

To those of you with heads full of pesky,
noisy hamster wheels . . . I see you!

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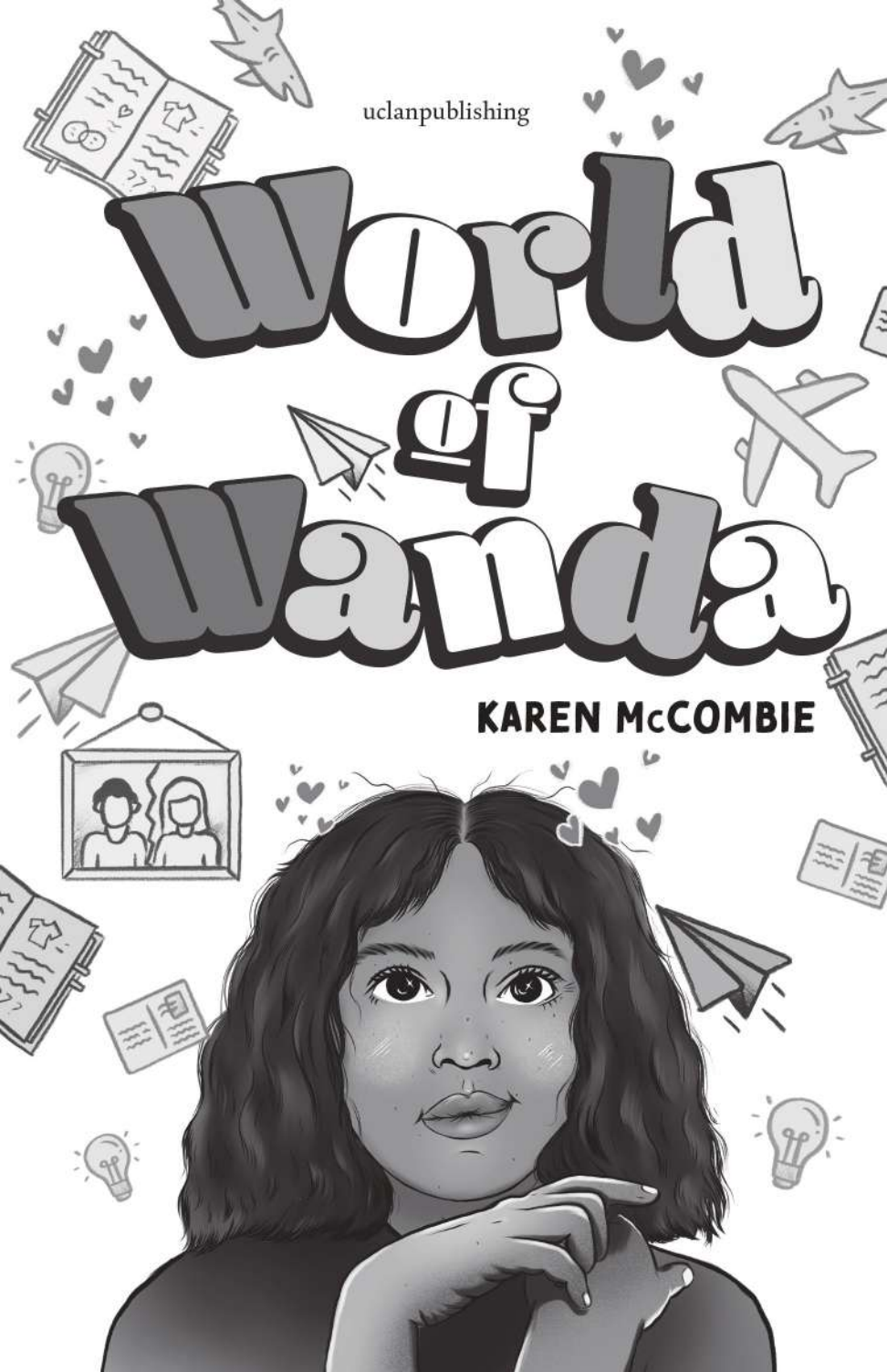
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World of Wanda

KAREN McCOMBIE





SEPTEMBER

MARGOT



Dear Diary,

Help! My chest feels like there's a bunch of bats flapping around in there.

And right now, I'm sitting on my bed, knowing I should be getting ready, knowing I should be picking up my bag and heading downstairs. But I just need to scribble some stuff down, in case it helps with the bat attack.

The thing is, today's the first day back at school after the summer holidays. It'll be the first time I'll have seen Marisa since she resigned from being my best friend. Awkward. Also, I keep thinking about how totally hyper everyone's going to be. The playground will be mobbed, with everyone squealing their

hellos and hugging and madly catching up.

If – I mean, when – I get asked how my summer's been, I don't know how I can even begin to explain what's gone on with me. There was the Marisa stuff, obviously. But even though that felt huge and hurtful at the time, what happened next just . . . well, it just eclipsed it. Cos exactly six weeks ago, something mind-melting happened to my family. Or I guess I should say someone happened to us.

Before that, it was like me and my parents and my little brother Charlie were packed together in this neat little snow globe, just the four of us staring out of the shiny clear plastic. Then The Someone appeared on our doorstep, with no warning.

The Someone who smiled this gap-toothed smile at us all and then grabbed our family snow globe and shook it till me and Mum and Dad and Charlie were lost in a total blizzard. That's what it felt like.

And that's what I've got to tell people about today. That our family of four is – surprise, surprise – actually a family of five.

That all this time I had – drum roll, please! – a secret sister.

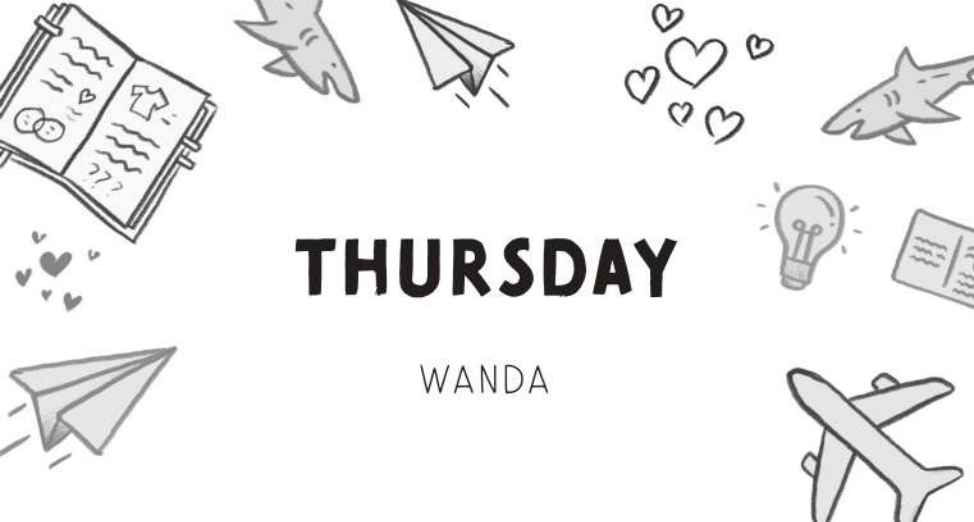
A SECRET SISTER!!!

Okay, so Mum's shouting my name. She's shouting Wanda's too.

#HereGoes

#WishMeLuck

***SIX WEEKS
EARLIER***



THURSDAY

WANDA



'Hola, mi llamo Wanda!'

I scratch the words in the dry earth with the end of the small wooden spoon I just ate my yoghurt with.

'Hej, mitt namn är Wanda!'

An ant is walking over the 'Hej'.

Why is it on its own? Where are its ant buddies? Don't they hang out in colonies? How many ants are in a colony, anyway? Hundreds? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands? I wonder if that little ant is lonely. Or maybe it just got bored of doing ant stuff and came to watch what the Big Human (me) was doing . . .

'สวัสดีฉันชื่อ Wanda!'

Actually, I don't know about the ant, but *I'm* kind

of bored. Like itchy-in-my-skin bored. My mum Patti and all the other grown-ups are either still working in the fields or taking a lunch break in the shade somewhere on the farm cos it's so, so, SO hot.

"Huh? What are you saying, Wanda?" asks Elif, from the stripy hammock swinging between two gnarly trees in the scrubby garden. She's made the hammock *her* territory; the other adults don't ever use it. The kids don't either, because the only kids here at the eco-farm are me and Astrid's little boy, Tiger, and he's only a baby, so he can hardly get up there on his own. Not unless he climbed on the back of one of the goats and then—

"WANDA!" says Elif, trying to catch my attention.

"What?" I ask.

"Were you saying something to me?" repeats Elif. "When you were looking at the ground just now?"

Oops, I must've mumbled all the yoghurt-spoon words out loud without realising. But I perk up, glad Elif's awake. I thought she was dozing, like the goats. The herd must all be snoozing, by the pines and the pond – I can't hear their bells.

"That's Spanish and Swedish and Thai for 'Hi,

my name is Wanda!," I tell her, pointing out my doodles in the dirt. "And I can introduce myself in a whole bunch of OTHER languages, like Dutch and Greek and Arabic and Hebrew and Italian. And cos we're in France right now, I should say, 'Bonjour, je m'appelle Wanda!'"

I don't mention it, but I can also say 'Hi' in Turkish ('Merhaba!') and German ('Tag!'). The reason I don't mention it is because Elif is Turkish-German so that'd hardly be big news to her.

"Uh-huh," Elif nods, lifting her sunglasses onto her head and staring down at me.

She doesn't say anything else, so I keep talking, cos I don't like silences.

"Do you know what 'posso comprar abacaxi' means?" I ask her, but then before Elif can reply I tell her. "It's 'Can I buy some pineapple' in Portuguese. And then when we were living in Ibiza, Patti was working in this café on the beach and I memorised ALL the flavours in Spanish on the ice-cream menu. My favourite flavour is 'chicle', cos it means 'bubblegum', but it sounds more like a TICKLE, doesn't it?"

Elif raises her dark eyebrows and 'huh's again.

I don't know if she's impressed or not, but it's okay – she never sounds bored when I talk, like some of the other backpackers and travellers me and my mum have met along the way. Lots of them sort of glaze over when I'm chatting or else laugh and say stuff like, "Wow, you *sure* can talk, kid!" which I don't think they mean in a particularly nice way.

"Hey, try this . . ." Elif says something I don't understand.

"What?" I mumble. I've sort of forgotten what we were just talking about because my hamster wheel of a brain is rattling away at top speed, like normal. MY normal.

Elif repeats the words I don't recognise, and then I guess that she's trying to teach me something in Turkish maybe. It doesn't sound like German.

I concentrate on the rhythm and shape of the words she just said and do my best to repeat them. Words in Turkish sound heavy and important. Same with German, actually.

"Annen . . . keçiye . . . benziyor . . ." I say slowly and carefully.

Elif bursts out laughing.

"Did I say it wrong?" I ask.

I worry a lot about getting things wrong. I want people to like me. I THINK Elif likes me. Same as both her native languages, she can seem very serious, till she smiles and then her whole face lights up. She's twenty-three and is travelling around in her beat-up campervan till her money runs out (or her campervan breaks down), same as everyone we get to know at the hostels and communes and farms we tend to stay at.

It's our story too; me and Patti's. Though Patti is thirty-four (and I'm twelve). And we travel on trains and buses and ferries. Our money hasn't run out for the last three years, but that's cos Patti picks up work wherever we go, and cos Patti got a bunch of money after Gran died and her bungalow got sold. Patti says that as long as we're careful with money, we can go on and on and on travelling as long as we like.

On and on and on . . .

It sounds a LOT sometimes.

"No, you said it perfectly!" says Elif, reaching a long, light brown leg out towards me and gently pushing me on the shoulder with her bare toes.

But I've forgotten what we were just talking about. Again.

"Huh?"

Elif was laughing at something I said . . .

"I taught you to say, 'My mother looks like a goat!'"

Wow! You know something? Elif is right. My mum DOES look like a goat. And I know the exact goat. It's Babette, of course, the really pretty goat on the farm who has shaggy white fur and amazingly pale eyes. Kenzo – a Japanese student who worked here till last week – took a photo of Patti and Babette posing together, with Patti's white-blonde dreads all piled on top of her head, and her ice-blue eyes twinkling at the camera. I swear Patti and Babette looked more like mum and daughter than me and Patti do. I mean, if someone saw me and Elif right now, I bet they'd think WE were related. We've both got matching tangles of dark hair and everything. She could be my big sister or cousin or something. (It must be nice to have a big sister or cousin or something.)

"Hey, don't take offence," Elif says casually. "I'm joking!"

Honestly, I hadn't been remotely offended that Elif had compared Patti to a goat. But then again, did she

MEAN to be mean? I don't think Elif likes my mum too much. Elif's smile slides off her face whenever Patti comes into the room, or passes in the distance, or says something, or laughs, or BREATHES, even.

I think it's cos of Jakub, the backpacker from Poland who's staying here too. He stares all lovey-dovey at my mum quite a lot of the time, and maybe Elif would like him to look at HER that way. I want to tell Elif that Patti doesn't feel lovey-dovey about Jakub. For a start, she's WAAAAYYYYY older than him. And Patti is always friendly to everyone, wherever we stay and wherever she works, whether that's on a farm helping pick crops like she's doing now, or teaching English for a term, or working in ice-cream shops at the seaside. All the time I've known Patti – which is basically for ever, obviously – she's never had a boyfriend (or girlfriend).

Though she DID have a boyfriend once upon a time, or I wouldn't be here, would I?

"Hey, Wanda . . . where did you go just now?" asks Elif, gently nudging me with her toe again. She's spotted that I just got lost in the babble inside my own head. Which makes a change from babbling out loud, I suppose.

"I'm here!" I say, waving up at her. "Honest!"

the cocoon of the hammock. "Jakub's going to some silent meditation retreat first, in the mountains south of here. Then he's selling his motorbike and flying to Bali sometime after that."

I've heard of Bali. It's a famous holiday island in Indonesia, and Indonesia is made up of *loads* of islands, I think.

I try to think of other things I might know about Indonesia.

But all I can think is it is a long, long, LONG way away, and after three years of travelling I feel really, really, REALLY tired all of a sudden.

Elif is staring at me with her piercing dark eyes, trying to figure out what I make of the news, I'm sure.

For a second, I don't say anything. But the inside of my head is bursting as I picture me and Patti packing up everything AGAIN, saying goodbye to everyone AGAIN, trying to settle somewhere new AGAIN.

I throw my wooden spoon to one side and use both hands to frantically rub away all my hellos in the dirt.

Cos what's the point in leaving my name anywhere when I never stay long enough to feel like I'm real?



MARGOT

Dear Diary,

I hate Charlie!

So today was the last day of term before the summer holidays, i.e. the most fun day of school in the whole year. The teachers absolutely don't care any more and for once we don't have to wear stupid school uniform.

I was planning on wearing my skinny jeans with the turn-ups. Dad ironed them last night and hung them over the back of the kitchen chair with a bunch of other ironing. But when I went to put my jeans on this morning, Charlie had spooned cornflakes into the turn-ups. Soggy, milky cornflakes!!

"Aw, that's so not cool, Charlie!" my dad said when

he heard me losing my mind.

"Oh, Charlie . . ." Mum sighed, walking into the kitchen with Charlie's bag for school. Charlie just looked around at us all and smiled so wide that milk dribbled down his chin. Honestly, that kid can be so disgusting.

But you know what makes me really lose my mind? How laid-back Dad is about all the stuff Charlie does. I mean, yes, he is only four. But it's like living with a wild mongoose sometimes. He totally tornadoes around the house destroying whatever's in front of him. I mean, just this week he drew all over my white trainers with his crayons 'to make them pretty' and made a potion in the back garden with mud, Dad's shaving foam and my new nail varnish.

And when that sort of stuff happens, Mum at least has a chat with him. Before bed last night I heard her telling Charlie that if he could please just remember where he put the house phone that would be really, really useful cos our Grandad Pops doesn't believe in mobiles and will only make contact via the landline. (Nice try, Mum, but Charlie can never

remember where he puts anything.) Dad, on the other hand, just seems to think that everything Charlie does is insanely cute and adorable.

So I know this sounds bad, but after I got changed into my second favourite pair of jeans this morning, I had to turn away and hide my grin when Dad couldn't find his mobile.

"Did you take it, Charlie?" I heard him say to my brother in this sing-song voice that just makes Charlie giggle. "Is it in the same place you put the house phone? Do you want to show me where they both are?"

Of course Charlie didn't! Dad was turning this into an excellent game!

Anyway, I was moaning to Marisa about Charlie and Dad on the way to school but I could tell she wasn't really listening. And why would she, when she's flying to Sicily later this evening? I can't believe my best friend has the cheek to desert me for the whole summer. I hate her mum for taking her away that long to visit relatives. And I'm so jealous that Marisa has a really cool older sister to hang out with. I mean, Toni gives Marisa all the clothes and stuff she

doesn't want any more – how brilliant would that be? All I get from Charlie is slobbery kisses and the occasional bite on the arm.

And think about it; next week, Marisa and Toni will be at the beach, while I'll be on a 'mini-break' in wellies on a farm in the drizzle. And while Marisa and her sister will be wandering around the shops and cafés in sunny Palermo, I'll be trailing after my little brother while he chucks food pellets at goats and sheep, cos Mum and Dad say ALL our holidays have to be little-kid-friendly, i.e. not remotely suitable for fourteen-year-old girls like me.

So, yeah, looks like the whole summer is going to be this endless, boring void. Great.

Night, night, Diary . . .

#Gloom

#BoredAlready