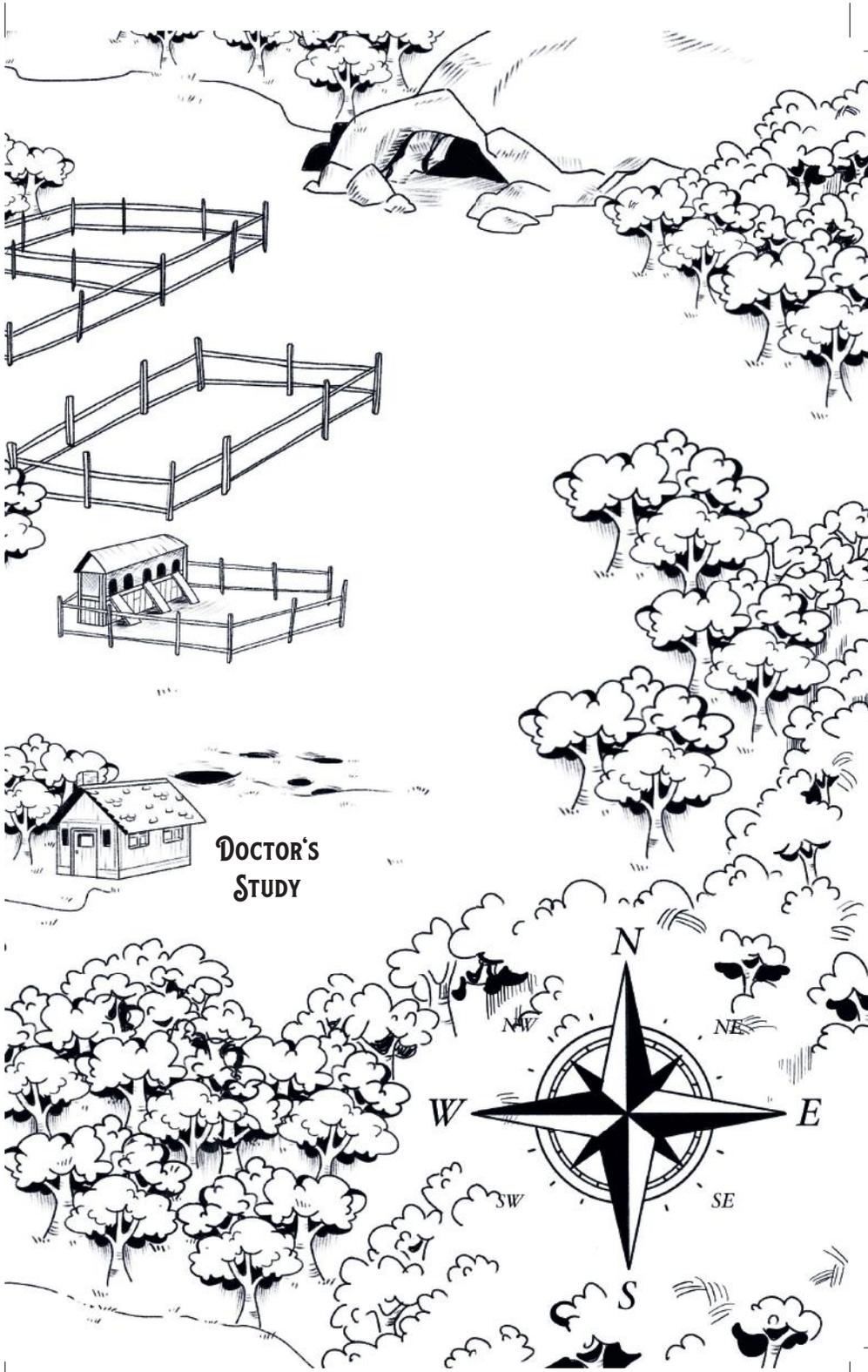


**TO GABRIEL AND ALL OUR  
FURRED, FEATHERED AND  
SCALY FAMILY MEMBERS,  
PAST AND PRESENT!**



FOREST  
COTTAGE

THE BARN



**DOCTOR'S  
STUDY**





# CHAPTER ONE

*In which the indomitable Edith receives some extraordinary news, and must face up to the possibility of an altogether different kind of life, and a summer holiday like no other. . .*

The halls of St Montefiore's School for Girls were enough to terrify any girl. In the playground there stood a big bronze bust of Margot Montefiore, who had founded the school many centuries ago. Along every wall were hundreds of paintings – Margot Montefiore's face peered down from all of them. Sometimes she was staring. Sometimes she was glaring. *Always* she had her finger raised, as if to reprimand every single girl who passed by, under her steely gaze.

Outside the headmistress's study, her oil-painted face was a perfectly gruesome grimace – for any girl sitting here must *surely* have demanded the worst telling off.

Or so thought Edith Wight.

Edith had been sitting here for hours already, while the school emptied around her as girls left for the summer holidays. Perched on the edge of a hard wooden bench in the gloomy, windowless corridor, her blonde hair pulled back in a painful school regulation ponytail, she glanced up at the clock beside Madam Montefiore's most fearsome gaze with sharp blue eyes. There it hung at a crooked angle, its large pale face framing two spindly black hands. Edith willed its hands to move, but the time was passing with aching slowness.

A short burst of laughter echoed through the old building from the front hall – another girl being collected. It died away abruptly as the thud of the heavy front door reverberated with finality. That was it: the last of the pupils had gone for the summer.

Well, *almost* the last.

Edith sighed and screwed up her eyes, hoping a phone would ring, for someone to tell her that it was OK, that her parents were coming after all.

They couldn't have forgotten – not twice in one year.

A sudden scurrying noise made her look sharply to her right. It took her a moment to see anything in the dim light, but then she spotted a small dark shape chasing along the edge of the skirting. The mouse seemed panicked, racing first one way and then another. Edith watched, wondering why the creature was so distressed. Then she noticed someone had placed a large box against the wall. It must be obstructing the spot where the creature needed to go. It had been blocked out of its home.

Edith bit her lower lip. If the teachers caught her getting up from the bench she'd really be in for it – at St Montefiore's, the school motto was **OBEDIENCE MATTERS** – but there was no way the mouse would be able to move the box. If anyone else saw it, they'd kill it.

Edith made her decision. With a quick push, she propelled herself off the bench.

“EDITH WIGHT! WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?”

The raised voice echoed sharply in the confines of the walls.



Edith looked up to see the angular figure of Madame Entwhistle, the French mistress, looming at the end of the hall.

Edith wasn't the only one who'd heard. The voices within the headmistress's office had abruptly stopped as well.

Something inside made Edith fight her instincts to obey and she dashed towards the box, hitting it full tilt and causing it to spin away from the skirting.

"EDITH WIGHT, GET BACK ON THAT BENCH AT ONCE!"

The sound of Madame Entwhistle's footsteps matched the anger in her voice.

Edith looked down. But the box had slid into the middle of the corridor and the mouse was heading towards sanctuary. Uttering a little squeak, it disappeared from sight.

"EDITH WIGHT!"

Madame Entwhistle was almost on top of her. Edith looked around. The door to the headmistress's study opened and then. . .

Then the world was an explosion of incandescent light.

The pain that suddenly exploded in Edith's head made her clutch her temples with both hands.

Clamping her eyes shut, she doubled over and staggered backwards, reeling as if she had been struck full in the face.

As the pain began to ebb away, Edith slumped to the floor, her chest heaving for air and sweat running down her face.

“EDITH WIGHT!” Madame Entwhistle roared. “YOUR BEHAVIOUR BEGGARS BELIEF. GET BACK ON THAT BENCH IMMEDIATELY!”

“She’s had another attack, Madame Entwhistle.” A more authoritative voice spoke from the study’s doorway. “Give her some air. I’ll see to this.”

“As you wish, Headmistress.”

Edie registered the sound of Madame Entwhistle’s footsteps retreating and other footsteps approaching.

The sound of softer footsteps approaching faintly registered in Edith’s consciousness.

“Child, are you all right?”

Edith opened her eyes, bracing herself for a resurgence of the pain. Nothing happened. She nodded up at her headmistress and got to her feet.

“Come into my office, Edith Wight. We have things to discuss.”

\* \* \*

The headmistress's study was small and square, and every inch of its walls were covered in yet more portraits of St Margot Montefiore. The woman in the pictures looked surprisingly like the headmistress who directed Edith to an upright leather chair, and this was no surprise; St Montefiore's School for Girls had been passed down from one generation to the next, ever since its founding.

The headmistress, as round and plump as her ancestor, sat behind her antique oak desk and paused to regard the girl in front of her. Edith was small for an eleven-year-old and she sat there clasping her hands together, looking pale, thin and drawn.

"Sorry, Headmistress," she said quietly once she had fully regained her senses.

"Edith," the headmistress said, with a hint of a sneer. "Child, you seem to have had another of your . . . *episodes*. I need to speak to you about your parents."

Not for the first time, Edith wondered if the headmistress really cared about the tumble she'd taken. She looked up, expectantly.

"Have they forgotten again?" she asked. The disappointment tasted sour in her mouth.

"Not this time." The headmistress paused with relish. "Your mother and father will not be here to collect you today, nor any other day. They have gone missing."

*Missing.* The word was so simple and yet so bewildering. Edith's eyes darted around, as if she might even find her parents hiding under the headmistress's table. It suddenly seemed so long ago that she'd last seen them.

"Where are they, Headmistress?"

"Well, if that was known, they would not be *missing*, would they, young lady?" The headmistress smiled. "This isn't like half term. *Then* they simply got the dates wrong – well, when your lives are as busy as your parents' lives are, off trotting the globe looking for natural 'wonders', it's quite easy to forget a little girl you left halfway across the world. What is it they're looking for this time? Tree frogs? Rare butterflies?"

"Flies, Headmistress."

"*What?*"

"They're studying bluebottles. It's my mother's speciality."

The headmistress gave Edith a look of disgust. "I dare say *some* people find flies fascinating, but what those people might be like, heaven knows – and, good gracious, just to think that they've left you behind while they're gallivanting across the world looking for *bluebottles!*"

"My mother says insects will save the planet," Edith said defensively, suddenly emboldened. "Without insects, there wouldn't be any other life on earth."

“Well, whatever they’re up to, we’ve had no word from them and neither has anyone else. This latest expedition of theirs, well, suffice to say it’s been a little more remote than usual. It’s thought they’ve been cut off by floods and are stranded in the Amazon rainforest.”

The Amazon. Her parents had been there before. There was more to investigate in the Amazon rainforest than anywhere else on earth. There were still corners of the Amazon where new animals lurked, undiscovered by humans.

Edith’s mother and father had first met when they studied Natural Sciences together at the University of Cambridge. From there, life had taken them all over the world. They’d spent summers in the Sahara, studying desert hedgehogs and hopping jerboas. They’d overwintered on an Antarctic island, documenting the lives of penguins and leopard seals. They’d even been to the bottom of the ocean to take pictures of the strange, shapeless jellyfish who live on the seabed itself. When Edith was small, they’d stopped roaming for a while and all lived together in their flat overlooking Kensington Gardens in London – but when Edith was old enough to go to boarding school, they’d set off again. Edith would thrill to get letters and postcards from places as far away as Mongolia and the Solomon Islands, Yosemite Valley

and the fjords of Iceland – but none of it seemed so thrilling today. Edith thought immediately of the mouse trying to get back into its hole.

“Doesn’t anyone know where they are?” She had always tried not to show any fear in front of the teachers at St Margot Montefiore’s School for Girls. They loved it when you showed a little fear. “Are they still alive?” she said quietly.

“Here,” the headmistress said. She picked up a letter from the big oak desk and tossed it on to Edith’s lap. “Now you know as much as we do. It seems the Peruvian authorities last had radio communication with them a week ago when they issued a warning about heavy rain. But now the rivers have broken their banks and the floodwaters are rising. Well, if you will go trotting off to heaven knows where, you’re bound to come a cropper one of these days. It’s their own silly fault, if you ask me.”

Edith fought back the urge to shout out, “*Well I didn’t ask you!*” and instead said, “Is anyone looking for them?”

“Read it for yourself,” the headmistress said dismissively. “There’s another expedition, the Syndicate, in the same region. They’re missing too. The only difference, it seems, is that this Syndicate didn’t leave behind a troublesome little girl whose headmistress now has to find *some* way of accommodating her over the summer.”

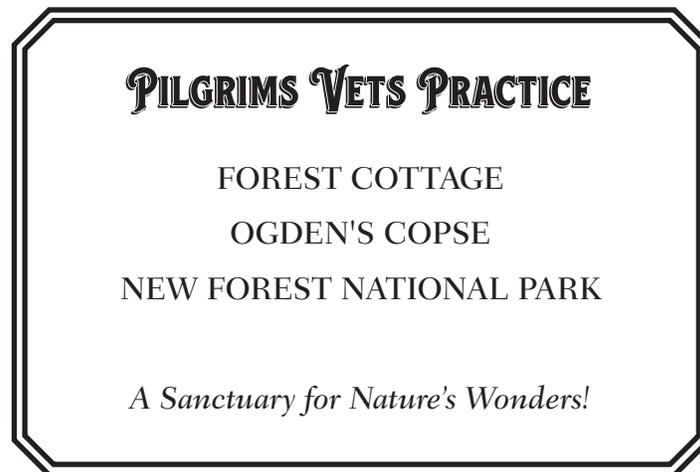
The headmistress gave a dramatic shake of the head.

“Where will I go?” Edith asked, panic creeping into her voice.

The headmistress produced a little card.

“Your emergency contact. Every parent has to leave one. Just in case they, you know, get eaten by a crocodile, or fall overboard at sea, or go missing in a jungle.”

Edith shivered as she looked at the card being pressed into her hands.



For the longest time, Edith just stared.

“I . . . I . . . I’m not sure who . . .”

The headmistress’s eyes flared in panic. Then she let out a little sigh of relief.

“For a moment there, Edith Wight, I thought you were about to have another of your turns! And I’ve got a plane to catch. Now, it seems this Pilgrims Vet Practice is run by an uncle of yours. His dearly departed wife was your mother’s sister or some such. But, whatever he is to you, he’s to be your keeper this summer.”

Keeper? The word sounded perfect for an animal doctor, but not for a child.

Edith paused. She was stunned into silence. She had never had much contact with anyone in her family other than her parents and grandmother. She wasn’t sure if her uncle would even know she existed. Her mother had never even mentioned that she had had a sister!

“I don’t know him. My parents have never talked of him. Or an aunt.”

“We’ve managed to speak to someone at this address,” the headmistress continued, “and explain the situation. We didn’t speak to the man himself. He was out on some expedition of his own, I understand. Must be a family trait – being too busy for you. Still, his housekeeper seemed reasonably understanding.” She stood and picked up a suitcase and parasol from behind the desk. “I’m sure it will work out just fine. So, if you wouldn’t mind. . .”

Edith watched the headmistress’s hand dart behind

her desk, and come back up carrying a suitcase and a parasol.

“Tick, tick!” she declared, using the parasol to shoo Edith back towards the door. “Oh, and don’t you worry –” She reached into a drawer under the desk and handed Edith a bulky envelope – “the expense has been added to your school account to be settled before the beginning of next term.”

Out in the corridor, Edith stood alone, listening to the click of the headmistress’s heels march away to her holiday on the Costa del Sol. Too many thoughts were buzzing in her head. Her parents – lost amongst the rising floodwaters of some faraway jungle. A whole summer stretching out in front of her – in the company of a man she’d never known. And. . .

Her eyes panned down. The little hole in the wall was still exposed, and out of it poked the mouse with its little whiskery snout. It squeaked once, sending another shockwave through Edith’s mind – but this time she didn’t faint clean away.

He was wishing me her good luck, she realized. He was wishing her “bon voyage”. She wasn’t sure how she knew it, but there it was in her head, as clear as day.

And, as Edith tramped away, she was grateful.

She was going to need all the luck in the world.