

Chicken
House

2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Text © Lucy Christopher 2018

First published in Great Britain in 2018

Chicken House
2 Palmer Street
Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS
United Kingdom
www.chickenhousebooks.com

Lucy Christopher has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted or utilized in
any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or
otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design and interior design by Helen Crawford-White

Typeset by Dorchester Typesetting Group Ltd

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

The paper used in this Chicken House book is made
from wood grown in sustainable forests.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data available.

ISBN 978-1-906427-73-3

eISBN 978-1-911077-59-6



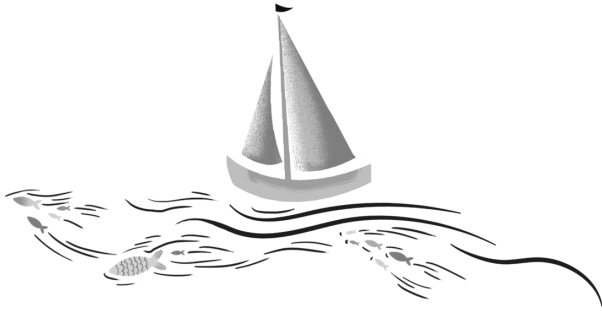
For Dad and Barb, with love.

Also by Lucy Christopher

Stolen

Flyaway

The Killing Woods



*Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometime voices
That, if I then had waked after long sleep,
Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
The clouds methought would open and show riches
Ready to drop upon me that, when I waked,
I cried to dream again.*

William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*



CONTENTS

Act One: Spring <i>The Scene: An Unnamed Port. Nine Years Previous.</i>	1
Act Two: Summer <i>The Scene: An Island. Eight Years Previous.</i>	5
– Two Years Pass – <i>The Scene: An Island. Seven Years Previous.</i>	15
– Six Years Pass – Act Three: Autumn <i>The Scene: An Island. Several Weeks Previous.</i>	53
Interval	125
Act Four: Winter <i>The Scene: An Island. Several Days Previous.</i>	127
Act Five: Spring <i>The Scene: At Sea. Current.</i>	291
Epilogue: Spring <i>The Scene: At Sea</i>	301





ACT ONE
SPRING



The Scene: An Unnamed Port
Nine Years Previous





ACT ONE. SCENE ONE.

This story starts with a dream, and its dreamer.

He was younger then, rolling in the belly of his boat, on rougher waters than expected inside those harbour walls. The first day of spring, but he felt at the end of the world. And still, the storms stayed.

In fever dream, he turned in his bunk, his hand splaying to the side and hovering in mid-air. He pressed his finger and thumb together, so gently, as if he were picking a flower. Careful, careful . . . he couldn't rush it, couldn't *crush* it, either. The flower was so little, more precious than any jewel. He breathed lighter, stretched a little further. *There!* He touched it. Just *there!* It left a tingling in his fingertips.

'Stormflower,' he whispered.

He ran his fingers down its stem – smooth, smooth, a little wet, so tiny and firm – more sparrow's leg than plant. And, soon, the feeling came, the happy rush into his veins. No pain now. All fading back – the sharp stabs in his mind, the confusion, the anxiety when he thought about the darkness washing over the world. He could drown in darkness like that; anyone could.

Not him.

He'd met that sailor in the port's bar – fate, perhaps? – and he'd watched the old man's face, candle-bright as he'd talked of that land.

'Alchemy . . . change . . . heal the darkness . . . a chance.'

As the sailor's words had tangled inside him, there'd been urging and rough magic and dreams in the old man's eyes. Then the flowers he'd sketched on the napkin between them. The map.

And then, every night while the rains got worse, came the dreams.

So.

The young man did what he always did in those dreams. He snapped the flower's head from its stem and put its petals inside his mouth.

And he chewed.



ACT TWO
SUMMER



The Scene: An Island
Eight Years Previous





ACT TWO. SCENE ONE.

For Moss, storms had a smell: churned-up salt water and seaweed, damp wood on the tide, even the far-off burn of lightning . . . but this storm had something else. It was sweeter. *Wilder.* Moss pushed her hair sideways and looked up at the cliffs. Tiny pieces of colour were everywhere, as if the rocks held gemstones. She growled as her hair flew back in front of her face, tangling in a hundred different sailor's knots.

But she'd seen right.

Stormflowers.

Opening.

Again, she shoved her hair clear to see where the flowers grew thickest, all around Pa's cave. Wind was pulling their petals, rattling their stems. The storm's sweetness was *this*. There were pink ones, white, others gold – petals floated from the rocks to settle on her shoulders. She heard a high-pitched singing sort of sound too. Pa had always said the flowers would sing. When they wanted to. When they were ready to open full.

She tried to see Pa at the cave entrance. *Now* she knew why he wasn't down on the beach with her, exploring for wash-up. He was

doing this. Somehow he'd opened the flowers, made them work!

She dropped the collecting pot and ran. Fast, fast, faster, leaping the sharp stones on that part of the beach. Quick, quicker, she skidded through their camp, then took the well-used path up to the cave. She was huff-puffing before she was even halfway. As she spread her arms wide so that she was almost touching the wild-moving pine trees, she was imagining how, later, beside the campfire, Pa would dance and sing and swirl her. Would tell stories till the fire went low, of the world where they had come from, of where they would go back to, also, one day. His smile would be broad beneath his bird-beak nose, his blue-grey eyes soft.

Now she felt lighter. Now she ran faster. She went quick-spinning and leaping beneath those petals, all swirling and falling. Until, flinching, she saw the sky smash.

'Lightning,' she whispered, savouring the word like a treasure. 'Sky's on fire.'

Was what Pa would say. She spread her arms wide till her wrists brushed pine needles and felt their cool zing.

Sky's!

On!

Fire!

She loved Pa's sayings and how his voice tilted as he spoke them; she liked to test how they felt in her mouth. A bigger, second flash came, but she didn't lie flat on the ground like Pa had taught her and wait for it to pass. She stood still, feeling the wind claw, smelling the petals, hearing the sea moan above the reef. And, still, that singing – that high-pitched, sweet-pretty singing! From beyond the volcano, at very toppest of the island, she thought she heard the wild dogs howl in answer. Perhaps even the lizards hissed

in their caves. Today, everything on the island cried out.

At Pa's cave, the heavy cloth across the door was half pulled back. Inside, the wind was not so firm. When Pa turned, his teeth caught the light from the candles and glinted like the petals did. He held out his arms and she ran for them.

'How did you make the flowers full-open, Pa?'

'Luck?' He shrugged, smiling. 'Maybe it was just the right time.'

She breathed in, there was smoke and earth; the smells always in Pa's coverings no matter how hard Pa washed at them. She crouched to Jess too, and breathed in running and rabbits. The dog licked her ear. Then Pa took Moss's hand and pulled her to the table to see the glass vase. She reached to touch it, thinking, as always, how special it was that something so fragile had survived their rough journey across the sea so long ago. Underneath its lid, a mixture swirled.

'Opened petals?' she asked. 'All crushed up?'

Pa nodded. 'Mixed them with salt water and sand. I told them dreams and stories! When they'd had enough, they opened.'

'Island feeds on stories.' She repeated the words he'd told her once when he'd been crouched close to the fire.

'Clever Moss.' He tapped her on the nose. 'I found these ones on the volcano. I sang for them. Perhaps I got the song right; perhaps they were just ready to work.'

He winked, then hummed for Moss. It sounded more like a bird's song than the rowdy-loud sailing songs Pa sang beside the fire after palm wine. Two notes, up and down, getting faster and higher in pitch until it was like a finch's trill. He put the flowers he'd picked on the table, in a line. Before, when the island had had storms, the flowers'd only opened a little, and she and Pa had

peered inside the closed-up petals to see their yellow hearts. But today their centres shone, and their petals glinted vivid-bright as fish scales.

‘When I felt this storm coming,’ Pa continued, ‘I knew the flowers would open – I felt it core-deep! Now we can send them out to the world.’

‘Heal the floods,’ Moss murmured, repeating other words she’d read in his book.

‘Fix the darkness,’ he added.

‘And then we’ll go back there, yes?’

But Pa didn’t hear her words. Instead, gentle-slow, Pa picked up one of the smallest, most orange flowers and held it out. Glow-bright, it was.

‘The pollen,’ Pa explained, ‘making it glint.’

But she knew that; Pa had told her a thousand times.

Healing pollen.

Magic pollen.

Pollen to change the rest of the world and make it safe again.

Pollen to heal Pa, too.

When she breathed in, the pollen’s sweet smell tickled the back of her throat.

‘Try it now, Pa,’ Moss said. ‘See if it heals anything! See if your brain feels better!’

He ruffled her hair, got fingers caught in it. Careful-slow, he took the flower between finger and thumb. Snapping the flower’s head from the stem, he put it inside his mouth. His eyes widened, and he chewed.

Moss squinted as she watched him, waited for his Adam’s apple to bob down his swallow. Did Pa look any different? Could one

flower make him better?

Pa laughed at her expression. 'Do you want to try?'

She took a pink flower. Closer up, its smell was sweeter than the honeycomb she fetched from the hives. It wriggled in her fingers and felt almost . . . alive. There was a sound like giggling. Was it coming from the flower?

'We can't eat something that laughs!'

Pa's eyes went crinkle-kind. 'Sing to it. Let it know you mean well.'

She copied him – those two bird-trill notes – moving her mouth in the same way he did. Jess barked. The flower went still in her hand, almost as if it were listening too. She turned it this way and that, seeing its million shades of pink.

'It's too beautiful,' she said. 'It giggled!'

'So? You giggle too! What six-year-old wouldn't when I do *this* . . .' He reached forward to tickle her ribs and she squirmed away, giggling louder than the flower. She wanted to spin and spin with the whooshing feeling inside.

When she opened her palm and looked back at it proper, it seemed to buzz on her skin. Something felt different inside her as she watched it, like her pulse beat faster and stronger.

'Like magic,' she whispered.

'It likes your stories,' Pa said. 'It gets energy from them, wants to be inside you to hear them better.'

She laughed again, and the flower seemed to move – just a little – towards her.

'See?' Pa said.

Quick-fast, she put it in her mouth. Chewed. Got an explosion of sweetness on her tongue. It made her teeth tingle. Made her

want to laugh and laugh and spin and swirl. Made her want to sit beside the fire and tell stories with Pa, read from his book. Draw pictures with sticks, dance in spirals. Pa had been right: these flowers were full-magic. Now she felt full-magic too.

Pa tipped rock-pool water from a scallop shell on to the table. 'Watch this, Moss.'

On a breeze from outside, the flowers moved towards the water, their petals darkening as they soaked it in.

'They drink it?'

Pa nodded. 'They'll make the floods go down.'

But how would little flowers drink in all the great big sea?

He laughed loud, his noise all startled-bird. She jumped. She felt the zing of petals against her cheeks, a sway inside her. Had the flower changed her, too? Healed her of something she didn't know she had?

'But what do I know about flowers like this?' Pa continued. 'What does anyone? A new species, Moss . . . a new chance. And we're the explorers!'

She saw hope and happy in his face. She dug her fingers into Jess's fur to go steadier. The flower's taste was strong. Now it made her want to shut her eyes and do nothing but dream.

When a gust of wind tried to pull petals from the table, Pa caught them quick.

'If I can just get the mixture right, maybe we'll make the world better without even leaving our island,' Pa said. 'Later, we'll send my book back to show them what we did!'

There was glinting in Pa's eyes, as if pieces of pollen were caught there. He picked up the vase and tilted it. Inside, the mixture glinted too, buzzed like a million fireflies pressed tight. 'Perhaps

whoever first discovered the healing given from poppies or willow felt like this too. We could be about to change . . . everything!’

Moss looked back towards the cave’s mouth to see ocean swirling and storm clouds coming. ‘If the Experiment works, will we see the other land?’

‘You remember it?’

Moss frowned to think of that other island, smaller than theirs, so far away on the horizon line. Had seeing it been a dream instead?

‘It disappeared,’ she whispered.

Pa smiled. ‘After we came. When the waters rose to cover it.’

She was thinking hard. ‘Maybe when that land comes back we’ll know . . .’ she shrugged, trying to decide what they’d know, ‘. . . we’ll know it’s safe to return, back to the rest of the world.’

‘Maybe.’

Pa took the lid from the vase, and such sweetness came into the air that Moss wobbled again.

Pa put his hand out to steady her. ‘Easy, my bird.’

His hand was warmer than before. He squeezed her shoulder before picking up more flowers from the table. He crushed them in his fist and dropped them into the swirling mixture, which turned a deeper shade of orange. He licked his fingers, not wasting a dribble of flower juice, then spat into the vase. The mixture swirled harder.

‘What now?’ Moss asked.

But she knew. Hadn’t Pa told her enough times as they sat around the fire? Hadn’t she read it in his book? Now, he’d push this mixture out to the storm, and winds would take the healing pollen back to the rest of the world. But would anything change? Would land return? Would darkness go away? She licked her lips, tasted sweetness.

Pa carried the vase to the cave entrance where the wind was racing-fierce, dragging Moss's hair over her eyes again. Pa pointed the mouth of the vase towards the storm clouds, his clothing flapping in the wind.

'Change,' Pa whispered.

They watched the mixture swirl up out of the vase and hang in the air as a bright puff, humming and fizzing. Moss's eyes watered. She wanted to stick her tongue out to taste it, keep it with her. But she also wanted to help Pa send it away. If that air went back, the floods would go down. Maybe then they would've fixed the world.

As she thought it, the orange mixture swirled and dived, darted towards the storm clouds.

'Take it,' Pa said. 'Fix us all!'