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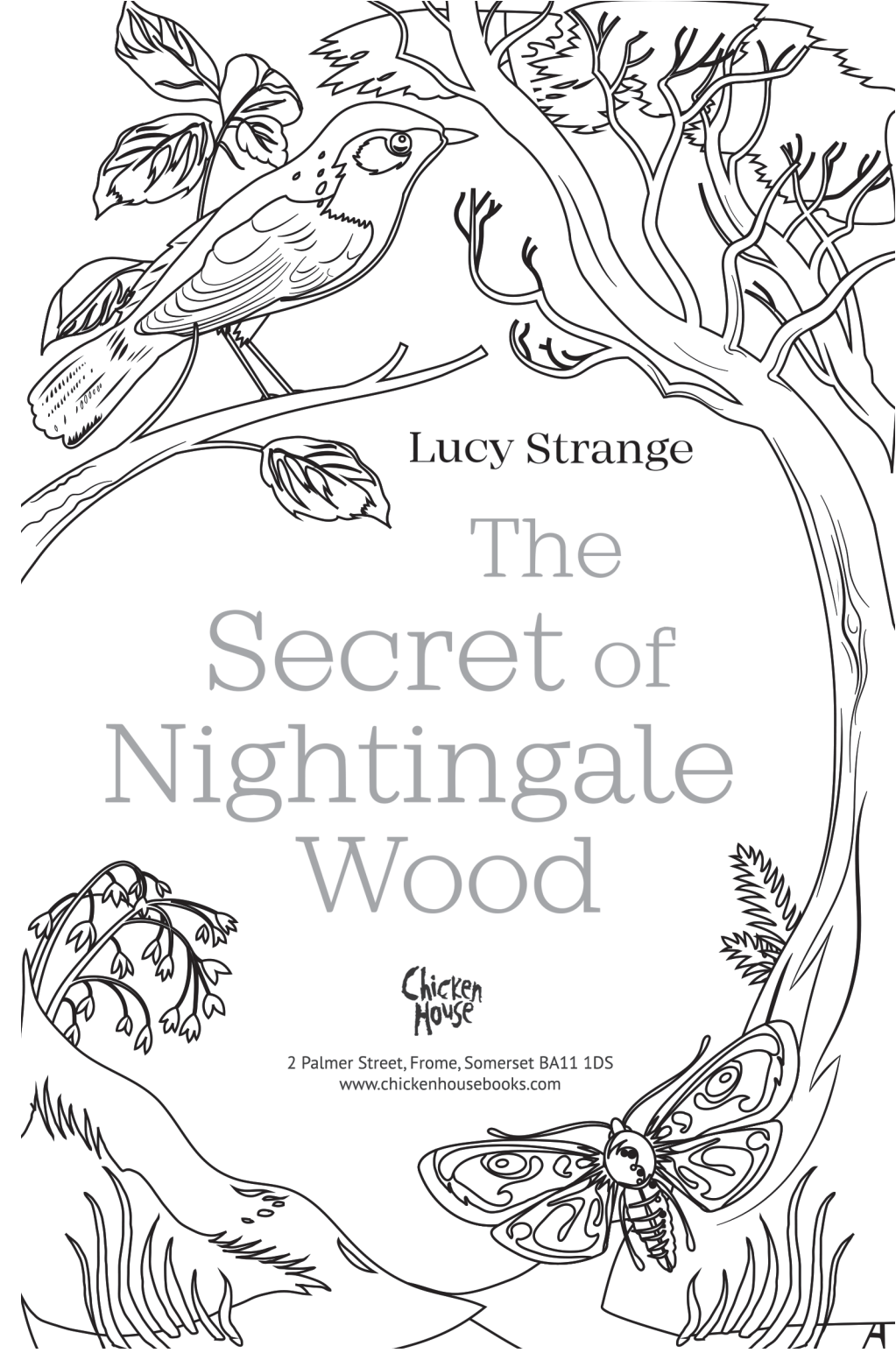
Opening extract from
The Secret of Nightingale Wood

Written by
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The
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'Do I wake or sleep?'

John Keats, *Ode to a Nightingale*

For my parents, Mary and Rick Strange

‘Life is a splendid gift – there is nothing small about it.’

Florence Nightingale



I

We stood together, looking up at the new house – Father, Mama, Nanny Jane, Piglet and me. It was large and old, almost falling down in places, with gently bulging walls and a steep, tiled roof that was etched with lichen. The sign on the gatepost read HOPE HOUSE.

‘It’s a fresh start,’ Father said.

Mama didn’t say anything. She just stared at our strange new home, and then turned to stare at Father.

‘Come on, Piglet,’ I whispered to the baby. ‘Let’s have a look around.’

I clutched her tightly to my chest and walked around the side of the house, towards the long garden and the wilderness of woodland that lay beyond.

‘Don’t be long,’ Nanny Jane called after me. ‘Be

back for tea in twenty minutes please, Henry.’

I had always been Henry, even though my full name was Henrietta Georgina Abbott. Maybe my parents had wanted two boys. Now that my brother Robert had gone, they had two girls. Just me and Piglet.

Piglet wasn’t the baby’s real name either, of course. She had arrived during that terrible time last summer. Mama wouldn’t discuss what to call her, so Father had registered her as Roberta Abbott – a horrible mistake, but it was too late now. No one could bear to call her Roberta, so we called her Piglet because, well, she looked a lot like a baby pig. I liked the name because it reminded me of the baby in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*.

I felt a lot like Alice that day, exploring a new world in which nothing quite made sense. Piglet and I wandered past a dishevelled herb garden, an overgrown bed of rose bushes and a broken old gazebo, all the way down the length of the lawn to the point at which the garden ended and the forest began.

Beneath the trees it was cool, dark and badgery. It had been a hot summer, and the leaves and twigs beneath my feet were as crisp as kindling. A tangle of overgrown pathways wound away into the darkness of the forest. I stopped and listened, but I could only hear the soft thrum of my own heartbeat and the whisper of Piglet’s breathing. She suddenly felt heavy in my arms and I realized she had fallen asleep. I kissed the top of

her fluffy round head. ‘Funny little Piglet,’ I whispered.

I stepped forward on to the nearest path, and then stopped. *What if I get lost and can’t find my way back?* I thought. *What if the shadows of the forest swallow me up?* The branches above shivered strangely, and then, quite suddenly, I could smell smoke.

Smoke. That thick, bitter smell that filled my nightmares.

I turned and stumbled out of the trees, gripping the baby so tightly that she jolted awake and cried out. I patted her and tried to laugh, pretending my clumsy panic had just been a game. ‘It’s all right,’ I said. She whimpered, unconvinced.

I looked back into the forest and saw a wraith of smoke drifting towards me through the trees.

The sunlit leaves trembled with secrets.

That evening, I helped bath Piglet, and then I read to her as she fussed in her cot, squirming and babbling. She liked being read to, or at least she liked trying to chew the corners of the book. I stroked her little turned-up nose with my fingertip, and by the time I got to the final verse of *The Owl and the Pussycat*, her eyes were starting to close.

*They dined on mince, and slices of quince,
Which they ate with a runcible spoon;
And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,
They danced by the light of the moon . . .*

‘Night night, Piglet,’ I said, and tucked the blanket around her plump middle. And then I said, ‘Runcible,’ because it was a lovely word and I didn’t know if it was real or not. I closed the nursery door softly behind me and went downstairs for supper.

Nanny Jane and I sat at the dining table for nearly ten minutes before Father joined us. We heard his raised voice upstairs, and then a door slammed shut. The old house shook and I half expected to hear Piglet’s cries drifting down the stairs, but she didn’t wake up.

Nanny Jane stirred her cooling soup and waited patiently – a vision of control, with her immaculate white apron and her hair pulled back into a perfect blonde bun. I asked her if she knew whether or not ‘runcible’ was a real word and she said she wasn’t sure. I said I would ask Father.

‘Not this evening, Henry,’ she said.

When Father sat down he started eating his tepid soup immediately, without a word to either of us.

‘Will Mama be coming down for supper?’ I asked.

Nanny Jane shot me one of her looks.

Father swallowed his soup, touched his mouth with his napkin, and took a deep breath. ‘I don’t think so, Henry,’ he said. ‘Your mother is very tired.’

He suddenly looked very tired too and his eyes seemed to sparkle unnaturally, as if they had filled with tears. He looked down and rubbed his forehead.

I tried to think of something else to say.

‘I think there might be someone in the woods,’ I said. ‘When I was looking around this afternoon, I thought I could smell smoke . . .’

Father pushed his chair away from the table and stood up. ‘It has been a long day for all of us . . . And I’m not that hungry after all.’

He walked to the door.

‘Perhaps give the stories a miss tonight,’ he said, without looking back. ‘You’re too old for fairy tales now, Henry.’

I assumed Father had gone to bed, but I was wrong. After supper, I followed the smell of his pipe smoke to a study at the front of the house, just off the hallway. Bare wooden bookshelves lined each wall, from the parquet floor up to the high ceiling, so that it felt like an abandoned book shop.

Father had begun to unpack a few boxes, but now he was just sitting in a high-backed armchair beside the empty fireplace, smoking his pipe. He must have heard me come in, but he didn’t say anything, so I didn’t say anything either.

Books stood in neat piles on the floor, ready to be shelved. I picked up Father’s heavy dictionary and flicked hopefully through the pages.

‘Runcible’ wasn’t there.