



December 16th – Present Day

If I told you that you were going to find a locked safe one day after school, and that it was going to transform your life, you'd probably think either:

1. I'm lying.

Or ...

2. That the safe was filled with a huge amount of money.

Well, I'm not lying. I really did find a safe after school. But it wasn't full of money either. Still, it really did change our lives for ever.

But to tell this story properly, I need to start at the beginning ...



*One and a half thousand years ago there lived a girl
who was as strong as an oak tree, as fierce as a holly
bush and as wild as ivy. Her name was Gwyon.*

Chapter One: Autumn

6 Weeks Earlier

The day we find the safe is a special day. The canal trust has drained a section of the canal for the first time in twenty years, revealing all sorts of treasure stuck under the water.

That morning, we beg Mum to let us stay home from school to search the canal. I do most of the begging; I'll try anything to stop having to go to school right now. My younger brothers and sister, Enzo, Arianwen and Bryn, are lucky. They're still in primary school, together, whereas I have to go to secondary school.

Alone.

But Mum strokes my hair and says, 'No, *mi niña*,' in her Spanish accent. 'Today is a school day.'

Instead, after school, we rush home as fast as we can. When we get back, Mum is standing in the kitchen of the boat wearing an apron over her scrubs. Pasta simmers on the stove and she's chopping a tomato.

'Are you ready?' I ask, worried that all the treasure will be gone by the time we get there. 'Please can we go now?'

'Why don't you join the canal clean-up crew while I finish up dinner,' Mum replies. 'I'll be there soon.'

Every month, people who live along the canal gather to pick up litter scattered on the towpath and in the water, and they've organised today's clean-up to coincide with the drained canal.

We see the crew at work, armed with fishing nets and rods, and cycle to meet them. Our Irish wolfhound, Willow, bounds alongside us wearing her burgundy assistant dog harness. It's drizzling, and I pull my hood up. Ahead of me, cycling side by side, Aria and Bryn race each other, speeding through puddles. The flecks of red in Aria's dark curls catch the low winter sun. Even though they're twins, they look nothing alike. Bryn has a blond wavy lion mane of messy hair which he refuses to cut. Aria is taller than he is too. There's a three-year gap between each of us: Aria and Bryn are six, Enzo's nine and I'm twelve.

We join the crew by the aqueduct, between the pub and the crystal shop, under the autumn trees. Tom waves us over.

'Great to have you here to help!' he says.

Tom has a tug boat and I can see that some people are already standing on it to reach the rubbish in the water with nets, scooping up anything floating in the canal. Michael, an older man with a smooth head, is handing out bin liners and dividing people into groups.

Michael's boat is moored next to the aqueduct. Intricate wood carvings decorate the hull like a Viking ship and prayer flags hang on the roof. Mum's best friend, Sam, is here too, with her baby, Ella, held to her chest in a sling. When

Aria and Bryn were little, Mum used to carry them like that. I did too, sometimes.

'Why don't you lot come this way,' Michael says to our group, and we follow him towards the drained part of the canal, pushing our bikes. Excitement bubbles in my stomach; I've lived on the canal since I was six, but I've never seen what it looks like without water in it. We stop to collect rubbish along the way.

Water sounds all around us: Tom's boat engine churns up waves; crisp packets and cans drip as they're lifted from the canal; the current sloshes against the bank.

At last, we reach the section that's been drained. A group of people in yellow high-visibility jackets stand on the edge of the towpath ahead, peering into the canal. We pass a blue working boat loaded with bent shopping trollies, plastic bottles and hundreds of plastic bags, dribbling sludge off the side and into the water.

We lay our bikes on top of each other on the grassy verge and push through the group of people. Everyone always jumps out of the way for Willow. Even though she's the gentlest, most well-trained dog, her size intimidates people.

On the other side of the lock gate, the canal has been completely emptied of water. It's deeper than I expected it to be, about ten feet. At the bottom, covered in brown gloop, is an assortment

of tyres, rusty bikes, bits of metal, plastic, fishing rods, traffic cones and lots of other objects I can't distinguish.

'Look at all that stuff!' shouts Bryn. 'I bet some of it's treasure.'

We sit in a line with our legs dangling over the edge and reach down with our nets and poles, trying to hook objects out. Willow lies beside us.

Enzo manages to catch on to something and yanks it out from the sludge, reeling it in.

He laughs as he pulls it closer.

A shoe dangles on the line, dripping slime from its tangled laces. 'I've caught the first treasure!' Enzo says, using sign language.

'Ew,' says Bryn. 'That's not treasure.'

'There's something shiny down there,' says Aria, and she points excitedly towards the middle of the canal.

I squint to try and see what she's aiming at. There's definitely something glistening in the muck.

'Our nets won't reach that far,' says Enzo. 'We've got to get down there.'

A few people are already standing at the bottom amongst the mud in extra-long wellies and gloves, passing the contents back out to the people on the bank.

There's also a ladder built into the canal wall. We don't have much time until Mum gets here

and there's no way she'd let us climb into the canal so we'd better get down there.

'Come on, then,' I say. 'Let's check it out.' I sign as I speak. After Enzo was born, Mum and Dad made sure that we were all fluent.

'Those poor fish,' says Aria, shaking her head as we walk towards the ladder. 'There must be hardly any space for them to swim with all that rubbish in there.'

'And the swans, the ducks and the moorhens,' I add.

'I didn't realise it would be so muddy,' says Bryn.

We reach the ladder and Enzo rolls up his trousers and jumper sleeves and climbs down into the muck.

'I'll go first,' he says.

'Don't forget this,' I say, passing him our stick to sift through the mud and junk.

He nods, his eyes sparkling. I realise he's already spotted something good.

Aria and Bryn follow him and I climb down after them, leaving Willow standing on the bank, watching us nervously with pricked-up ears. My feet squelch as I reach the bottom. I'm up to my knees in the mud.

Aria wades toward her mysterious object, bends and pulls out a metal windlass, mostly coated in goop. Windlasses are big, hollow

L-shaped keys used to open the lock gates. She sighs. 'I really thought it was going to be an old coin or ancient jewellery.'

Within a few minutes Enzo finds two more windlasses.

'Can I bring this home?' asks Bryn, dragging a rusty bicycle frame behind him. 'Please, please, please?'

'It won't work,' I say to him. 'Look how rusty the pedals are.'

Bryn sticks his bottom lip out. 'I thought we'd get loads of good stuff in here but everything's rubbish.'

Aria wades back towards us and trips. Enzo catches her just before she falls face first into the sludge.

Willow barks, worried from the path above.

'What was that?' asks Aria, peering into the mud behind her with a wrinkled forehead.

Willow whines and paces back and forth, trying to get down to us.

'Time for us to get out,' I say, imagining Aria cutting herself on one of the sharp bits of metal.

'Wait,' says Aria, poking the bottom with her foot. 'I want to see what I slipped on.'

Enzo clears the mud around the object. Aria bends and pulls out a box coated in grime. She wipes away the sludge from one side of it and holds it up to show us.

'I think it's a safe,' I say, noticing the lock on the front. I peer more closely. It's like a safe you'd see in a hotel room – small, about the size of a shoebox, with a handle on the top.

Bryn, who's been sulking, jumps up to get a better look. 'Give it here! Maybe we can open it.'

'Everyone out first,' I say, ushering them back to the wall of the canal. 'Let's pass the safe and the windlasses up the ladder.'

We stand one behind another on different rungs of the ladder and hand the safe up to each other, holding on to the ladder with one hand and grabbing the handle with the other.

'You children shouldn't be playing in there,' says a passer-by.

I ignore him and pass the safe to Bryn.

Bryn's on the top rung, covered in green and brown slime. 'It's heavy,' he says as he drops it on the ground. He takes the windlasses from me one by one and places them on the path, before clambering over the edge of the canal wall. Willow barks and licks his face.

The rest of us follow him up.

Crowding around the metal box, we examine it. Willow lies down next to us, wagging her tail as people pass.

'Look!' I say, staring at the circular dial with the numbers one to ten written around the outside, scratched and rusty but still legible. 'It

has a dial combination lock. You spin the arrow on the dial to match whatever the code is.'

'I wonder what's inside,' says Aria. 'I bet it's money.'

I spot Mum in her blue work scrubs, searching for us through the crowd. Her eyes grow wide as she sees us, covered in mud, and I know she's going to say I should have known better than to let my brothers and sister climb into the canal. But it was worth it. Because now we have a safe that's full of money and is going to change our lives. Maybe I'll never have to go to school again.

If only we can get it open.



As a child, Gwyon felt the pulse of the Earth under her bare feet and the rush of life in the trees. Every day she would explore the forest, and arrive home covered in mud, or followed by a new animal, often a fox, hedgehog or blackbird. The only thing Gwyon cared about as much as the forest and the animals was her brother.

Chapter Two

Canal

I watch Mum pause to say hi and chat to our neighbours, Jenny and Raj, while Bryn and Aria continue to discuss the safe.

'Money would be boring,' Bryn says to Aria. 'And wouldn't it be all wet and rotten by now?'

I wonder if the safe's waterproof.

'It's pretty rusty,' says Enzo. 'I bet we can get it open.'

Bryn grins and lifts the safe on to his lap. 'I knew we'd find real treasure. Can I try and open it?' he asks, rattling the lock.

One of the organisers passes us and frowns. 'You're not supposed to take the things you pick up.'

'But it's all getting thrown away anyway, right?' replies Bryn.

'Yes, but it might be dangerous,' she says. 'There's no way to know what might be inside.'

This only fuels Bryn's and Aria's imaginations even more.

'Maybe it's an ancient scarab beetle,' says Bryn.

'Or a mummy,' says Aria.

'You can't fit a mummy in there,' says Enzo. They've been learning about ancient Egypt at school.

'You could if it was a mummified cat,' replies Aria, crossing her arms.

'Or a mummified hamster!' says Bryn.

'Here's Mum!' I shout, as she approaches us, pushing her bike.

'How about this: if your mum says you can keep it then it's fine,' suggests the organiser.

'What on earth happened here?' asks Mum. She tuts at our muddy legs.

'We found a safe,' says Bryn, tugging at her arm. 'Can we keep it?'

'It's covered in dirt,' she says. 'Do you really want it?'

'We'll clean it,' says Aria, giving Mum her best smile.

'Then I don't see why not,' says Mum. 'It could be exciting.'

'Yes!' says Bryn, punching the air above him.

Just then a news crew arrives and the organiser goes over to welcome them.

We stand back and examine our treasure.

One locked safe.

Three windlasses.

And an old shoe.

I watch as the local news team films the drained canal and chats to the organiser.

Then the interviewer, a lady with short blonde hair and pink lipstick, approaches us.

'Hello, kids. Were you excited to see the canal emptied?'

We all nod eagerly and she smiles.

'Do you mind if we interview you for the local news?'

'If they want to be?' says Mum, looking at us.

I say that I want to, with the others. But when the two cameras point at us, I suddenly feel self-conscious. Usually I'd take every opportunity to talk about the canal and how proud I am to live on it, but now all I can think of is the people from school who might watch this. I wonder what they'll think of me standing here, covered in mud and rubbish.

I've been at my new school for almost two months but still the only person I'm friends with is Jasmine and that's because we went to primary school together. And we only have English lessons together so I don't see her that much. Yesterday and today I couldn't find her at lunch and I had to eat by myself in the cafeteria.

It's not like I haven't tried to make friends. It's just that everyone already knows each other and I'm not sure where I fit in.

Thankfully Aria immediately points to our pile of treasure, starting with the shoe, and I don't have to say anything.

Maybe people won't even notice me.

Enzo models the windlasses, holding them at either side of his body.

'What was the most exciting thing you found in the drained canal today?' asks the interviewer.

'This safe!' answers Bryn. 'It's really scratched up and it's locked. But maybe there's a diamond ring inside.'

'Well, keep us updated if you get it open! I'm sure the viewers would love to see what's inside too.'

'We'll get it open,' says Aria. 'Mum says we can teach ourselves to do anything if we work at it.'

The interviewer smiles at us. 'Very best of luck with that.' She turns to the camera and talks into it as she walks off, wrapping up the news segment.

'How many numbers do you think the combination is?' asks Enzo.

'I bet it's six numbers,' I say. 'I've used a combination lock once before, for my locker at gym, and it was six numbers. 'But I guess it could also be a different kind.'

Enzo thinks for a second. His green eyes focus on the path.

'If it's six, that means there are a million different combinations,' he says.

'A million!' says Bryn, eyes wide with disbelief. 'How long will it take to try all of those?'

Enzo squeezes his eyes shut as he thinks.

'How long does it take to count to a million?' he says. 'Let's say you can do one combination every second. That's one million seconds, which is about . . . 278 hours, which is about . . . eleven or twelve days, if we work nonstop.'

'That's for ever!' says Aria, stamping her foot.

Mum laughs. 'I'm sure you'll find a way. Quick maths, Enzo.'

Bryn twists the combination dial on the safe. It squeaks and sticks but the numbers eventually turn. Bryn yanks the door. It doesn't budge.

'Let's get you home and cleaned up before dark,' says Mum.

We strap the safe on to the bike trailer Mum has brought with her. The twins used to ride in it when they were younger. Now we use the trailer to bring the fuel, shopping and wood along the canal to the boat. You can't reach us by car.

Next, we slowly ride home together, stopping to pick up any litter that's still on the ground.

'Look at all this rubbish,' says Mum, holding up a crisp packet and a cotton bud stick.

'At least we're getting rid of it,' says Aria, reaching for Mum's hand to make her feel better.

'We're just moving it to a landfill,' says Mum, shaking her head. 'Almost all of the plastic ever created still exists somewhere in the world today.'

I smile sympathetically at Aria. There isn't much we can say to cheer Mum up when it comes to things like this. We already know how much plastic frustrates her. The first time Mum tore the plastic wrapping off the vegetables at the supermarket checkout I was mortified. She held up the queue behind us for ages.

Later, after she'd calmed down, she explained that most plastic can only be used once, and after it's thrown away it adds to the tons of plastic waste

that already exists. It covers the land, floats in the sea and leaks into our drinking water, for thousands of years.

After that, every time we went shopping, I did it too.

Until I started at the new school.

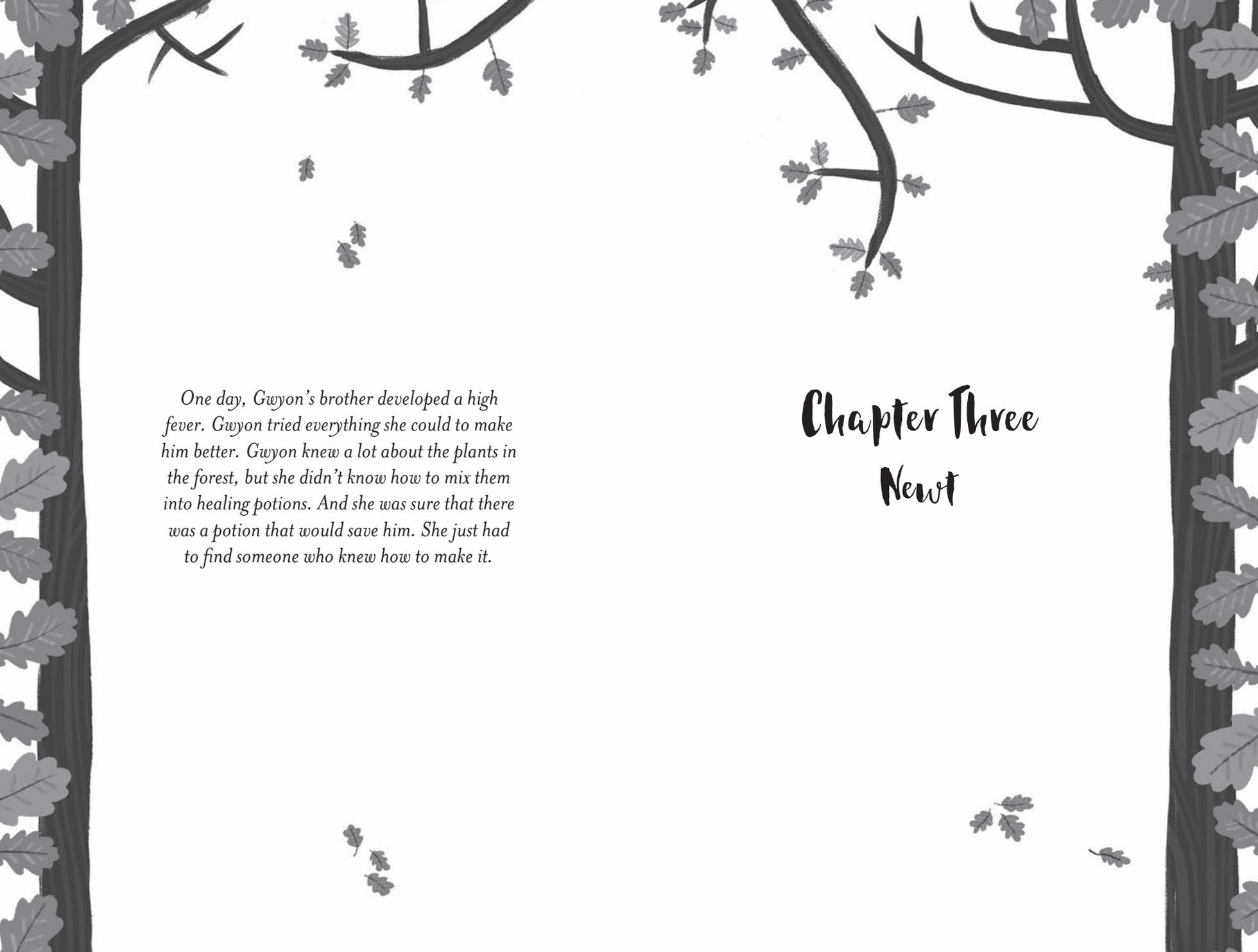
What if someone from my year saw me? What would they think?

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a heron on the other side of the bank, poised and still, watching for fish.

Willow bounds ahead, splashing in the puddles and the heron jolts at the noise, spreads its huge wings and flies off. The orange setting sun reflects in the ripples of the water.

As we cycle along, I remember how back in spring the hedgerow verges were covered in buttercups, blossom and cowslip. Now they look totally different, bursting with tufts of Old Man's Beard, bright berries and prickly brambles. It's the time of year where people start to light their wood-burners and smoke billows up from the chimneys on the boats. We pass a slightly sunken carved pumpkin sitting on the roof of one of the boats, left over from Halloween last week.

I breathe in the cool air and taste the wood smoke, happy that it's Friday and I don't have to go back to school for two whole days.



One day, Gwyon's brother developed a high fever. Gwyon tried everything she could to make him better. Gwyon knew a lot about the plants in the forest, but she didn't know how to mix them into healing potions. And she was sure that there was a potion that would save him. She just had to find someone who knew how to make it.

Chapter Three

Newt

On the way home, we pass lots of different moored boats, some with pristine shiny paintwork and names like *Serene* or *Kingfisher*, others with chipped paint and piles of stuff on the roofs buried under tarps. We pass *Narrow Escape*, *Mudlark*, *Puddleduck* and *The Unsinkable II*.

In summer, we move up and down the canal but in winter we have a permanent mooring and stay mainly in one spot, between the town and the village. It's still remote but closer to drinking water and a place to empty the toilet tank and things like that. There isn't enough daylight in winter to move the boat after Mum gets home from work. At this time of year there's lots of space between the boats, whereas in summer we always have someone moored right next to us.

After about ten minutes, our boat, *Newt*, comes into view. A wood and glass cockpit encloses the very back of the boat, where the tiller and our main entrance is. Her name is written in dark-green and black lettering on the side. Solar panels cover one third of the roof. The outer edges are lined with plant pots, benches that we made from wooden crates, and bags of solid fuel for the burner. Sometimes people ask if I wish I had a garden but I know that the whole countryside is my garden.

We hose Willow down on the towpath and dry

her off with towels, each rubbing a leg. She stands patiently, waiting, sometimes licking Aria's hair with her long tongue. Next, we clean the safe. Under the mud it's covered in a dark-red rust that flakes off under my fingertips.

Inside, our boat's layout goes like this: cockpit, entrance, galley kitchen, table, sitting room, bathroom at the side, then all the bedrooms at the back. My bedroom is more of a nook than a room, but I like it because it's cosy. Photographs of Mum and Dad and my siblings cover the walls, and curtains separate it from the rest of the boat.

There are all sorts of special modifications that we have to make living on a boat easier. We have a tiny television that fits inside a cupboard when we're not using it, although most of the time the signal is pretty terrible. The twins have bunk beds to save space. One of the coolest things is that the kitchen cooker is on gimbals which allow the cooker to swing, so even if the boat rocks, the saucepan stays upright and won't spill.

At the moment, the kitchen shelves are filled with homemade rosehip and blackberry-and-apple jams and hazelnut butter. This is my favourite time of year because we get to forage for the food that grows in the hedgerows along the towpath. Every time I walk Willow I take a

bowl for picking berries, always making sure I leave lots for the animals to eat too.

I step into the bathroom. On the windowsill is a big glass jar. I've been trying to grow a velvety blanket of wood moss in it. Aria wants to turn it into a fairy garden when I'm finished. So far, there's only a tiny patch on a rock but I'm confident it will grow eventually.

My stomach rumbles and I remember that I hardly ate lunch today. I hated sitting by myself so much I wasn't hungry.

I wonder where Jasmine was?

After I've changed out of my wet clothes, I text Jasmine and ask if she wants to sleepover tomorrow after Bonfire Night. Last year we went together and then she came back to the boat. We hid under the covers with hot chocolate and told ghost stories until Mum came in to tell us to be quiet and we were both so scared we screamed.

A few minutes later, a reply flashes on my screen.

Sorry, going with my dad this year.

I sigh.

'Cara!' shouts Bryn. 'Come quickly! The canal is on the telly!'

I slide off the bed and run out to the living room.

Everyone is gathered around the television,

clustered on rugs, floor cushions and leather poufs. Aria's sitting closest to the telly, almost right in front of it, and Mum asks her to move back, patting the cushion beside her. I pull on my thick woolly socks and join them, sitting between Willow and Enzo and stroking Willow's soft fur. Next to Enzo, Bryn grips the safe on his lap.

It's the evening news. The camera pans along the canal, lingering on the dripping shopping trolleys being pulled out of the water. The newsreader we met today is talking.

'After a boat got stuck on the debris sitting in the bottom of the canal, the trust decided to drain the canal for the first time in twenty years to remove the rubbish,' says the interviewer on TV, as she strolls along the towpath.

'I talked to some local children about what they were able to remove from the canal,' the reporter continues.

Our faces appear on the TV and everyone squeals and whoops.

'Look! We're famous!' says Aria, and she pouts and walks up and down posing. 'I always knew I'd be famous.'

'I'm *trying* to listen,' says Bryn.

'These are windlasses,' Aria is saying on the screen. 'They're very useful for opening the locks.'

'But most of the stuff in the canal is rubbish,'

says Bryn. 'Like this shoe!'

I'm relieved that with Aria and Bryn explaining, and Enzo displaying the findings, you hardly notice I'm there, standing quietly behind them.

The interviewer turns back to the camera and we disappear from the shot. 'What a pleasure to see the community here come together to clean up this area,' she says. 'Together, they will work to make it a safer place for wildlife, fish, boaters and people enjoying the beauty of the canal.'

She smiles, and then the news moves on to the next thing.



After dinner Enzo stacks logs in the wood burner and sparks fly up the flue pipe to the chimney.

'It'll be nice and warm soon,' he says.

We have a metal fan that sits on top of the burner and spins when the heat rises, circulating the hot air around the whole boat.

The fire roars and soon it's toasty inside. Mum reads a story aloud, curled up on the sofa with Aria and Bryn. She's finally convinced Bryn to put down the safe. Her singsong voice crescendos as she reaches the end of a chapter.

Tomorrow I'll try and find a way to open the

safe. You never know, I might get lucky and guess the code straight away.

I sit cross-legged on the rug opposite from Enzo, playing backgammon and listening. Outside, a fox barks.

I smile. Autumn evenings are my favourite. The only thing that could make this better is if Dad was here too.