

Temperance



Temperance flinched as the black gates clanged shut. She reached forward to touch them; they vibrated beneath her fingertips. A tremor raced up her arm. She drew back, black paint flaking off in her hands. An old night porter limped out of his dilapidated security hut on the other side of the gate. There was a tinny half-tuned radio playing inside the shack. A smell of mint and smoke wafted out around him. He lifted yellow fingers to his lips, taking a final drag of his cigarette before flicking it to the ground.

Feeling someone touch her elbow, Temperance looked up and saw her brother, Crispin, giving her a weak smile.

“We’re locking ourselves in for the night, kids,” the porter said, waving them back away from the gates. He reached for a thick ring of keys fixed to his belt. Twisting them around in the dim light, he flicked through the mismatched collection before selecting the largest one. He cursed as he fumbled to turn the key in the lock. With a final nod towards them, he hobbled back to his small cabin.

“Don’t worry Temperance, Daddy will be out soon. They’ll make me better,” Pratchett whispered from the other side of the gate.

Yellow beams from the streetlight glared down on him, casting harsh shadows across his drawn features. His wide blue eyes flicked to Crispin, he paused as if to say something but with a small shake of his head, he turned instead, and shuffled away towards a waiting nurse.

Slipping her hand free from her brother’s tight grip, Temperance leaned forward again. She wrapped her fingers around the cold metal bars and pressed her face against them.

A heavy set man in white scrubs held Pratchett by the elbow and led him along a row of fractured flagstones, weeds and brown grass sprouted up through the crevasses to coat the path that twisted up a small hill. At the top, a sprawling red-brick building dominated the skyline. It was three-storeys high, with large yawning arched windows caged in spiky bars painted an off-white colour. There was a harsh light coming from some of the windows. A shiver rippled down Temperance’s back when she saw silhouettes of people staring down at them.

The night was silent; a small breeze picked up around them sending dry leaves scratching along the road. In the sky, a tiny sliver of the moon was obscured behind dull grey clouds that cast dark blue shadows on the tree covered landscape surrounding them. With a sigh, her brother folded his arms and shifted his weight; loose pebbles crunched beneath his scuffed shoes.

Temperance kept her eyes pinned on Pratchett and the nurse. When they reached the gigantic oak doors, they swung inward and a warm glow spilled out over the two men. She saw her father wave and then they disappeared inside. As one, the people in the windows turned away, the painfully bright lights flickered off and the building plunged into total darkness, leaving it looming down like a black hulking monster. A chill settled over Temperance, she zipped her coat up to the top, snuggling down to cover her mouth and nose from the cold night air.

“Let’s go Temperance. He’ll be fine. It’s like his second home,” Crispin said. He gave her a wide smile that didn’t quite reach his green eyes then turned to lead the walk home. She heard him mutter, “This place gives me the creeps.”

Temperance scowled up at the sign beside the entrance, *Candlewick Mill Psychiatric Hospital*. She kicked a stone at it; it knocked against the wooden base with a satisfying thud. Shoving her hands in her pockets, she hurried up the road after her brother.

They strolled back to their house, an old converted church, on the outskirts of the town. Temperance struggled to keep up with Crispin's much wider strides, added to that, her shoes were too small, they pinched and rubbed the skin on her toes. When they reached their front door, it was with a massive groan of relief that she kicked off her muddy footwear.

In the hall, a wave of heat rolled over her. The radiators were all on, clunking away throughout the house and a fire roared in the large hearth in the living room. A smell of acrylic paint and burnt potatoes hung in the air, mixing together.

Their home was so different to the grim dark of the Candlewick Mill; most of the lights were on and a warm cheery atmosphere flowed throughout the house. Temperance bit her lip, trying to banish the image of her father locked up in a small shadowy room with thick bars on his windows.

Their mother came down the stairs almost completely hidden behind a large glass vase she was carrying, it overflowed with colourful flowers. She glided past them. Her curvaceous figure was lost under a massive hand-knitted yellow cardigan with golden leaves sown haphazardly across the back. For a moment, Temperance thought she hadn't even noticed they were there, but then she called to them.

"Dinner's in the oven!"

"She cooked?" Crispin shared a look with Temperance, his dark eyebrows rising.

They crept forward towards the kitchen; Temperance clutched the back of Crispin's coat and peeked in. Strewn across the long wooden table were different sized brushes and little jars of coloured water. Their mother was at the far end of the room holding a brush covered in red paint. She had splotches across her cheeks and stains down the front of her cardigan. She waved at them, sending giant dollops of paint onto the floor.

"What do you think?"

Stepping back, she pointed with a flourish at a large canvas on an easel that took up most of the small kitchen. Adora threw back her dark hair and placed her fists on her wide hips. She smiled over at them, waiting for their reactions. Temperance stepped forward and tilted her head; the half-finished image was of the hill and forest behind their house.

"Very nice," Crispin said, shrugging off his jacket and throwing it onto the counter. He stretched out his long arms with a heavy sigh.

"Did your father settle in all right?" Adora asked. "He needed a bit of a holiday!"

Temperance frowned. She dragged out one of the heavy kitchen chairs and perched on the edge. Her brother scowled, his green eyes narrowing on their mother's face.

"He's not spending the night in a hotel, you know."

Adora swung back to her picture; she made several wide red swipes at the canvas, ignoring him. Shaking his head, Crispin stepped over to open the oven; he bent his tall frame at an awkward angle to peer in. A wave of black smoke billowed out over him, he coughed, slamming the door closed and flicking the switch off. He started collecting things from the fridge and glanced over his shoulder at Temperance.

"I'll make us scrambled eggs."

With a nod, she hopped up to grab the plastic stool, positioning it at the counter near the toaster. Crispin stretched over and pushed the loaf of bread closer to her as he stirred the mixture in a pot.

"Be careful not to burn yourself, Temperance."

Biting her lip, she dropped slices of chunky brown bread into the machine from a height and pressed the button down with her index finger. She left them to toast and went to lay out the plates. Pausing, she held the third one and glanced over at Crispin, who nodded back.

Once he finished cooking, he divided out the food evenly, peppering it and putting a stack of toast in the middle of the table. Grabbing the tub of butter, he settled down and picked up his knife.

"Thanks Crispin," she whispered.

Adora had stopped moving, standing with her back to them; she was staring blankly at the wall. Crispin took a large bite of toast then spoke around his mouthful. "It'll get cold if you don't sit down."

Adora swung around; she pressed her brush to her chest and slid into the nearest seat.

"Crispin, you're so much better at cooking than I am. I never know what I do wrong!"

"You burn it," he said.

"True," Adora giggled. Crispin smirked over at Temperance but it faded when their mother spoke again. "Your father usually cooks. It'll be good when he gets back from his break away."

Crispin dropped his knife with a clatter. Adora jerked back away from him. He wiped his mouth with a tea towel and half-turned in his seat to face her. Temperance froze; scrambled egg tumbling off her fork.

"You need to wake up," he said in a low, harsh voice. Adora's mouth opened, her hand started to tremble. "He's had another breakdown, not a break *away*. I gave up my place at university when this happened last time. I'm not doing it again. Every time I try to leave, there's always *something* - well I'm going this time, I don't care anymore. You need to start looking after yourself and stop being so helpless, there are other people relying on you."

He nodded to Temperance. They both turned to look at her, when he saw her watching him, his glare faded and he sighed, dropping the tea towel. "I'm sorry Temperance. You're only eight, so you probably don't understand why I have to do this, but when you're older, you will."

"I understand Crispin. It's all right." She pushed her plate away.

"You haven't finished your food, Temperance," Adora whispered, her eyes were wide and glassy with tears.

"I'm not very hungry anymore."

Temperance twisted and dashed out of the kitchen, her brown hair streaming out behind her. She thundered up the stairs to her bedroom in the eaves. It wasn't a very large room, but it was cosy with a giant woolly rug and sloping ceilings painted in bright colours. Her room was the only place she could find any comfort. She threw open her door and flung herself onto the bed. Two sets of footsteps hurried up after her, they stopped at her open doorway.

"Knock, knock," Crispin lifted his hand, pretending to rap on the door.

"Temperance..." Adora pushed forward and bundled them both into the room. She rushed over to Temperance and wrapped her up into her arms.

"We're so sorry, we didn't mean to fight."

Crispin leaned against the door jam, watching them.

"Does Crispin still have to go?" Temperance's voice was muffled against Adora's rough cardigan. She dreaded the thought of him leaving.

She felt her mother give a great sigh, her whole body lifting with it. Adora looked over at him. Crispin came over and knelt beside the bed so he was eyelevel with Temperance.

"I can't stay here forever," he said. "And there'll never be a good time to go."

"Oh Crispin!" Their mother started weeping; she reached over and kissed him on the head.

"Don't worry. I'll be back soon, for a visit." He stood up and ruffled Temperance's hair.

She gave a sad smile. "See you soon, Crispin."

He patted Adora's arm. She clutched at his fingers with a desperate expression on her face. Crispin nodded, broke free from her grip and strolled out. Adora gave Temperance a quick peck on cheek before scurrying after him.

Temperance could hear more talking and the zipper of a bag closing. When she heard the front door slam shut, she buried her face in her pillow.

It was Adora that woke her the next morning. At some point in the night, Temperance had drifted off to sleep and she'd been covered with a blanket.

Now bright sunshine streamed in through her window. One of the small panes was fitted with stained glass; vivid reds and greens dappled her bedspread. The warm light lit up her mother's face as she crouched over her with a large grin.

"I've a treat for you!" Adora clasped her hands together. "Get dressed, we're going into town."

"But I have school today." Temperance rubbed her eyes and sat up to lean against her headboard with a yawn.

"Not today!" Adora danced out of the room.

In no time, Temperance was bundled out of the house, her scarf knotted at her neck. As Adora locked the front door, Temperance held the large canvas her mother had been working on the night before. It was wrapped up in brown paper and tied with twine.

"Where are we going?" Temperance puffed, leaning back to lift the package up so that it wouldn't drag along the ground. A car beeped at them from the road, a large taxi sign perched on its roof.

Adora leaned over to take one side of the painting. Between them they lugged it over to the boot of the car. Once it was safely stowed away, Temperance slipped into the back seat, while her mother climbed in the front beside the taxi man.

"To Threadneedle Street, please!"

Temperance groaned and pressed her head back into the leather headrest, realising where they were going. The driver looked back at her through the rear-view mirror. Swallowing, she straightened and stared out the side window at the scenery flashing past, trying to avoid his eyes.

Threadneedle Street was the most pristine upmarket area in town, with exclusive shops above and below street level. The white Georgian houses, lined with polished black railings, glistened in the early morning sunshine giving the street an austere air.

When they pulled up outside Adora's favourite tea shop, Temperance's suspicions were confirmed. She narrowed her eyes at her mother, who shot her a beaming smile.

"What? You *love* Alice's Tea Shop, Temperance!"

Adora paid the driver and skipped around to the back of the car to haul out her package. She shuffled it in her arms, struggling down the stone steps to the shop.

"You know I hate it!" Temperance said. She glanced around, stalling for time before she had to climb down into the cloying incense-infused shop.

Her mother had discovered the place a few weeks ago and had introduced all of her friends to it and its owner. Adora loved the man's quirkiness, Temperance hated it. He was a massive flirt, who loved to have all the women who visited him simpering and gushing over his every word.

Hearing the door swinging closed at the end of the steps, Temperance knew her mother was waiting inside for her. With a deep breath, she hurried down.

The smell and heat of numerous scented candles and incense burners hit her when she stepped inside. They lit up the dim shop in a soft glow. A smell of lavender and bergamot mingled in the stagnant air. Individually, they may have been nice, but together they were overwhelming. She coughed and her eyes began to water.

The blond-haired owner stood behind the main counter. He greeted them with a dramatic bow and circled around to usher them in. He was dressed in his usual over-the-top style. Temperance eyed his purple Edwardian suit and red silk waistcoat with hand-embroidered gold dragons. Peering down at his feet, she wondered where you could even buy green suede riding boots. He should have looked absolutely ridiculous, but somehow, he didn't. He exuded charm and confidence.

He clapped his hands, tilting back on his heels and held his arms out wide. "Welcome ladies! What would you like today, a cold drink? A hot tea or -" he waggled his eyebrows, "a sweet treat?"

Adora broke into a fit of girlish giggles, a bright red flush spread across her cheeks. Temperance sighed and wandered away as her mother started to gush over him.

The shop wasn't very large. It was painted a dull tea colour, with busy floral paper on the bottom half of the walls. Several ornate gas lamps and chandeliers hung from the ceiling. While below them, little round tables, decorated with delicate embroidered cloth, were crammed into the space. It felt more like someone's sitting room than a shop. Perhaps that was the draw for Adora and her friends; it was like they'd been invited into his home.

"Oh nothing for us today I'm afraid, I'm just here with a present for you." Adora handed over her painting to him.

The man took it with a bemused smile and reached across to snatch up a pair of scissors from the till. Snipping the twine, he ripped the brown paper down through the middle. The wrapping fluttered to the ground. It crackled as Adora stepped on it, pressing forward to watch his expression.

"It's magnificent!"

He kept one hand on the canvas and tipped it back. Temperance eyed the other paintings already hanging around them. Despite the homely feel of the room, there were quite a number of lewd images with mermaids and sprites wrapped up in risqué poses. She couldn't see how her mother's painting of a hill and a forest would fit in with his chosen theme.

The shop owner squinted and bent forward. "I love how the moonlight reflects off the pale skin."

Temperance stopped, her mouth falling open. She swung around and craned her neck trying to see the painting. He turned it away however, propping it up against the side of the counter with the image facing inward. He slipped back behind the till, clapping his hands together.

"Thank you so much, Mrs Levinthal."

Catching Temperance edging closer, the man grinned over at her. He reached forward to unscrew the lid of a little silver box beside the cash register. He held out the tin to her, it was filled with rainbow coloured hard-boiled sweets, laced with powdered sugar.

"Would you like one, Temperance?"

She glanced up and caught his blue eyes on her, they were sharp, almost hypnotising. For a moment, she found she couldn't look away; it was with great effort she managed to break free. She wrinkled her nose; there was a faint smell of roses from the box.

"No, thank you."

He frowned at her, his hand drifting down.

"Oh! I'd love a sweet, Mr White!" Adora cut in. She plucked out a yellow drop-shaped one and popped it into her mouth.

"Call me Winthrop, please. Mr White makes me feel so old." He winked at Temperance, who just stared back at him. Clearing his throat, he shot a smile at Adora instead; her blush darkened.

"Then you must call me Adora!"

She giggled then gave a sudden loud hiccupping gasp. Trying to cough, she pointed to her throat then clawed at it, her face turning red. Temperance frowned and shook her mother's arm. Adora tried to reach around and hit herself on the back.

"Your sweets are killing her!" Temperance shouted at Winthrop.

"I hate it when this happens! Simultaneous giggling and sucking is just too dangerous, I can tell you!"

Winthrop vaulted over to their side of the counter and started slapping Adora on the back. With a large hacking cough, she managed to spit out the sweet. It tumbled to the ground and disappeared under one of the nearby tables. She took several deep gasping breaths.

“Oh, that was a fright.” Adora pressed a hand to her chest, looking dazed. She gazed up at Winthrop, blinking rapidly. “You saved me.”

“All part of the service, dear lady.” He leaned down and kissed her hand, Adora started twittering over him again, forgetting her scare. Temperance rolled her eyes.

She felt mentally exhausted when they finally escaped the shop half an hour later. It was raining when they emerged, the sun had completely disappeared. With little else to do in town, they retreated back home. Temperance spent the rest of the day reading and staring out the rain-streaked windows. She was dreading going back to school the next morning.

It came around all too quickly.

She soon found herself in her uniform approaching the main gates of her school. It was a long low white building that was larger on the inside than it looked. The grounds around it were extensive and well-maintained, with a car park to the side and a large playing area at the back. A stone wall circled it, its two ends meeting at either side of the entrance gates.

There was a small crowd of adults huddled outside waving goodbye to their children. She ducked her head to try to avoid the people who had started to stare at her. Whispering broke out, spreading through the group. Hurrying past them all, one or two people stepped back for her, others however refused to move and she was forced to squeeze her way by them. Once she was inside the main doors of the school, she rested her back against them and clenched her eyes shut.

It was going to be a long day.

The rest of the week passed in a similar manner. The time seemed to creep along. She started to dread the trips through the school gates. She'd been deliberately late the last two days.

When her alarm-clock started ringing on Friday morning, no one was more grateful than Temperance.

The house was silent when she wandered into the kitchen. Her mother was still in bed. She bit her lip; Adora wasn't doing well now that Crispin was gone too.

With a sniff, she tried to pour out some cereal, it spilled across the counter, but she succeeded in getting most of it into the bowl. She managed a large spoonful of milky cornflakes before she realised the time. She grabbed her sandwich-box and stuffed it into her lunch bag.

Outside, she stretched up on her tip-toes to lock the door then circled around to the side of the house. She stopped when she saw her mother. Adora was almost hidden in the middle of the long wet grass at the back of the garden. Still in her blue dressing gown, she was leaning in between two trees at the edge of the forest.

Even though she was far away, Temperance could see Adora was throwing slices of bread to a large dog; possibly one of the numerous wild ones that lived in the woods. Crispin had warned them never to go near the animals; they were dangerous and had all sorts of diseases.

Hefting up her schoolbag, Temperance stepped forward to pull her mother away. The dog lifted its head, sniffing the air. It froze, before darting back into the forest. Adora watched it go, then with slumped shoulders, wandered into the house.

Temperance waited until she heard the backdoor close. She took deep gulps of cold air. The driveway stretched out in front of her. It ended in a wide opening that revealed a tree-lined country back road. The leaves rustled in the breeze, making a swishing sound that reminded her of the ocean.

Squeezing the strap of her bag, she wondered what it would be like if she could walk away and not come back, like Crispin had. Her mind raced with possibilities, each more frightening and liberating than the last. She curled her toes, scraping them against the inner lining of her shoes. One toe poked out through a hole in her sock. She glanced up at her parents' bedroom window. It was little more than an arched sliver in the chipped façade of the old church.

With a small start, she realised Adora was waving down at her. Temperance lifted her hand, her attention fixed on her mother's eyes; they were puffy and red. She felt betrayed by her brother. She didn't know how to help her parents, how to make things better.

Gritting her teeth, she hurried out of the driveway and on to school. Her lunch bag smacked against her thigh as she rushed down the narrow paths that had been cut alongside the hedgerows lining the road. Large overgrown brambles jutted out from every direction; she was forced to duck and weave through them. At the end of the lane that led to her school, there was a well-maintained quiet street with overhanging trees and large cottages.

Slowing, she stared over at the gates and scuffed her shoe along the pavement. She wished she didn't have to push through the crowd today.

"Come on, dearie!"

The lollipop lady in her puffy yellow jacket waved over at her from the school crossing. The woman shoved her stop sign out across the road. The few cars that made up the morning traffic slammed on their brakes. Amidst their blaring horns, the school's shrill bell rang loud on the crisp air. Nodding her thanks, Temperance darted across the painted black and white stripes.

At the school entrance, chattering and squealing children sprinted around their parents, while other students stood still as their shirts were buttoned up, and their ties knotted. Temperance reached up to touch hers, her thumb brushing over the folds. Her father had tied it once and she had tried to keep the knot in place, just loosening it a little day by day to remove it. It was starting to come undone.

She drew closer to the crowd and a little girl with pigtails bumped into her. Temperance put out a hand to stop her from falling, but her mother jerked the girl back.

"Stay away from her, Mildred!" She scrunched up her nose, clutching at her faux leopard-print jacket. Temperance tightened her grip over the straps of her bag. She twisted her fingers through the fabric, not knowing what to say.

"Mummy says your family is sick!" one little boy cried, big tears rolling down his cheeks. He shook his hands out, screaming, "I don't want to get sick!"

His mother shushed him and steered him into the school. Temperance's cheeks reddened as several other children backed away with horrified gasps.

Some adults turned to glare at the woman in the leopard-print jacket. Temperance tried to swallow back her tears as she brushed past them, sniffing into the cuff of her sleeve. When she got into the school, one of the boys rushed by her and his shoulder slammed into her back. She slapped off the cold laminate floor. A piercing jolt of pain shot up her arm and she dropped her bag. It skidded across the ground, bouncing off the opposite wall.

"Stay away from me, Levinthal!" The tall boy leapt away from her, his runners squeaking on the polished floor. "I don't want to catch whatever you have!" He swung around to the other students. "If anyone hangs around with her, they'll get what she's got!"

Temperance cupped her fingers over her eyes, listening to them all rushing away to class. Her vision blurred and she couldn't hold back her tears. They rolled hot and fast down her cheeks, into her hands. Her nose blocked up, leaving her hiccupping gulps of air through her mouth.

She heard something being dragged across the floor. It bumped against her thigh; her lunch bag. She dropped her hands and looked up. A small blonde-haired girl was staring down at her; her big blue eyes darted down the empty corridor. She hopped from side-to-side and gave a jerky wave. She reminded Temperance of an excited puppy.

"Here!" She pulled a handkerchief out of her pocket and tossed it into Temperance's lap. "It's clean!"

She fisted her hands, tensing her body as if trying to hold herself in place. She watched Temperance lift the cloth to her eyes.

"Thank you."

The girl smiled. "That's okay. I better go!"

She dashed off down the deserted corridor. When Temperance had dried the last of her tears, she got to her feet and shuffled to class.

"Nice of you to join us at last, Temperance," her teacher said with a frown.

“I’m sorry, Mrs Graves.”

The woman’s thin lips were drawn tight, almost disappearing into her doughy face. Her shrewd eyes followed Temperance until she sat down at her desk. Mrs Graves made a clucking noise in the back of her throat, brushing the chalk dust off her tight green shirt. The movement made the fabric strain over her arms, the grey buttons struggling to hold her bulging frame in place. Before anything could come undone, she turned back to the blackboard.

As the class wore on, Temperance settled in and almost forgot what had happened. When the lunch bell sounded, the other children broke off into groups around the room to eat, leaving Temperance by herself. She tugged out her lunchbox. Her stomach grumbled. She clicked open the plastic lid and stared down into the empty container.

Her eyes widened as she remembered the dog her mother had been feeding. Biting her lip, her fingers fumbled to press the lid closed again. The teacher glanced down at her from her desk at the top of the room.

“Are you alright, Temperance?” Mrs Graves asked as she poured out a cup of tea from a thermo flask.

Temperance glared down at her chipped wooden desk. “I’m fine, thank you.”

“Moonbeam!”

The classroom door flew open and bounced against the wall. Everyone glanced over and then the giggling started. It rippled around the room. Temperance sucked in a sharp breath and slid down further in her seat. Adora stood there wearing a flowing rainbow patterned fleece jumpsuit and large straw sunhat. She held up a blue plastic bag.

“You forgot your lunch!”

She smiled, her hazel eyes sparkling. She swept into the room, waving to Mrs Graves, who spluttered tea over her clothes. Adora dropped the bag down in front of Temperance, giving her a wet kiss on the cheek and a brief hug, before humming her way out again.

Everyone around Temperance leaned up on their desks, straining to watch as she pulled out her lunch. It consisted of a packet of thin crackers and several slices of old mouldy cheese that smelt like eggs, wrapped in cling-film. The girl behind her made a gagging noise.

Temperance ripped the wrapping off the dry crackers and rested her head on her desk, nibbling them. Mrs Graves pushed away from her table and stepped over to Temperance, handing her half a sandwich.

When the bell rang again, everyone put on their coats and filed out into the courtyard. Temperance hung back until the last person left, hoping to hide in the classroom and not face a half an hour of walking around the yard alone.

“Come on Temperance.” Mrs Graves nudged her gently out the door. “You aren’t allowed to stay in here by yourself.”

The yard was a wide-open space at the back of the school, enclosed by high stonewalls lined with leafy trees. A strip of green grass bordered two basketball courts in the centre. Children screamed and raced from one end to another using them to play games that had no rules. A group of six-year-olds barrelled past Temperance as she stepped out onto the cracked tarmac.

She kept her head held high and tried to look like she had somewhere to go. She wove away down to one of the quiet corners of the yard, hidden under the shadow of the trees. She slowed when she saw there were already people there.

Three boys were crouched down in a circle, staring at the ground. Their blue shirts were creased, half tugged out from their trousers, while their jumpers, despite the chilly weather, were discarded in a heap beside them; a deflated football on top. One of the boys had a tie wrapped across his forehead like a bandana. Behind them, hopping around, was a blonde-haired girl. Temperance recognised her from earlier.

The girl huddled closer to the group as everyone else paused.

Temperance clapped her hand over her mouth; a flash of blue light exploded in the small space in front of them. The girl made a loud gasping whoop of excitement then jumped back as the boys laughed.

Temperance shuffled her feet, leaning to the side to try and get a better look. She rubbed her eyes, pressing her fingers into the corners and blinking to clear her vision. The boys crowded in closer together again. They didn't notice her gaping at them; their attention fixed on whatever was happening on the grass. Temperance swallowed over the lump in her throat.

It was happening again. She was seeing things that weren't there, just like her father. She shoved her hands into her pockets, grappling for her pillbox. Even though she took her medication every day, she still sometimes saw things that couldn't be real. She squeezed her eyes shut and turned to leave.

"Alexander!" the boy with the bandana shrieked. "Do it again!"

Temperance's legs locked, she twisted back around.

"Quiet, Rob! Someone might hear you!" Alexander snapped, reaching out and jerking on the end of the tie, toppling the other boy onto the grass. The others laughed as he struggled to get up again.

Alexander reached into the centre of the circle, picking up a dark green leaf. "Watch this!"

Temperance drew closer. He folded it into a tiny airplane and balanced the small shape on his knee. Looking up at the blonde girl, he smiled. Her cheeks flushed as she stared at him with wide eyes.

"Come here!" He crooked a finger at her. The other boys snorted.

"Yes!" She buzzed with excitement.

He gestured at her to open her hands then rested the plane in her cupped palm. He touched the edge of the leaf. A shock of blue light fizzled around it. It lifted off the girl's hand and hovered in the air. She screamed in delight.

Temperance gasped. Alexander spun around and saw her staring at them. He leapt to his feet and smacked the plane down. It broke apart, the remains fluttering down onto the grass. Everyone else turned to glare at Temperance.

She shuffled on her feet, staring at Alexander. His nose was scrunched up, making his flushed cheeks stand out on his thin face.

"What are you looking at freak?" he snarled. His narrowed eyes scanned the yard, looking for anyone else watching them.

"N-n-nothing!" Temperance stammered feeling hemmed in as his friends joined him. They were all much taller than her. She peered around Alexander. "I was only looking..."

"Looking?" He drew back with a frown; he thrust his hands in his pockets. "Looking at what?" There was a long drawn out pause.

"The blue light and the leaf airplane," Temperance mumbled, pulling on the sleeves of her jacket.

Alexander lunged forward. He shoved her and she slipped on a patch of mud. Her arms flailed at her sides and she tumbled back.

"What blue light and leaf?" he laughed, knocking his elbow off the boy with the bandana. "She's as batty as her father!"

The boys chuckled down at her, their lips drawn back in wide gaping laughs. They jostled with each other as they sprinted away, leaving Temperance staring up at the sky, her fingers curling into the grass. The blonde girl's face popped up into view. She bit her lip and gave Temperance an apologetic shrug before scooting off after the boys.

Tears of frustration welled up in Temperance's eyes but she blinked them back, refusing to let them out. She gave the ground beneath her an angry thump, wishing she hadn't said anything. She really had been imagining things again.

Struggling to her feet, she brushed off her uniform and marched back to the classroom. She slipped unnoticed into her seat, taking out her pens with shaking hands as Mrs Graves walked in.

Squirming, she tried her best to focus on her teacher scribbling on the blackboard. It wasn't long, however, before Temperance felt her eyelids grow heavy. Her head bobbed on her shoulders.

The colours bled out of the world around her, turning grey. She was suddenly behind the gates of the Candlewick Mill, being led away as Crispin glared in at her from the other side. She buckled backwards against the orderly's hold, planting her feet on the ground. She went rigid. Ahead of her the large front doors started to creak open.

She screamed when she felt hands on her shoulders, jerking her awake. Mrs Graves was glaring down at her.

"Am I boring you, Temperance?"

The other children started giggling and whispering around her. Someone tossed a paper ball at her head, which earned an angry reprimand from the teacher.

"No, Mrs Graves," Temperance answered. A shiver ran through her body, making her hair stand on end; the images from her nightmare slowly receding.

The bell rang, marking the end of the day. Everyone started packing away their books, the noise drowning out Mrs Graves who tried to remind them about their homework. Temperance hurried to squeeze her way out, racing down the musty smelling corridor, over the cheap brown carpet and through the doors into the cold evening air. She turned the corner heading for the gate and pulled up short behind a huddle of parents blocking her way. Their backs were to her.

"Did you see him, Jane?" A black-haired woman said. Her red lips smacked together over the end of a cigarette, she took a few short puffs before stubbing it out under her runner. Smoke escaped from her wide nostrils. "He's grinning like a loon. It's downright creepy."

"Typical of him, Hattie."

Temperance narrowed her eyes on the woman's leopard-print jacket. Jane folded her arms tight over her chest, leaning in towards the group. Her cheeks were flushed, her beady eyes glittering in a face that was altogether too big.

"You know, my husband works at the Candlewick Mill. *He* said he's getting worse."

Temperance felt her whole body freeze; an icy shudder crept down her back. Several students bumped into her, forcing her forward as they flooded out of the school. The adults turned to see her staring up at them.

"Poor dear," Jane said, peering down.

Temperance balled her hands into fists, her nails digging into her palms. She wanted to hit something, or someone. Instead, she jabbed a finger at the woman. "That's illegal!"

Jane gripped her chest, taking a step back. "I beg your pardon?"

Beside her, Hattie's face drained of colour. She reached out to clutch at her friend's arm, steadying them both.

"Medical issues are private," Temperance shot at her, her voice shaking with the tears she was fighting to hold back. "We could sue you!"

Temperance jostled her way through them. Her lunch bag got stuck in between two men. She hauled on it until it popped free and sent her reeling a few feet ahead. She brushed herself off and strode with her head held high towards the school gates. With a gasp, she stopped when she saw who was waiting there.

Beyond the low wall, her father was grinning at her. He was wearing a woollen jumper with large patches of floral quilt fabric sown over the threadbare holes. His blue eyes were full of excitement as he watched her. Giving a small cry, Temperance hurried forward. Her schoolbag bobbed from side-to-side as her little legs pumped to propel her over to him.

She smacked into his long legs. He put his hands on her shoulders to steady her, drawing her attention to his pale face. Despite the happy expression, there were dark bags under his eyes. His blond hair was dishevelled; Temperance noticed a few stray grey hairs that caught the light.

A plastic bag bumped into her when he struggled to pull her up into his arms. Taking a deep wheezing gasp, her father set her back down with an apologetic sigh.

“Not quite up to it yet, Temperance!” The corner of his blue eyes crinkled, but he looked a little disappointed.

“What’s in the bag?”

He swung it back and forth. “This? Oh, well -!”

He looked over her head at the adults that were clustering around the growing mass of students, struggling to pick out their own children. He reached out his hand and she took it without thinking.

With a happy smile on his face, he walked her over to the parents again. Temperance’s hand went slack in his. He stopped in front of Hattie and Jane. The women pulled up short when they saw them.

“Ah, Pratchett,” Jane said, with a sweet smile. She shared a quick look with Hattie. “I hope you are better.”

“Oh yes!” He brushed a hand sheepishly through his hair. The plastic bag he had dangled in front of him and knocked off his chest. He held it out to Jane, who lurched back away from it. Pratchett thrust it at her again. “These are the books you ordered. I’m so sorry I had to close the bookshop... while I was away. But I said I’d better get this to you; they’re for your daughter, Mildred, aren’t they?”

Jane’s cheeks went bright pink. Reaching out she paused, then took the bag with a whispered ‘thank you’. Pratchett glanced over at Hattie.

“I hope your mother is doing better, Hattie,” he said with a genuine note of concern.

Hattie’s eyes slid away from his face and dropped to her feet.

“Thank you, yes, she is much better,” she mumbled.

“It’s not easy being sick,” Pratchett said, with a sympathetic nod. “Well! We best be off.” He leaned in with a conspiratorial wink. “We’re having chocolate cake today - a surprise for the little one!”

He squeezed Temperance’s hand and led her away. She glanced over her shoulder, her hazel eyes boring in Jane and Hattie and the rest of their group. Her blood was boiling as they crowded back in to gossip.

Temperance glared up at her father, her nose scrunching as tears of frustration started streaming down her face. She swiped them away with the corner of her jacket. When they reached the end of the lane, she jerked back against him, pulling her hand out of his.

He turned towards her with a frown on his face.

“Y-you’re a fool!” Temperance sobbed, the tears continuing to roll down her cheeks. She sniffled wetly, her nose stuffing up.

Her father fidgeted, pulling his hands up to his chest and clutching them. He stopped in front of her and knelt down.

“What’s the matter, Temperance?”

He reached out and brushed the tears out of her eyes with the rough pad of his thumb. His fingers shook.

“They said mean things about you all week!” she said. “They *always* do! How can you be so nice to them?”

With a sigh, her father rested his hand on her shoulder and drew her into a tight hug. Her short arms struggled to reach around his back. She pressed her face into his chest, leaving tears and snot on his jumper when he pulled her back.

He tapped a finger to her nose. “I know all about people like them, Temperance. But, it’s not what they think of you that matters, it’s what you think of yourself. If I’d said something mean to them, I wouldn’t like myself very much.” He tilted his head. “Do you know what Daddy means?”

Temperance reached into her pocket for her borrowed handkerchief and blew her nose. A small smile lifted the corners of her lips. She stared up into his twinkling blue eyes and nodded.

“Yes.”

He smiled at her with a toothy grin. He leaned back, patting his pockets, "I almost forgot!" He dug around for a minute then tugged out two lollipops, handing one to Temperance. "I stole them off the nurses," he said smugly. He reached out his hand again; she took it and squeezed it tight. "It's my favourite flavour," her father chuckled, "red!"

End