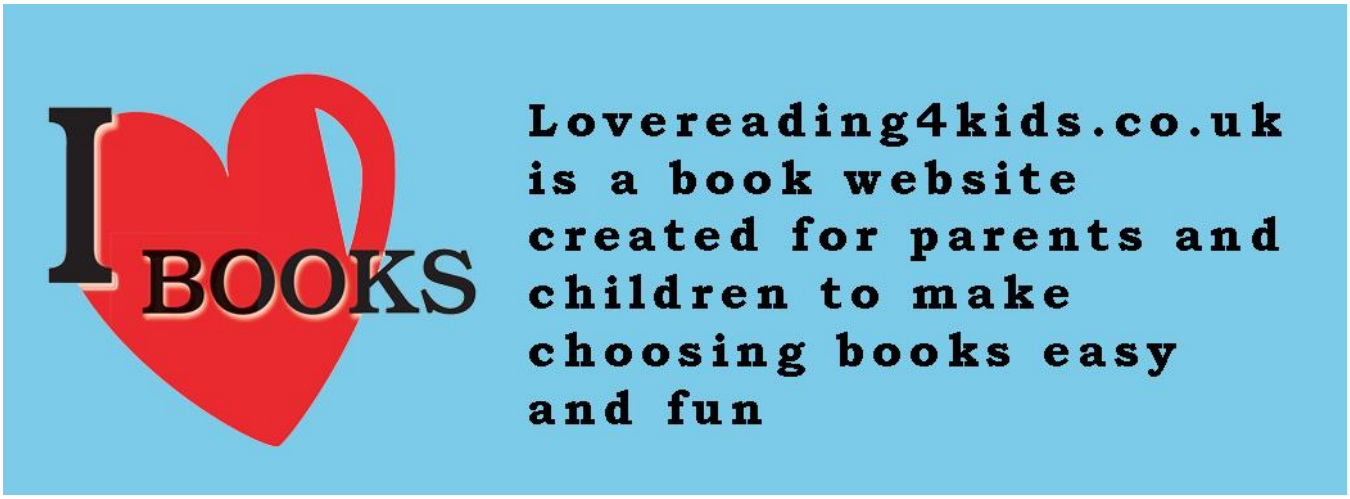


Opening extract from

The Ones That Disappeared

Written by

Zana Fraillon

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THE ones THAT disappeared



Zana Fraillon

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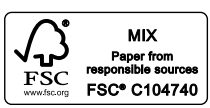
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To all the silenced voices

There was a stirring in the mud. A soft rumble from deep in the riverbank that sent the fish swirling and stopped frogs mid hop. It was just a hint, a whisper, that something was coming. Something was about to begin.

Esra

My name is Esra Merkes. I am eleven years old. The tattoo on my arm says I belong to Him, Orlando Perel. It says the Snakeskins are my family for life. It says I am kept. It says I am owned. They think just because I close my eyes and shut my ears and follow their words, that I have forgotten who I am. They think I am theirs to make.

But that is not *my* truth.

No ink scratched in my skin can tell me who I am. No roughed hands and twisted faces can turn me soft. My truth is stronger than a thousand hands, and fiercer than a million twisted mouths.

I am Esra Merkes. They do not know me. They do not know I can wait. They do not know, one day, I will be free.

Curled on the floor, the stink of blood and sweat crawling up my nose, I tell my truth over and over, letting those words keep me whole. I tell my truth until the beating stops and the footsteps have gone back up the stairs, and the door has locked us in again and the pain has cooled off and the only sound left is Miran breathing *Sorry* over and over again in my ear.

‘Suck it up, princess, I’m not dead yet,’ I tell him, and wipe the blood from my mouth, and he smiles and wipes the wet from his eyes. I know he didn’t mean to be late. ‘Anyway, what doesn’t kill me only makes me stronger, neh?’

Miran smiles and says, ‘Or at least a little crazier.’ Then he pulls me to a sit and we lean into each other, our shoulders warming at the touch of skin, the wet of the wall against our backs.

Miran reaches into his pocket and pulls out an orange. A real orange. It hurts my mouth to smile and it’ll hurt more when that juice stings the cracks in my lips, but that orange is worth it. Miran takes some peel and puts it in my mouth. I let it sit on my tongue and suck at the flavour. The bitter bites right through the taste of blood and dirt, and for just a moment, I’m back home, sitting in the shade dipping orange peel into melted chocolate, my brother pulling faces at the taste. But it’s only a flash of a memory. A shadow I can’t catch.

‘I don’t think that’s true anyway,’ Miran says. ‘There’s lots of stuff that might not kill you, but definitely wouldn’t make you stronger. Like a bear. Or a crocodile. Or a really angry duck.’

‘A duck?’

Miran nods, not smiling even a bit. ‘Ducks can be vicious. Have you seen those beaks? And their slappy feet? They pretend to be nice and cute, but you look in a duck’s eyes, and all you will see is hate.’

I shake my head. 'Well, maybe not a duck then. Come on, tell me what it was like out there.'

'It was sunny,' Miran says, his eyes soft with remembering. 'Hot. I could smell the rain on the wind. I felt it on my face, those tiny drops. It didn't pour down though. I wish it had. My bones were aching for it, you know?'

I take another piece of peel and put it on my tongue. 'What else?'

Miran thinks. He's remembering being outside this room, outside this house, past the metal gates, out in the world, just for the day. I can see his face holding hard to keep each detail fresh. 'The people,' he says after a while. 'I forgot there were so many people. All those faces, Esra.'

I close my eyes, the skin pulling tight over the lumps growing fast on my face and tell myself to push through the hurt and listen. Miran is telling every little detail so I can imagine and fool my brain to believing I'm remembering too, as if I'd been out there, with him. That's the rule, whenever one of us is pulled to a job outside, we have to tell everything. They only ever pull one of us, leaving the other locked behind as guarantee. That way they know we won't try to run. We've seen what happens to the one locked behind if we do. We've seen what happens to the one locked behind if we don't do as we're told, or if we don't earn enough, or if we get picked up by police.

Or if we come back late . . . Miran looks at me. He's hurting worse than me, knowing my pain is on him.

'I'm sorry, Es,' Miran says again. 'I was thieving a wallet and my hand got caught in his pocket. He almost caught me. I had to run for ages to lose him, and—'

I put my hand on his knee. 'Forget it. It's nothing. You've always been rubbish at thieving wallets. You rush it too much.' I push him with my elbow. 'What else was there?'

He thinks a bit, his fingers pushing a piece of orange flesh, juiced and sweet onto my tongue. 'There was a fair. Full of clowns and rides and music and magicians, and I got to go on every ride three times and they fed me up on hot dogs and ice cream and—'

I push him with my elbow again. Now he's trying to fool his brain as well. 'For real, Miran. What else was there really?'

'There could have been a fair. Maybe there was and I just didn't see it.' He thinks a bit longer. 'I forgot how the light changes, you know? How it starts soft in the morning and gets hard and bright until its almost the end of day, and then the light turns to shadows and tricks your eyes into thinking you're seeing things. You can just about believe anything is possible in that light.'

The light never changes down here. In this room under the house, with its puddled floor and too bright lights, time doesn't even exist. There are no days or nights or hours down here, just an endless now.

The lights are kept on all day and all night for the plants. Burning hot lights that hang from chains from the ceiling and shine brighter than the sun. There are so many plants down here we call it The Jungle. More plants than we can count, hundreds of them, growing in rows in their pots all the way from one wall to the next, some just starting up from the dirt, others so big we can't see over all those leaves.

This room has been our world for eighty-four days now, Miran and me. Little Isa too, except he arrived on day 9, all wrapped up in that too big jumper of his that he won't take off no matter how hot. He spent most of the first week rocking himself in a corner, whimpering and shaking. 'He's aching,' Miran had said.

'He needs to grow up,' I told him. 'Orlando has no use for babies.' But we left Isa alone. He's not even seven years old, and too small to work much anyway. Orlando doesn't need to know Isa's not working yet.

Miran keeps track of the days by the sprinklers. They come on once in the morning and once at night to feed the plants and so we can fill our water bottles. Miran marks up a brick in the wall each time they start, smiling every time. He said when we get to one hundred days we should have a party. We laughed so hard, Isa thought something was wrong with us. He didn't get why it was so funny. He hasn't been around long enough I guess.

When they locked the door that first night, Miran

looked at the plants growing up around us, and he turned to me and said, 'What kind of tree can you carry in your hand?' I told him to shut up. Miran and his stupid riddles. Even still it took me all night to get it. 'A palm tree.' I woke him up to tell him.

Our job in The Jungle is to grow the plants up, to water them just right and move the fans around the room so each plant gets enough air blowing all over it. To wet the plants with a spray that stings our eyes, shakes our legs, catches in our throats, sends an angry rash up our arms, and puts the taste of metal in our mouths. To make sure this room stays just hot enough and just wet enough for the plants to grow strong, and to scrub any dot of mould from the walls so it doesn't get to a plant and make it sick. These plants we grow are worth a lot of money to Orlando. He trusts us to do it right. There are worse jobs than this.

Isa says these plants are for making medicine to stop people dying. Miran must have told him that lie, but it makes him happy, and he sings to every one of those plants and talks to them like they understand. He even has names for some of them. *'Hello Niri, so good to see you today. Are you feeling well?'* I don't tell him he's wrong, that these plants are turned to drugs which people buy so they can go crazy for a time. I don't tell him these plants are what feed the street rats and turn them to zombies. I don't tell him only because I like the sound of his singing.

When a plant is ready and the flowers change to just the right colour, we harvest it, and hang it in paper bags in the drying cupboard. That cupboard is the only space in here that isn't too hot. It's big and dry and cool with a breeze pushing through a tiny window from the outside. We aren't meant to spend long in the cupboard, but sometimes I sit in there, looking up at the window and letting the outside wind blow over me, and I close my eyes and imagine.

Unless we're pulled for a job, the only other time we leave this room is to load up one of the trucks with the bags of dried plants. That happened on days 11, 23, 41, 58, and day 67. Isa scratched at the brick to put a circle around those days like a sun.

The last time we loaded the truck, the boss said we had done good. He was old and greyed and had more tattoos covering over him then anyone I'd seen. He said he would tell Orlando that we were working hard. He gave us all a chocolate bar for free and let us sit outside in the front garden to eat. My eyes stung after being inside so long, but it was a good sting, and we smiled and felt the wind on our faces and the grass at our feet and the sun warming our heads.

Just down the street, a bus full of kids drove in to the school. I could hear them singing through the open windows. *'A duck walked up to a lemonade stand, and it said to the man, running the stand, hey, ba ba ba, got any grapes?'* They didn't look at us though. Just drove

past and into the school like we weren't even there. Like we were invisible.

No one here sees us for real. They just see the house looking like any other house in the street, with its brown bricks and blue curtains and wooden door with a Neighbourhood Watch sign stuck to the window. They just see three kids eating chocolate bars and don't think to even wonder. It's like Orlando says. Here, in this country, we don't exist.

That old, tattooed Snakeskin watched the bus, then he brought out cans of drink that dribbled down our faces and turned our hands sticky. 'No charge,' he told us. 'This is your reward for doing good.' He took a football from his truck and he kicked it to Isa, back and forth, his smile big enough to show his browned teeth clamped hard on his cigarette. But he kept looking at Isa. I've seen people look like that before, looking, like he had ideas to move Isa to a different kind of job.

Miran saw too. He squeezed my shoulder and closed his eyes. He tipped his head back and when the sun hit his face it turned it white and flat and empty like stone. I watched that man put his hand on Isa's head and rub at his hair. I watched him reach in his pocket for another chocolate bar and whisper in Isa's ear so Isa smiled up at him, believing.

Miran's eyes were still closed when I stood up. He didn't see me kick that ball on to the road and kick the side of the man's truck so it left a dent the size of my heel

in the door. He didn't see me grab Isa by his jumper. He heard me though, telling that man to jam his chocolate bar. He saw me spit at his feet and he followed when I pulled Isa back inside the front door, all the way along the hallway with its flowered carpet and back down the stone steps into The Jungle, Isa not saying a word the whole time, but tears tracking dirt down his face.

And when the man followed us into The Jungle, his keys jangling and smiling through the smoke of his cigarette, Miran couldn't do a thing but put his arms around Isa and turn him away.

The man walked down the steps, slow and sure, all the way through the plants to where I stood at the back wall. He grabbed my cheeks in his hand, the keys pushing into my skin and he squeezed hard, his face up close to mine and his breath, all sour and smoked, pushed inside my nose and mouth and all the way into my chest.

'Be careful, girl,' he said, his voice growling like Orlando's dogs. 'Most people won't tolerate a mouth like that. Better hope I don't tell Orlando he needs to shape you up. Better hope I don't tell Orlando he should sell you on. I know people who would pay a good price for a girl like you.' Then he jammed my face into the bricks and held it there, watching. He took the cigarette from his mouth and moved it right up close to my face. I could feel the heat of it, the choke of the smoke. But I didn't move, didn't call out. I wouldn't let him win, no

matter what he did. *They do not know I can wait*. After a time he let go and left, slamming the metal door to the The Jungle and locking it up tight. We heard him laughing as he walked down the hall.

But I won. Because he didn't come back for Isa. He didn't say a word to Orlando either because next time Orlando came to check on the plants and bring us our food He didn't say a word against me. Instead He told us we'd done good. He said if we keep doing good he'll give us a raise and we'll have paid back our debt before we know it. And we smiled, standing tall and proud that He'd noticed.

Orlando, He soft holds with the same hand that slaps us down hard. That same mouth that spits His anger like fire, can smile and kiss the tops of our heads so gentle we turn weak as babies, and all that fear we've got waves over us, and we feel our fingers hold hard to His shirt and feel our faces pressed against His chest, listening to His heart beating strong over us and breathing in His smell of sweat and smoke and petrol, and feeling sure and safe because He's looking out for us. Because we're Snakeskins. We're His, and He'll take care of us. And when His fingers trace over our tattoos, all we feel is proud.

After, we don't look each other in the eye for a long while, knowing how easy we were played.

On those days, I don't whisper my truth at all.

*