

A
PLACE
to HANG
the MOON

KATE ALBUS

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MOON

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MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS
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Margaret Ferguson Books

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FOR LUKE AND OLIVIA ...
WHO HUNG THE MOON



CHAPTER ONE

Funeral receptions can be tough spots to find enjoyment, but eleven-year-old Edmund Pearce was doing his best.

He was intent on the iced buns. Some of them had gone squashy on one side or the other, some had lost their icing when a neighboring bun had been removed, and a few had been sadly neglected in the icing department from the start. Undaunted, Edmund picked through the pile, finding two that met with his approval. He shoved one into each of his trouser pockets and, scooping up a handful of custard cream cookies to round out the meal, navigated through the crowd until he found a vacant armchair. There he settled, quite content despite the occasion. It helped that he'd never cared much for his grandmother, anyway.

On the other side of the room, Anna Pearce sat cross-legged on the floor between a corner cabinet and a brocade settee. The settee's occupants didn't notice the nine-year-old tucked under the weighty scroll of its arm. Anna had nearly finished *Mary Poppins*, and she preferred its company to that of the unfamiliar elderly ladies perched on the settee, or any of the other guests. Like her brother, Anna had managed to find enjoyment at the funeral reception. Also like her brother, Anna felt little grief at her grandmother's passing.

William Pearce, the eldest of our threesome, made his way through the throng, thanking people for coming. He had spent a particularly long while with the vicar, who was quite deaf. Everything had to be repeated before the dear man understood, and this took some time. William was cross and tired. The corners of his mouth felt tight with smiling. But funeral receptions, after all, were not events to be enjoyed. Even when one didn't much miss one's grandmother.

William glimpsed the toe of Anna's shoe by the corner cabinet. He smiled. His first real smile that day. Crossing the room and nodding to the elderly ladies on the settee, he nudged Anna's foot with his own. She looked up from her book and smiled back at him.

William crouched low and squeezed between the furniture to join his sister. It was a tight spot, and none too comfortable for a tallish boy of twelve, but this is what one does when one loves one's sister very much.

Especially when one hasn't any parents who might make themselves uncomfortable on behalf of their children.

William eyed the slim handful of pages remaining to be read in Anna's book. "Last chapter?"

Anna marked her spot with a hair ribbon and nodded. "Mary Poppins has gone away, and the children are so sad."

William pulled Anna close.

"Is the reception nearly over?" she asked.

"Nearly." William surveyed the crowd. "People are starting to leave. They've got to get home before the blackout."

"Where's Edmund?"

William sighed. "Last I saw, he was taunting the vicar."

Anna's eyes went wide. "Taunting?"

"Standing behind him, trying to figure how loud he had to shout before the vicar noticed he was there."

"Oh, dear."

"Mmmmm. I should find him." William squeezed Anna's shoulder. "Stay here and finish your book."

Anna took her brother's hand. "I'll come with you. I'd rather finish it in bed tonight."

With that, the pair began to search for their brother in the crowded room. This took quite a while, as they were stopped at every turn by well-dressed strangers wishing to list their grandmother's many fine qualities. Anna found herself collecting words along the way. *Principled. Dignified. Formidable.* She wasn't entirely certain what *formidable* meant, but it sounded like *forbidding*, which was a word that described their grandmother nicely. Certainly more so than a word like *grandmotherly*.

"Thank you, sir," she heard William say, as he shook the hand of a brittle-looking man in a gold-buttoned jacket. "You're right, sir. She was formidable, sir."

William spied Edmund in the armchair. He was tossing bits of cookie into the air and catching them—most of them—in his mouth. William excused himself from the gold-buttoned man and pulled Anna along behind him. The pair reached Edmund just as a piece of a custard cream bounced off his chin and skidded across the floor to lodge itself against the base of a standing lamp.

William put his hands on his hips. "Must you, Edmund?"

Edmund grinned. "There were only boring cookies left. You've got to

do something to make them more interesting.”

Anna eyed the piece by the lamp. “I like custard creams.” She thought it a shame to waste them, even if there hadn’t been a war on. Which, in fact, there was.

William scowled at Edmund’s feet. “Edmund, put your shoes back on.”

“Why?”

“Because the guests are leaving. We’ve got to see them out.”

“I’m in my own house. Why do I have to wear shoes?”

“Just—” William retrieved his brother’s shoes from the floor. “Please, Edmund.”

Edmund grunted his indignation but took the shoes.

As the children waited for Edmund to do up his laces, they caught snippets of conversation here and there.

“Lovely sermon,” a woman in a blue suit said—twice—to the vicar.

“...blasted Germans...,” a ruddy-faced man grunted as he made his way toward the door.

“...if only they weren’t rationing bacon,” said a plump woman being helped into her jacket by an even more plump woman.

“Whatever is to be done about the children?”

This last came from the dining room.

William, Anna, and Edmund exchanged glances. They recognized the voice of their elderly housekeeper, Miss Collins. They could hear no more of her conversation, but they didn’t need to. They were only too aware that nobody had yet come up with an answer to the question of *what was to be done about the children*.

At the moment, however, there was no time to dwell on this rather terrifying unknown, as a heavily ringed hand landed on Anna’s shoulder. “I’m sorry for your loss, children. Your grandmother was a paragon, as you no doubt know.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” Anna said. Anna didn’t know the ringed woman. She also didn’t know what *paragon* meant but thought it sounded rather like *pagoda*, which couldn’t be right. She noted, silently, that the woman smelled of mothballs.

“Yes, thank you,” William said, recoiling with some dismay as he saw Edmund remove an iced bun from his pocket—his pocket!—and shove it into his mouth, whole.

The ringed woman looked to Edmund for his response. It was perhaps for the best that his mouth was filled with iced bun, for this made his

answer unintelligible. The woman raised her eyebrows in distaste and brushed a spray of crumbs from her lapel. She carried on toward the front door, muttering something about the world and what it was coming to.

“Charming, Ed,” William said.

Edmund swallowed the last of the bun. “She *was* a miserable old cow, and you know it. Why must we all of a sudden pretend to have adored her?”

“It’s what people do?” Anna said.

“Yes, but *why*?”

Anna considered this but could find no sense in it. Frankly, she was preoccupied with hunger, and a bit jealous of Edmund for having got the last of the custard creams. She picked out a finger sandwich from the buffet and nibbled it, wishing it were a cookie.

As the door was closed on the last of the guests, Miss Collins appeared and asked the three of them to join her in the dining room. There, she lowered herself into a chair.

“You’ll remember, children, that your grandmother’s solicitor, Mr. Engersoll, will be here early tomorrow?”

William, Edmund, and Anna knew the meeting with the solicitor was to be about their FUTURES—somehow the word always sounded capitalized when adults said it—and all three felt rather sick at the bleak uncertainty.

For June of 1940 was, even for those who had not recently become orphans, a time of most uncertain futures. The country’s worst fears about Mr. Hitler had been realized the previous fall when war with Germany had been declared. While no bombs had yet been dropped on London, the overheard conversations of adults suggested that it was only a matter of time.

William smiled a stalwart sort of half smile. Edmund looked at the floor. The sides of Anna’s nose were beginning to go pink, warning of oncoming tears. “Miss Collins,” she whispered, “can’t you just stay on with us?”

“Don’t be daft,” Edmund said. “She’s ancient.”

William grimaced. “Ed.”

Miss Collins laid a wizened hand on William’s. “Children. How I wish such a thing could be. I’m afraid, though, that an old bird like me”—she directed a smile at Edmund—“is in no position to become mother to anyone.”

“But we don’t need a real mother,” Anna said, only a hint of a whine

creeping into her voice. “We just need someone to watch us when we’re home from boarding school at the holidays. We wouldn’t be any bother.” Her eyes darted briefly toward Edmund. “Truly, we wouldn’t.”

William thought of hushing his sister, but the fact was that he wished for precisely the same thing she did. Indeed, if he was to be honest about his heart’s desire, he wished for more. He wished Miss Collins *would* volunteer to be a mother to the three of them. He wished she would stop Edmund from sneaking sweets after dinner. He wished she would read Anna—all of them, come to that—stories at bedtime and tuck the covers about their necks before saying *Sweet dreams* and switching off the lamp. He wished she would praise him for his top marks in history. He wished she would take him in her bony old arms and tell him she’d be in charge and he needn’t worry any longer. Truth be told, he had wished all of this for a very long time, though he knew a housekeeper’s job was cleaning and cooking, not tucking in and hugging.

Miss Collins dug in her apron and produced a spotless handkerchief. She dabbed at her nose, now gone pinker than Anna’s. “I’m afraid there’s nothing for it, children.” She gripped William’s hand. “What you need is a proper guardian.” She faltered, gave a snuffle. “And while I wish things were different, that’s more than I’m...” She sniffled again. “That’s more than I’m able to give you.” With that, she rose and fled through the doorway to her own quarters as quickly as her aged bones would carry her.

Left to themselves, the children trudged upstairs to the nursery for their own private council of war.

Edmund perched on the window seat, which was rather useless just now, as the blackout shades were tightly drawn and eclipsed any view of the dusky London streets below. He picked up a rubber ball and began tossing it into the air and catching it again. “I suppose that was supper,” he said.

William sat cross-legged on the floor, paging through a book. The rhythmic riffling of the pages was soothing. “Honestly, Edmund,” he said. “Do you really need more food?”

Edmund shrugged. “What do you think the solicitor will have to say, Will?”

“I don’t know. Hopefully Miss Collins will stay on until we go back to school in September. And then...maybe the grandmother had some sort of plan thought out for us.”

“I’m fairly certain the only thought the grandmother had about us was that we were a right pain in the neck.”

“Ed.”

Edmund hesitated only a moment. “She did think that, though.”

William sighed. “I know, but you needn’t say it out loud.” He fanned the pages of the book again. “Maybe there was a plan left over from Mum and Dad.”

Anna lay down on the nursery rug. “Tell me something about them, William.”

William gave her ankle a squeeze. “Mum always said her children hung the moon.”

“You tell us that one all the time,” Edmund complained. “We know that one.”

“I know you know it.” William frowned. “But it’s a good one.”

“Yes, but tell us something else anyhow,” Anna pleaded.

For you see, of the three of them, only William had any memory of their parents. Nothing too detailed, mind you, as he was not yet five when they died. He remembered being led by the hand through the back garden. A cool palm on his forehead when he was ill. A few notes from a tune sung to him at bedtime. And with this handful of fleeting memories plus a great many more he concocted from his own imagination, William had made it his business, some years ago, to paint for his brother and sister a vivid, if largely fictitious, portrait of their parents. Anna would, with some regularity, turn to William and say *tell me something about them*. Edmund never asked but always listened. Whether the memory about hanging the moon was real or whether William had made it up such a long time ago it had become so, well—did it matter?

William thought for a moment. “I’ve got another. I’ve only just remembered this one. When she was small, Mum got her little finger run over by someone’s roller skate, and she broke it.”

“The skate, or the finger?” Edmund asked.

“The finger!”

Edmund narrowed his eyes. “You actually remember her telling you that one?”

“I do.”

“Must have hurt, mustn’t it?” Anna said.

“I’m sure it did,” William agreed.

The children sat in silence for a long while, pondering broken fingers

and uncertain futures, until finally William rose, shook himself, and mustered a confidence that was almost believable.

“Mr. Engersoll will have a plan for us, and everything will be all right.”



CHAPTER TWO

There are those adults who possess a rare gift for explaining complex subjects to children. Harold Engersoll, it may safely be said, was not one of these. He and Miss Collins sat on straight-backed chairs in the parlor. The children bunched together on a sofa opposite them.

Mr. Engersoll cleared his throat. “It goes without saying, I suppose, children, that your situation is both unique and precarious?”

This was not the opening any of them had hoped for.

“Yes, sir. I mean...no, sir.” William stumbled. “I mean, we understand...that we’re...unique and...precarious.”

“Yes. Well. As you are no doubt aware, the three of you are heirs to a comfortable inheritance.” The children only blinked at him. “However, that inheritance is of little use in the procurement of the one thing you require—a guardian to watch over you until you are grown.” He offered an awkward smile. “Your grandmother did not name such a guardian in her will.” He paused. “It is rather a bitter irony, isn’t it?”

William reached for Anna’s hand, aware that she hadn’t a clue what irony was. He wasn’t sure he understood it himself, truth be told, but he knew what Mr. Engersoll was getting at. “He means that we have money but we don’t have anyone to take care of us.”

Edmund, for his part, was studying the tufts of hair sprouting from the solicitor’s ears. *And none on top*, Edmund thought. *Rough, that.*

The solicitor cleared his throat again. “Miss Collins has agreed to stay on until alternative arrangements can be made, but—I’m sure you understand—she has served your grandmother here for over forty years and it isn’t her job to—ehm—well, she is of such an age that...” He faltered for a moment. “It’s time for her to retire to her own lodgings. Her own family.”

Miss Collins dabbed at her nose with a handkerchief.

Anna wasn’t quite prepared to give up on Miss Collins. “We don’t need a real guardian, though. Only somebody to watch us on school holidays.”

Mr. Engersoll gave the three of them a long look. “I hardly think a just-for-the-holidays guardian seems the right solution, do you?”

The children saw the sense in this. They shook their heads.

“Therefore,” Mr. Engersoll continued, “I believe now is the time to proceed to a discussion of other—ehm—*external* options?”

Anna’s eyes met William’s. “He’s talking about adoption,” William explained. He looked at the solicitor. “Is that right?”

“Perhaps,” Mr. Engersoll replied. “Let me continue, however, as I fear circumstances may make adoption...challenging. First, I assume you would prefer to remain together?”

This question Anna understood perfectly. A fat tear slid down her cheek.

“What sort of question is that?” Edmund fairly bellowed.

William stiffened. “Yes, sir.” He took a deep breath. “We would prefer to remain together.”

A sniffle escaped from Miss Collins.

“Of course,” Mr. Engersoll said. “I am sorry. What I mean to say is—” He removed his spotless spectacles to polish them. Anna climbed onto William’s lap, where she buried her wet face in his shirt. Edmund’s fists were clenched as Mr. Engersoll proceeded gingerly. “It’s only that...three is rather a lot to adopt, especially with the war going on. Families aren’t sure they can keep their own children safe, let alone take on more.” The solicitor replaced his spectacles and leaned close to the assembled siblings. “Which brings me to my recommendation for the three of you...”

William thought he saw the old man’s eyes twinkle. But that couldn’t be right. This was not an occasion for twinkling.

“I wonder whether,” Mr. Engersoll said, “in this very special case...the war might, in fact, be seen as rather...an opportunity?”

William assumed he had misunderstood. “An opportunity?”

Mr. Engersoll’s fingers met in a steeple under his chin. “You are aware of the latest round of evacuations currently being carried out in London and other—ehm—*imperiled* locations around the country?”

The children nodded. They knew that thousands of children had already been evacuated from London to the countryside last September, after war was declared, in the hopes of keeping them out of harm’s way should the Germans bomb the city.

“I should like for you to consider,” Mr. Engersoll continued, “the possibility of being evacuated yourselves.”

William frowned. “But...wouldn’t we be safe at school, sir?”

The solicitor looked from one to the other of them. “You probably would, William, but as it doesn’t solve the problem of finding you a proper

guardian, I'm not sure going back to school is what's best for you."

Not going back to school. Edmund was beginning to like the sound of this.

Mr. Engersoll leaned even closer, his voice a near whisper now. "What if...the three of you were to be evacuated with the rest of London's schoolchildren? Off to the country with you, where you would no doubt make a most favorable impression on whatever family was lucky enough to have you? Is it not possible that an arrangement intended as temporary could evolve into something...permanent?"

William glanced at Edmund, then Miss Collins. "You mean," he said, measuring each word, "that we should be evacuated and hope that whatever family takes us on wants to keep us forever?"

Mr. Engersoll leaned back and folded his hands in his lap. "Precisely."

Edmund snorted. "Right. So...we're to ship out to the wilderness, where we just happen to be scooped up by some kindly...farmer and his wife...who've been waiting all their lives for three half-grown children to drop into their laps?"

Mr. Engersoll sighed. "It does sound preposterous when you say it that way." He was not to be put down so quickly, however. "Is it outside the realm of possibility, though? You would be doing just as nearly a quarter of a million other children are doing, so it's not as if you'll be put on a train alone to seek your fortunes. And at the very least, evacuation will offer you the *possibility* of a permanent guardian." He cleared his throat again. "You would need to be circumspect, of course. You couldn't tell anyone the truth about your grandmother, or your inheritance, at least until you were sure you'd landed somewhere that you all agreed was a suitable home. We don't want anybody taking advantage of you."

William wrinkled his nose. "So...we'd be lying?"

"Well," said Mr. Engersoll, looking rather guilty at the mention of *lying*, "I wouldn't want you to lie, so much as to...omit the truth, I suppose. That is, you needn't tell anyone that you left London because your grandmother died...only that she sent you away for your own safety."

"Which is lying," Edmund said.

The solicitor gave a sad sort of smile. "It isn't a perfect plan, children. I understand. But among the limited options I see for you, this one offers the best hope, in my imagination."

Hope and imagination. How funny that the dour old solicitor should choose those words. For children—above all other creatures—are naturally

endowed with extraordinary capacities for both. Indeed, having grown up in the care of a grandmother who lacked much in the way of warmth, William, Edmund, and Anna had spent untold hours *imagining* what a real family might look like and *hoping* one day to find themselves in one. And now, in the silence of the parlor, each of the children could *imagine* the faintest glimmer of *hope* in the solicitor's admittedly preposterous plan.

"What if we don't find a suitable place?" William asked. He thought, but didn't say out loud, *What if we do find one, but they don't want us, even if we do come with an inheritance?* He wasn't sure which of those was worse.

Mr. Engersoll sighed. "Why don't we cross that bridge when we come to it?"

The children sat for a long moment, considering.

Edmund set his teeth in a grimace. "It'll never work."

And yet the children found themselves in the nursery the following week, packing their suitcases. Mr. Engersoll had contacted a colleague in the Ministry of Health and arranged for William, Edmund, and Anna to join the students of St. Michael's, a North London primary school, when their evacuation occurred.

For the most part, the wartime evacuations of London were accomplished through the schools. Children packed their things and boarded trains with their teachers, to be delivered to the relative safety of the countryside. There, willing strangers gathered in churches and schools, in village halls, even in theaters and cattle markets, to select evacuees to host until such time as London was safe again and the children could return to their families.

"It's an awfully small suitcase," Anna said, reading aloud the official packing list Mr. Engersoll had obtained for them. "'Nightgown, handkerchiefs, face cloth, toothbrush, comb, sturdy walking shoes'—right, I've got those. 'One small family memento.'"

"No worries there," Edmund said. "That'll save you some room."

Anna ignored him, continuing down the list. "'A small bag or rucksack for school materials...if possible, a coat...'"

"If possible?" Edmund wrinkled his nose.

"Not everyone's got a coat, Ed," William said absently. Edmund paused a moment in his packing to digest this notion.

"'A favorite storybook,'" Anna went on. "One?" she asked.

The very idea. To pick just one favorite book seemed as impossible as—well, as finding a family through a mass wartime evacuation. But there you have it.

Anna surveyed the nursery shelves, taking down books here and there, considering each, then moving on.

The Arabian Nights?

“Far too heavy,” Edmund advised, “and I’m not carrying it for you.”

Peter and Wendy? All those lost boys looking for a mother. A bit too close to home.

Heidi? Agh. More orphans.

A Little Princess. This one, Anna hadn’t read. She paged through the book, catching phrases: *warm things, kind things, sweet things...nothing so strong as rage, except what makes you hold it in...a princess in rags and tatters...*Anna snapped the cover shut and nestled the book in her suitcase.

William’s selection was decided by an assignment he had made himself two years ago. On his tenth birthday, William announced to no one in particular that he planned to read the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* straight through, beginning to end. He read other things along the way, of course—heavens, to think of reading nothing but the *Britannica* for years and years—but had carried on with his quest. He had just started the fourth volume: *HER(cules) to ITA(lic)*. He hefted it off the shelf. Surely the war would be over and done before it was time to move on to volume five and the doings of *ITA(liysky, Aleksandr Vasilyevich Suvorov)?*

Edmund, retrieving a well-worn copy of *The Count of Monte Cristo* from the topmost shelf, marveled at his brother’s utter lack of sense. He poked William in the stomach with a corner of *The Count*. “You can borrow this, if you like, once you realize what a stupid choice you’ve made.”

Miss Collins joined the children toward the end of their packing. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and she pocketed her handkerchief as she entered the nursery. “Now, children—shall we go through your suitcases and ensure you’ve not forgotten anything?”

“Mine hardly latches,” Edmund replied. “Even if I had forgot something, I don’t know where I’d put it.”

“Even so—let’s have a look, shall we?” Miss Collins opened Edmund’s suitcase to reveal an impressive selection of sweets. Dairy Milk chocolate bars and jelly babies, Cadbury Roses and wine gums, even a roll of Parma Violets. A weary smile played at the housekeeper’s lips. “Edmund, dear,