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Opening extract from

She is Not Invisible

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The First Gate

One final time I told myself I wasn't abducting my little brother.

I swear I hadn't even *thought* of it that way until we were on the Underground, and by the time we got to the airport, it was too late for second thoughts, and it was too late to put Mum's credit card back in her purse.

It was also too late *not* to have used that credit card to buy us, Benjamin and me, two tickets to New York, and it was without a shadow of a doubt far too late *not* to have taken out five hundred dollars from

the fancy-pants cashpoint at the airport.

But I *had* done all these things, though I passed at least some of the blame on to Mum for letting me help her with online shopping from time to time, as well as telling me most of her pin numbers.

However many crimes I'd committed already that morning, I'd done it all for a very good reason, and it must be said that they faded into insignificance next to the thought that I was abducting my brother.

Benjamin, to his credit, was taking the whole thing as only a slightly strange seven-year-old can. He stood patiently, holding my hand, his *Watchmen* backpack on his back, silently waiting for me to get myself together. Far from screaming to the world that his big sister was kidnapping him, he was much more concerned with whether Stan needed a ticket.

I held his hand tightly. We were somewhere in the check-in hall at Terminal 3. It was loud and very confusing and we needed to find the right desk. People hurried by on all sides and I'd already lost track of where we'd come in.

'Stan does not need a ticket,' I repeated, for the eleventy-eighth time, and before Benjamin could get

in his bonus question added, 'And no, he does not need a passport either.'

'But we do,' said Benjamin. He sounded a little nervous. If Stan didn't make the flight I knew Benjamin's world would probably end.

'Yes,' I said. 'We do.'

Just then, by coincidence I heard someone walk past talking about a flight to New York, and that started me panicking.

I took a long, slow breath. Benjamin is utterly wonderful and I love him deeply, but he does have his moments, and I needed him. I *absolutely* needed him; if I didn't, I wouldn't have *abducted* him. Not that I had. Not really.

'We do,' I explained, 'because we are real, alive, and human, and Stan, exceptional though he is, is none of those things.'

Benjamin thought about this for a moment.

'He is real,' he said.

'Yes, you're right,' I said. 'Sorry. He is real. But he's also a stuffed toy. He doesn't need a passport.'

'Are you really sure?'

'I'm really sure. How is he, anyway?'

Benjamin held a brief conference with Stan. I

guessed he was probably holding him by the wing, as usual, in the same way I was holding Benjamin's hand. We must have looked pretty silly, the three of us. Me, then pint-sized Benjamin, then a scruffy black raven.

'He's fine, but he misses everyone.'

By everyone Benjamin meant the menagerie of fluffy creatures and plastic superheroes in his bedroom.

'We only left them an hour ago.'

'I know, but that's just how Stan is. He also says he's missing Dad.'

I pulled Benjamin into a walk.

'Listen, Benjamin. You need to find the desk that says Virgin Atlantic Check-In. Maybe Stan can help. Don't ravens have excellent eyesight?'

It was a bit of a gamble but it worked.

'Virgin Atlantic . . . ' Benjamin repeated. 'Come on. It's right here! Stan, I beat you. Even though you have excellent eyesight.'

Benjamin started ahead, quickly, and I hung on to him, tugging his hand to try to get him to remember how we walk. It's something we worked out together a couple of years ago and he likes doing

it, but I guess he was excited about going on a plane again, and his hand slipped out of mine as he trotted away.

'Benjamin!' I called, waiting for him to come back.

It was probably only a second or two but I freaked out and rushed after him, then kicked into a bag or something, and went sprawling full length on the floor.

Even in the noise of the airport I heard everyone around me go quiet as they watched and I knew I'd made a stunning spectacle of myself. I'd landed with my legs over the bag and my arms flung out in front of me.

'Am I invisible?' a man said, angrily.

My sunglasses had shot off my face somewhere and I heard him sigh.

'Why don't you look where you're going? My laptop's in there.'

I got to my feet and managed to kick his bag again.

'For God's sake,' he said.

'I'm sorry,' I muttered. 'Sorry.'

I kept my head down as the man unzipped his bag, grumbling.

'Benjamin?' I said, but he was already back at my side.

'Are you okay, Laureth?' he asked, pushing something into my hands. 'Here's your glasses.'

I slipped them on quickly.

'I'm really sorry,' I said in the direction of the man, and held my hand out for Benjamin to take. 'We'd better get a move on.'

Benjamin took my hand and this time walked with me properly, in our secret way.

'There's a queue,' he said, coming to a stop. 'It's only short.'

The first gate, I said to myself. That's what Dad would have called it. The first person I had to pass; the assistant at the check-in desk.

'It's our go,' whispered Benjamin.

'Next customer, please!'

It was the woman at the desk.

I squeezed Benjamin's hand, and bent down to whisper back.

'Wait here.'

'Why?'

'You know why,' I said, which gave me the task of walking the few paces up to the desk by myself.

I was glad it was summer, and hot outside, because it looks less weird wearing sunglasses when the sun's shining, even indoors, but after falling over some grumpy guy's bag I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself.

'Where are you travelling today?' asked the woman, before I was even at the desk.

I thought about my friend Harry at school. He's amazing. He'd have tried making a couple of clicks to figure out where the desk was, but I guessed it probably wouldn't have worked even for him; there was way too much background noise. Besides, there's always the risk that someone thinks you're pretending to be a dolphin. Not cool. Instead, I swept my hands up slowly but smoothly, and was very pleased that I'd got the distance almost exactly right. I mean, I banged my shins painfully into some kind of metal foot rail in front of the desk, but I did my best to keep a straight face and plonked our passports on the desk.

'Er, New York,' I said. 'JFK. 9:55.'

The woman took our passports.

'Any bags to check in?'

'Er, no,' I said. 'Just hand baggage.'

I turned and showed her my backpack, and waved a hand towards Benjamin, praying he'd stayed where I'd left him.

'Short break, is it? Doing anything nice?'

I told her the truth. What I hoped was the truth.

'Going to see our dad,' I said.

She paused.

'How old are you, Miss Peak?'

'Sixteen.'

'And that's your brother, is it?'

I nodded.

'And he's . . . ?'

'Oh, he's seven. It said on the website he can travel with me if he's five. And he's seven. And I'm sixteen, so I, I mean we, we thought that . . . '

'Oh yes,' said the woman, 'that's fine, I was just asking. But does the bird have a passport?'

'I told you!' cried Benjamin from somewhere behind me.

'It's okay, love,' said the woman. 'I'm joking. He doesn't need a passport.'

'He doesn't need a passport,' I said. Then I felt stupid and shut up.

'Can I have a look at your bird?' the woman said,

over my shoulder.

'I have to stay here,' said Benjamin.

'Why does he have to stay there?' said the woman to me.

Suddenly things were going in the wrong direction.

'You know,' I said, trying a smile. 'Small boys. I mean, he doesn't have to stay there, but well, small boys.'

'Are you okay, Miss Peak?' the woman asked. Her voice was suddenly serious.

'Oh. Yes. You know. Anxious.'

'The flight's not for an hour and a half. You've plenty of time.'

'Oh, no,' I said, feeling more desperate to get away than ever. 'I mean about flying. And you know, there's Benjamin.'

I heard her laugh.

'Twins,' she announced. 'My boys are such a handful, and just his age. And there's two of them, so count yourself lucky. Whenever we go on holiday it's like we've declared war on the poor country.'

I laughed. I thought I sounded really nervous, but the woman didn't seem to notice.

'Have a nice flight,' she said.

She put the passports back on the desk.

'Boarding is 8:55. Should be gate 35. For your own reassurance it would be sensible to watch for any changes.'

So then there was just the small issue of picking the passports back up off the counter. I made a gentle sweep across the desk and with relief found them straight away.

'Thank you,' I said. 'Benjamin. Hold my hand. You know how you get lost so easily.'

Benjamin came over and took my hand.

'I don't!' he protested, and then, since he was being indignant about it, forgot to squeeze my hand to show me which way to go.

I froze, though what I really wanted to do was get him away from the nice woman's desk before he could do any serious damage.

'Which way do we go?' I asked her.

'Departures is upstairs,' she said. 'Escalators are over there.'

'Benjamin,' I said. 'Benjamin? Shall we . . . ?'

But, bless him, by then he was already pulling me away from the desk, in the right direction. He's

remarkably good to me, mostly.

The first gate had been passed.

'Are we going to find Daddy now?' Benjamin asked, as we rode up the escalators to Departures.

'Yes,' I said. 'We're going to find Daddy now.'