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Opening extract from
Lucky

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I

The Cloudfoot Avenue

‘Lucky?’ It was a soft voice, a kindly voice, pulling him out of the Darkness. ‘Lucky squirrel, you’re shaking again. Are you awake?’

Awake? I don’t want to be awake, he thought. It’s happened again. This isn’t my home-tree. I’ve woken up in the Cloudfoot Avenue – *again!*

‘It’s all right, Lucky, you’re safe with me.’

I’m not going to open my eyes yet. I’m going to breathe slowly and stop shaking. It’s happening again today, but maybe tomorrow I’ll wake up back home. But will I? Ever?

Lucky had lost count of how many times he'd thought this. Every day he hoped he'd be back in his home-tree again, snug and safe in his own drey-nest. Yet every day he woke up in an alien world with this creature who called herself a squirrel.

She said he was safe – she said she was his mother now. But she wasn't *right*. She didn't even look like a squirrel, with her horrible grey fur that smelt of smoke and dust.

He knew she wasn't right. He knew he'd had a mother before this 'First Daughter' squirrel, brothers and sisters too. For a fleeting moment, just as he woke, he could remember them. Then they slipped away, replaced by memories of shrieking wind, splintering wood and sharp talons.

Then, thankfully, the Darkness came again.

Maybe my family are just a dream, he thought. But I know I'm not called Lucky, and I know you're not my mother!

He never said it to First Daughter. She was kind to him and it would hurt her feelings.

'Lucky, I know you're awake!'

He opened his eyes obediently and looked up at the strange squirrel who wanted to be his mother. She smiled and nuzzled him out of the warm moss-lined bed at the base of her drey-

nest. He uncurled and stretched. First Daughter towered over him. Even with nose and tail extended he was half her size. Why wasn't he getting any bigger?

Bud and Branch, thought First Daughter, am I doing the right thing? I can't keep him hidden in my home-tree for ever, but he's so small!

She'd tried to feed him up. Maybe he was supposed to be this small? Perhaps this was normal squirrel size in *his* home-trees. His fur was a peculiar red colour and his ears . . . She didn't even want to think about his ears . . .

There's nothing more I can do, she thought. I must stop worrying. So she began the morning grooming, cleaning his face and strange tufted ears with her sharp little tongue.

Lucky wriggled and started to giggle – it always tickled! First Daughter smiled again. He'd stopped shaking and seemed happier now.

A scratching noise outside the drey stopped her in mid-stroke. Lucky stiffened and wrinkled his nose. There were other creatures out there. He could smell them.

'Stay here, Lucky, I won't leave you for long.'

First Daughter's drey was a hollow ball of tightly woven twigs, a warm and dry nest. She pushed through a small hole in the curved wall, arched over the edge and jumped out onto her

home-tree, where the drey hung safely between two great spars of wood.

I'm not going to hide in the moss-bed, thought Lucky. I'm not going to be afraid. So he crept up to the drey wall, straining to hear fragments of conversation over the rustle of leaves and unfamiliar distant rumbling sounds.

'It's too early for the Cadet Troop.' This was First Daughter, he knew her voice.

'Tooth and Claw, sister, why waste time?' This was not a friendly voice.

'The Ma gave him to me and he *is* growing . . . slowly.'

'Sister, I have heard the chatter in the trees. I've heard that he's . . . different. A runt at best, and certainly not a Cloudfoot!'

'I will be the judge of that!' First Daughter sounded angry now. 'He will join the Cadet Troop when he is ready, like any other Cloudfoot male.'

'Then he will fail and be Cast Down. The Ma will not have weaklings in the Clan.'

'I do not need *you* to tell me the Word of Ma, sister! He is my son and I will raise him.'

Lucky could hear First Daughter coming back into the drey and he scurried back down to the moss-bed. He thought she would look angry – she had *sounded* very angry – but she just

looked sad.

‘Different’? What did the other squirrel mean? It was First Daughter who was different, not him! They had been talking about him for sure, but what was this ‘Cadet Troop’ he was supposed to join, and who was this ‘Ma’? She didn’t sound very nice – or motherly! There were so many questions he wanted to ask, but First Daughter just carried on with his grooming as if nothing had happened. Eventually she considered him clean enough and seemed to come to a decision.

‘Lucky, we are going out into the Avenue, into the Cloudfoot trees.’

‘Today? Now?’ His whiskers quivered – going outside!

‘It’s time you learnt about our Clan. I have kept you in my drey for too long. But you must promise to stay close and do everything I say. Understand?’

Lucky nodded solemnly. He was far too excited to be afraid. There was a world outside the drey-nest and somewhere, somewhere in that world, was his real home. I’m going to find it, he thought. My family is out there somewhere!

First Daughter squeezed through the gap in the woven twig wall. Lucky followed, small enough to slide through easily. He took a deep

breath and dived over the edge of the drey, landing on a thick branch high up in a densely leafed tree.

His nostrils instinctively flared, tasting the air. Was this like his home-tree? He had a memory of its scent: clean pine, carried on sweet air. The air in this tree had a bitter, smoky tang. This did *not* smell like his home-tree.

First Daughter started to spiral up the thick tree trunk to the next branches. Lucky set off after her, circling the trunk, but she was really fast and soon disappeared amongst the huge green leaves. Lucky froze in panic, his claws pressed into the rough tree bark – he'd already lost her!

'Lucky!' First Daughter hung from the branch above him. 'Come on, you must keep up!'

Lucky clawed up the rest of the trunk, trying to go as quickly as he could.

Bud and Branch, thought First Daughter, he's too slow. He's never going to survive at that pace!

The two squirrels set off along the branches, leaping from tree to tree. This was better. Lucky was light and agile and he found thin branch pathways that First Daughter was too heavy to use. He was keeping up with her quite well now.

I've got to build up his stamina for climbing,

she thought. I'll have to. No slow squirrel survives for long.

They were passing a large, beautifully woven drey in a chestnut tree when a female squirrel appeared. She looks just like First Daughter, thought Lucky. Waddling behind her, with a sour look on his face, was a young male.

Lucky was stunned. He'd expected to find *some* squirrels that looked like him, but all these Cloudfoots were strange. The young male didn't just have stubby small ears and dirty grey fur; he had a massive stomach too. This squirrel was bigger and fatter than any squirrel ought to be.

'Sister! Finally out with your *son*, I see.'

Lucky recognized the voice and felt First Daughter stiffen. This had to be the other squirrel from outside the drey, the one who'd said he was different.

The other squirrel shoved the sullen male towards them. 'Nimlet, say hello to First Daughter and her *son*.'

Nimlet looked at Lucky and wrinkled up his nose in disgust. 'You stink.'

'You stink too!' said Lucky before he could stop himself.

The fat squirrel's mother tried not to laugh. 'Nimlet!' she exclaimed. 'The *poor* thing can't

help how he smells – *or* what colour he is.'

First Daughter was furious. 'Lucky, we are going *now*.'

They travelled some way amongst the branches before First Daughter stopped.

'Sorry,' said Lucky quickly, before she could tell him off. 'But he started it!'

'I know. He has no manners and nor does my sister, Second Daughter. I'm sorry too, Lucky, but be careful what you say otherwise you'll get into fights.'

'I'm not afraid of getting into fights!'

Good, thought First Daughter, but you're not big enough yet to win them. 'Fighting is no good without strategy, Lucky. In our trees the Cloud-foot Daughter Generals use their wits to win battles. It's called the Knowledge. They are the cleverest females in the Avenue.'

'I can be clever too!'

First Daughter was taken aback. It had never occurred to her that a male might be clever. Males followed the Daughter Generals' orders and defended the Avenue – they didn't need to think for themselves. But Lucky wasn't big and strong like the Cloudfoot males, and it didn't look like he was ever going to be, so he would *need* to be able to think for himself – if he was to have any chance of survival.

I *could* teach him the Knowledge, she thought. If he could plan for the future, understand strategy and think logically, he'd have an advantage over the other males. It would be worth a try . . . She looked down at his big bright eyes and trembling whiskers. 'Would you like to learn to be *really* clever?' she asked.

'Oh, yes!'

'Come along then, we will start with some geography.'

They spiralled higher up the tree trunk, leaving the densely foliated, safe Mid-levels behind. Lucky tried to stay close, but it was hard work and the trunk seemed to go on for ever. When they finally got close to the Canopy, the highest branches, he was panting and struggling for breath in the foul-smelling air. The branches had thinned out and leaf cover was scarce at the very top of the trees. The squirrels were exposed to the vast sweep of the sky.

'First rule: check the airways,' said First Daughter. '*Always* check the airways. The sky is dangerous – look!' She pointed to the black shapes circling above.

Lucky squinted upwards as First Daughter listed the hunting birds that saw squirrel as a tasty snack. Thuggish black crows and ravens.

Thieving magpies, fast and clever. The silent swooping owls at dusk; they would happily pluck a squirrel from the trees if they could.

‘Know the shape of your enemy, Lucky, so you can avoid them.’

They went up higher, scanning carefully for incoming birds, and finally First Daughter led him out onto a viewing branch and showed him her world.

Lucky looked at it in horror: a long line of huge trees, stretching into the distance, as far as the eye could see. None of them had the shape or smell of any tree he knew.

‘This is the Cloudfoot Avenue.’

One side of the Avenue was bordered with strange shapes, square and pointy at the same time, that covered the whole of the landscape. Lucky had never seen anything so ugly.

‘Houses,’ explained First Daughter. ‘Human dreys.’

The other side of the Avenue was a vast flat sea of green, then more houses and towering white blocks on the horizon.

‘That is the Albion Park.’

Lucky fought a rising tide of panic. I’m trapped! he thought. Trapped between these ‘human dreys’! He wanted to run. This wasn’t a real wood or a forest – this wasn’t a proper place

for squirrels!

He frantically scanned the trees for any other squirrels like him. Any hint, any clue, anything he might recognize – any way back.

‘I can’t see my home-tree,’ he whispered.

‘This is your home now,’ said First Daughter.

Lucky struggled hard to hold back his tears.