



A SECRET OF BIRDS & BONE

Kiran
Millwood Hargrave

Chicken
House

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

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For my editor, Rachel Leyshon,
for the glittering lessons & shining structures,
& all the other treasures you have taught me



Other children's books by
**Kiran Millwood
Hargrave:**

The Girl of Ink & Stars
The Island at the End of Everything
The Way Past Winter
The Deathless Girls

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In the grounds of a ruined monastery, on the outskirts of Siena, a girl awoke in a charnel house.

All about her were skeletons: by the thin shafts of light flitting in from the slits in the ribcage shutters she could see the bed about her, built from tibias and fibulas. A moon-white skull still warm from last night's fire was cupped over her feet, for here the nights were clear and cool. Over her head draped a canopy of gold-dipped toe bones in great, gilded wreaths, and teeth were set like stars in the chinks in the walls.

But the girl was not afraid. This house, built of

old and golden bone, was her home – and today was her twelfth birthday.

No one else was awake: her mother's and brother's beds along the other walls were still, and the house was silent as a tomb. Sofia lay calm in her bone bed, and smiled. Soon Corvith, their crow, would squawk for breakfast, and her brother Ermin, always tired and sleeping long into mornings, would grumble at the noise, and Mamma would rise and stoke the fire for lavender honey and milk. There would be presents, and perhaps Mamma would change her mind about letting them go to the Palio—


Thump.

Sofia stopped smiling. She sat up, and immediately bumped her head on the headboard. She had lately grown too tall for her bed, and Mamma hadn't yet made it bigger.

Thump.

She got up more slowly, rubbing the sore spot on her crown, and turned towards the closed door that led to their mother's workshop.

Thump.



The sound came again, followed by small clinks, light as raindrops stumbling against the tiles of the patella roof. Now that her eyes were adjusted to the gloom, Sofia could see the door was slightly ajar and that her mother's bed was empty.

Heaviness flooded her body, like she hadn't slept at all. She'd hoped these days were over. The days where Mamma seemed to float through her waking hours as though under a storm cloud, or crushed beneath an invisible sack of weighty worry. Mamma had promised they would be done, only yesterday.

I'm finished, she said last night, pressing a kiss to Sofia's forehead, *no more late nights. No more days away. It ends tomorrow, and we will celebrate your birthday like a saint's day.*

Sofia clenched her teeth together until her jaw clicked. Mamma had lied to her, and on her birthday of all days. She pushed back her blanket and padded on bare, quiet feet past Ermin's bed and Mamma's empty sheets to the gap in the door.

Corvith stirred as she passed, snug in his skull nest.

‘So?’ he squawked, but a quick rub of his feathered head sent his beady black eye closed again, and Sofia was able to peer unnoticed through the door that connected the bedroom and Mamma’s workroom. This was as far as she was allowed to go, now.

The shutters here were closed too, and a lavender wax candle burned in its knucklebone holder, wafting the purple scent towards Sofia. Mamma was hunched at her broad worktable, surrounded by creamy white bone shavings. Her dark skin was streaked pale with the powdery dust that settled finely in the air about her, her black curls caught up away from her face with a finger-bone hairpin.

This was the first thing Sofia had ever made, a simple design where she’d hinged the joint with bronze so it could manage Mamma’s unruly tangles. Ermin could have made better, and it was a trinket compared to Mamma’s artistry, but still Mamma treasured it like the finest relic.

Sofia knew not to be jealous of the hours Mamma spent in this room, the door pushed to or closed entirely, because Mamma had a calling, a



skill, a *gift*, and such things were valuable and must not be ignored.

Mamma was an ossuarist, a bone builder. She was the greatest in all of Italy, perhaps in all the world, though there were rumours from Central Asia of a man who crafted carts and boats.

But the delicacy of Mamma's creations was unparalleled. Ermin and Sofia watched as she wove thighbone with clavicle as though they were lace, frosted knuckles with diamonds to make hinges that would never break, made gold-dipped locks from vertebrae that could be opened only by a finger bone from the same skeleton.

She specialized in reliquaries – ornate bone boxes to hold the famous relics of the cathedral. These remains of saints were believed to have the power of healing. Santa Maria's toe bone, said to cure dancing manias, was encased in a lattice of ankle bones. Santa Peter's jawbone, healer of toothache, was tiled in molars. Her greatest work was for Santa Catherine's finger bone, said to heal the sicknesses of whoever held it in their bare palm. This received a particularly fine gold-filigree box,




with an especially complex lock of knuckles.

Mamma also made simpler boxes for poorer customers, as well as earrings, door handles and sometimes, like their bone house, whole rooms.

Mamma's skills were celebrated, but very few knew her truest gift. Only Sofia, Ermin, and Corvith knew – and not even they were allowed to watch the process. Only they knew that their mamma was not solely a bone builder: she was a bone binder. When she made something, it was not merely beautiful. It was blessed. Blessed by the spirit of the person whose bones had been used to make it. Some might call it magic but Mamma thought that made it sound like superstition, in the realms of fairies and witches. And this particular magic was bone-bound, earth-made, rule-tangled.

So when a widow brought her husband's rib to become a brooch worn over her heart, she would be comforted in her weeping by the double beat of a ghostly pulse worn against her chest. When a bootmaker brought her the skeleton of a beloved assistant to make into a coat rack, it was the manservant's spirit that reached out to take their



master's worries even as his finger bones held the cloak.

Even before the smallpox, Mamma took great care over the cleaning of the bones in the well before binding, and Sofia helped. Always it took place at dawn, in the orange tinge of the world coming awake, washing her mother and the bones in golden light.

Then the smallpox came. Ermin fell sick with it, and for a while Sofia was worried because Mamma seemed so desperate. A doctor came, and left looking helpless. But Ermin was well again within a week, thanks to Mamma. They took him to the well one morning to make him better, and he recovered. But after that, Mamma refused to work for anyone but herself, and Sofia and Ermin were forbidden from touching the bones.

If only Mamma let her help with the work again, Sofia would be content to live just the four of them on the monastery hill – Mamma, Ermin, Corvith and she – for the rest of her days.

That was until a year ago.

A year ago, a stranger visited their house and



Sofia finally came to understand that light must be followed by dark.

That good is sometimes chased, hard and merciless as hunting dogs, by bad.

