

1

Nova passed a note to Henry under the table. “Go on”, she said, “give it a go. You’ll never get it!”

Henry grinned and held the sheet of white paper to his nose. At first he grimaced a little, then he screwed up his eyes. “It’s obvious”, he whispered. “The bench behind the West wall, next to the hotdog seller, where the old jogger always sits in the mornings. Smells really strong. Like sweaty feet, mustard and pigeons.”

Although this wasn’t the first time Henry had demonstrated his extraordinary sense of smell, Nova was left open-mouthed. It was true that last night she had put the note under the bench by the Thames, weighed down with a stone. She had collected it quickly before school.

“Genius!” she exclaimed, touching her button nose. “You should join the circus.”

“Henry, Nova”, Horatio, their teacher, scolded them as he rummaged about in a stack of papers on his desk. Next to it steam was rising from a huge mug filled with Horatio’s favourite drink, milky brown tea. Maybe their teacher was looking for the children’s exercise books again, having left them in another room. Horatio was very forgetful. “I can safely assume that what you are discussing has nothing to do with maths.”

Nova nodded so hard her brown hair fell into her face. “You’re right, but you said yourself that maths isn’t that important anyway.”

The rest of the students murmured in agreement and Horatio let out a deep sigh. It was an open secret that he only taught maths begrudgingly and was happy when the children helped each other with the tasks because he sometimes couldn’t explain them himself. If Nova had understood things correctly, the proper maths teacher was ill at the moment, as well as all the other teachers. That’s why Horatio was having to teach all of the subjects for now.

“So, let’s look at the question a bit more closely.” Horatio went to the board, stroked his brown moustache and underlined the text with a piece of chalk.

A fat ginger and white tomcat was asleep on the desk. Disturbed by the screech of the chalk, he woke up and briefly snarled in Horatio’s direction. Horatio gently stroked the tomcat’s head. “Sorry, Hector. I know how sensitive your ears are.” He reached into his bag and offered the cat a tuna biscuit, which Hector graciously accepted.

Horatio and Hector had a shared passion for good food and both of them could always be placated by it; that much Nova had already learnt in the past two weeks.

“Leah has four times more sweets than Hugo and gives him two sweets. Now she only has three times more sweets than Hugo. How many sweets did she have to begin with?” Horatio continued with the lesson.

“It doesn’t even matter”, said Nova. “The whole thing’s completely unfair! Why doesn’t she just share the whole lot fifty-fifty? All this question teaches you is that Leah is really selfish!”

“Exactly”, Henry agreed with her whilst drawing invisible numbers with his finger on the big, old desk he shared with Nova. “It’s just not on that someone has a great big pile of sweets, and the other only has a few! The answer is thirty-two, by the way.”

Horatio sighed with relief. Henry didn’t just have an amazing sense of smell, he was also pretty good at maths. “I take it Henry is right”, said the teacher happily, tapping his head in search of his glasses, which had disappeared somewhere in his curly hair. “We can end our maths lesson there for today and concentrate on more important things.”

“Thank goodness for that!” whispered Nova.

There was a scratching sound coming from the door. Nova jumped up before anybody could beat her to it. She pulled the handle of the old wooden door, that creaked loudly and was usually left ajar. Someone had forgotten today. Three cats walked into the classroom. One of them had light blue eyes and white paws that looked like socks against her grey fur. She looked at Nova pleadingly.

“Alright then.” Nova pulled the cat into her lap whilst one of the others jumped up to Henry. The third cat was busy sharpening her claws on the red carpet in the corner of the room. She looked quite haggard.

“Nova, I hope you can concentrate better with a cat on your lap.” Horatio looked at her so intensely his green eyes were hardly visible beneath his bushy eyebrows. “That’s sorted and we can turn our thoughts back to the History of the English monarchy and its cats. We had been looking at James the Second and the question of his successor. Do you remember? He was always accompanied by a cat named Henrietta, as we can see by the portraits of both of them hanging in the National Gallery.

Hector, the tomcat, raised his head inquisitively, narrowing his eyes.

Henry, Nova and their four fellow students nodded. Ria had got a pencil out and was drawing something that looked like an enchanted castle. Bernie was making a paper aeroplane. Ed and Said had their heads together, heads that couldn’t look any more different from one another. Ed’s hair stood on end like short red spikes on his head, Said’s on the other hand, was jet black and drooped down softly into his face almost obscuring it. They were playing some kind of game involving tooth picks.

Horatio didn’t mind. He often said it was educational to keep your hands busy whilst you were listening. Nova and Henry, who had only been taught by Horatio for two weeks, thought that was great. But the thing they liked the most was the thing about cats in the classroom. They used every opportunity to stroke the animals’ soft fur and to give them a good rub under the chin, making the cats purr softly.

“They were just outside under a delivery truck loading bananas”, whispered Henry, nuzzling his cat. Nova nodded in acknowledgement.

They lapped up the stories Horatio told – about Kings and Queens, knights, battles and old castles. It almost sounded like a play, Horatio put on so many voices. As he told the stories he roamed about the room, stopping in front of the children and turning away again. Nova could have sworn that even the cats were listening attentively to him talk.

When the lesson was over Horatio asked his students to remain seated for a bit. “Bernie and I have some news”, he said thoughtfully. “Maybe you’d like to...?” he asked and turned to Bernie.

He just shook his head. Nova watched as he crumpled the paper aeroplane in his hand.

“So, it’s good news”, said Horatio. “Bernie’s mother was discharged from hospital two weeks ago. She is doing well. The holidays are coming up, but Bernie will be leaving us today to be with his mother. After the summer holidays he will start at a new school closer to where he lives.”

Ria let out a shrill little scream and hugged Bernie, which the poor thing obviously found terribly embarrassing. The others gathered around Bernie to offer their congratulations as well. Everyone except Nova.

Up until a short while ago it hadn’t looked like Bernie’s mother would be let out of the hospital so quickly. Nova bit her lip. She was obviously happy for Bernie, but at least he had always been able to visit his mother. And now he could go back to her. Lucky him!

Nova noticed Horatio’s round face smiling at her painfully. He looked like a teddy bear who really wanted to comfort her, but couldn’t. It didn’t help, in that moment she was just sad. There was nobody here who didn’t regularly hear from their parents. Nobody that was, except for Nova.

Tomorrow would be exactly two weeks since her arrival here: at *London Tower Boarding School*. Two weeks, during which Horatio had reassured her on a daily basis that she was at his school at the request of her parents. Two weeks, during which she had absconded every night to look for her father.

2

The Tower of London had served as a palace for the monarchs of England for centuries. Nova still hadn't got used to the idea that she lived there now. The grounds of the Tower were vast. There were old buildings everywhere, tall towers and walls with shooting slits in them. Since the majority of the old castle was now a museum, it was just full of tourists and people who worked there.

Horatio's tower, however, was completely isolated and hidden behind a high wall covered by a thick overgrown hedge. Even sleeping beauty's prince himself wouldn't have stood a chance against that! When you walked past the wall you would never suspect that Horatio's school existed at all.

You could only see the tallest turret of the tower itself, with a few missing stones it looked like a ruin. Horatio had put in little passages and paths that snaked their way through a little garden ram packed with plants. Nova loved the sunflowers that reached almost to her shoulder.

At night the bushes, shrubs and flowerbeds felt eerie. There was a constant rustling and every now and then Nova would feel a branch touch her shoulder or neck, stroking her like a slender finger. Oh, how much friendlier it looked during the day!

The students each had a key for the massive iron gate in the wall; Horatio did not want them to feel like they were locked in. And quite apart from that he lost his own key on a regular basis. This way he could always ask one of the children to help him out.

The gravel made a tell-tale crunch under Nova's feet. It was the deep of night and the cool air tickled her nostrils. Nova and Henry had spent the whole afternoon playing with the cats and had then gone for dinner. Now Henry was fast asleep in his bed. He loved his sleep. Once Nova had tried to take him with her at night, but Henry just lay there like a sack of potatoes under his blanket and didn't even turn over, even when she sprayed water in his face and on his neck. He just whispered something that sounded like, "Death to the sleep robbers".

Apart from the nightly excursions, Nova and Henry did everything together. Even on the first day of school, a school that was new to both of them, they had both remarked at the strange brochure they had received in the post that contained everything about Horatio's boarding school in the Tower.

Henry's parents had just visited him at his grandmother's, who lived in a tiny terraced house in Liverpool, where Henry's father had also grown up. His parents were environmental researchers and for almost ten months a year they were on expeditions in their very own research ship. That's why Henry lived with his grandma. *Scholarship for Henry Morgan to attend the Tower Boarding School in London*, it said in the letter.

Nova's foster mother had held the thick piece of paper under her nose with a look of contempt on her face. It felt heavy to the touch and had black and white photos printed on it. "Look, Nova Loxley. Your fugitive father and your secretive mother have decided you should go to this school. A stroke of luck that you got a scholarship – when you consider how much boarding school would cost otherwise!"

Nova hadn't asked any more questions. She didn't want to give her foster mother any more opportunities to insult her father. If he wanted her to go to this weird boarding school that looked like a mix between Rapunzel's tower and a cattery, it must be because her father was staying somewhere near the school. It was clear as day! She had already changed foster family four times in the last few years and shortly afterwards Dad had always turned up to see her. He would have a plan this time too.

Unlike Henry, Nova didn't have to set her alarm at night. She always woke up of her own accord.

Luckily at that time of night nobody apart from her used the narrow path along the eastern outer wall, even during the day it was always empty. The little iron gate Nova was heading for had been completely overgrown when she arrived – just like the wall surrounding Horatio's tower. With a great deal of effort, first Nova had removed the creeper-like weeds and then the ancient rust. But, after all that work, she had her very own private way out of the tower that she used every night.

The stench of the Thames hit her. To Nova the river always smelt simultaneously damp and earthy, but Henry had explained that it made a big difference whether it was high or low tide, when for a few hours the Thames revealed pebbles and earth.

Nova could feel her heart beating hard and fast. She pulled her hood down over her face and kept within the shadows of the wall, quiet, almost invisible. If her dad could see her now! Today she would look for the cellar in the house on Mill Lane. That's what her father seemed to want. It had been the last message she received from her dad. It had been on the inside of a chocolate bar wrapper someone had left on the doorstep the day she had left her horrid foster mother's house:

*Everything's going to be ok now.  
18 Mill Lane, right at the bottom.*

Nova had a good feeling about this.

The Tower was one of the oldest buildings in London and when she was there Nova often forgot that she was in a huge city. Now she had left the medieval walls, she could see tall, modern buildings everywhere, their bright lights shining ecstatically. Nova counted four aeroplanes in the sky.

She turned decisively down a road of brown-brick terraced houses that would all have looked the same with their tall rectangular windows if it weren't for the brightly coloured doors: some blue, some red, some brown.

There was a grey striped cat behind her. This had always been the case lately. But it wasn't always the same cat. They were always different, sometimes even two or three of them. Nova loved cats. She was happy there were so many of them in Horatio's school.

She had discussed it with Henry straight away on the first day, what the deal was with the cats. They were sitting in every corner and they'd even made it into the school brochure! You could hardly go down the stone steps leading out of the tower, or cross the little garden, without stumbling over a cat. They would be stretching their tummies in the sun or sharpening their claws on one of the wooden blocks dotted about the place. Flicking through the brochure, Nova's foster-mother had sarcastically commented that Horatio's boarding school was probably inspected by the RSPCA instead of Ofsted.

But Henry said his grandmother had reassured him that learning in the presence of animals was a wonderful thing and she thought a head teacher who looked after lots of cats as well as his students must be a clever and genuine person.

The cat accompanying her today seemed to Nova to be nervous somehow. As if she was scared of something, but had to follow Nova anyway. When Nova stopped, the cat sat on its back paws a few metres away from her and looked at her keenly. Nova squinted. Did the cat really have a marking on her light-coloured paw that looked like a little crown?

Nova shook her head and turned away. She had more important things to do. "Take a left down the next road", she murmured turning into a little alleyway. Wheelie bins stood on either side. The houses here were all the same too, but smaller. They had black wrought-iron fences in front of their tiny front gardens and little steps leading up to the front doors.

"18 Mill Lane", murmured Nova. This must be the very place. She stood rooted to the spot. A bell chimed somewhere. Midnight.

Nova got her torch out, that actually belonged to her father and had his name engraved on it: Marc Loxley. Its beam was so weak that nobody would notice it from a distance, but it did what Nova needed. She climbed over the wrought-iron fence and discovered an iron ring in a wooden board on the ground in front of the house – exactly like it said on Dad's card. It had to be the entrance to the cellar!

Nova bent down and took the cold metal in her hand. She pulled on it with all her might, but nothing budged.

A sound behind her made her jump. It was the grey striped cat. She was standing close to Nova. Her eyes were now huge and black and she didn't look nervous at all anymore, she looked like she was scared out of her wits. Nova heard more noises: snarling and hissing, it was getting louder and louder. She felt a strange draft streaming through the alleyway accompanied by a strong smell that she didn't recognise.

Just as her father had taught her, she jumped up silently and pressed herself against the wall next to the steps to the house's front door, in complete shadow. She was barely visible there. She did not make a move.

The snarling and hissing got louder and Nova suddenly saw who was making the noises – cats scurrying close to the ground. Nova counted at least ten of them. With their slim, athletic bodies they all looked similar and seemed like they were moving in formation: at the front a leader, three cats in tight rows following on behind. Each of them had a collar round their neck with a tag that Nova couldn't make out very well in the dark. It was shaped like a triangle. How odd!

Nova held her breath as the animals passed the entrance to the house opposite. They stopped just past it. The snarling got louder and was suddenly interrupted by a pitiful meow. Although she knew better, Nova ducked out of the shadows and pulled down her hood so that she could see better.

What *was* that? The cat formation had surrounded the grey striped cat. The circle that they had formed was getting smaller and smaller. Having just meowed, the trapped cat now lowered its head submissively. The cats made a new formation with the only difference being that now the grey cat was in the middle of them.

Nova stepped onto the road. The cats drew back and started to go past her, forcing the trapped cat forwards as they did so. She raised her head and looked straight at Nova. She started meowing again.

Then everything went really quickly. The formation huddled into a tight knot and suddenly sped up. Nova could hardly follow the cats with her eyes. Before she knew it they had reached the end of the alleyway and turned onto the next road. The trapped cat didn't stop meowing, but it got quieter and more pitiful.

Nova ran. Close to the wall, her hood pulled down over her face again.

But it was too late. The cats were nowhere to be seen and the meowing was now just like a weak echo from a certain direction. Somewhere in Nova's head it transformed into words. They were quiet, but Nova could hear them very clearly: "Help me, help me!"