

IN THE TREES

Pauline Fisk is the much-loved author of eight children's novels, including *Flying for Frankie*, *The Mrs Marridge Project*, *Sabrina Fludde* and *Midnight Blue* which won the Smarties Prize and was shortlisted for the Whitbread Children's Book of the Year Award. Pauline has five children and lives in Shropshire.

Praise for *Flying for Frankie*:

'Like almost everything she writes, it is a gem . . . It is moving and heartwarming without being at all sentimental.' *Observer*

Praise for *The Mrs Marridge Project*:

'Ingenious.' *Observer*

Praise for *Sabrina Fludde*:

'A multi-layered novel packed with big writing and even bigger ideas.' *Guardian*

Praise for *Midnight Blue*, winner of the Smarties Prize:

'Deeply satisfying . . . one of the year's best imaginative novels.' *Sunday Times*

Praise for *Tyger Pool*:

'A brilliant novel that leaves its readers emotionally drained.' *Daily Telegraph*

Praise for *The Candle House*:

'This is a marvel.' *Observer*

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For Idris

'Sub Umbra Floreat'

('Under the Shade, I Flourish')

National Motto of Belize

PART ONE
SOUTH LONDON

1

KID'S CARDBOARD BOX

Ever since Nadine's text message, Kid had been in a hurry to get home. *Guess what, it said. It's here. Don't know where from, but it's on the doormat with your name on it! Kid Cato it says, and some other stuff which I can't read.*

Business was dead that night, which meant that Kid was able to take off the specials grill earlier than usual, transfer the quarter-pounders to the main grill and embark on what everybody in Jet's Burger Joint knew as 'the close' – that mysterious process by which machines were shut down and the establishment prepared for the following day.

If he could get through it all, Kid reckoned, then perhaps he'd be able to slip off even before the last customer was through the door. Maybe the floor would still need swabbing and the till cashing up, but those final things could be left to someone else.

Kid checked his mobile phone again. It was almost as if he couldn't quite believe what Nadine's message said. Jet gave him his special 'no phones at work' look, but he didn't care. He unclipped the Teflon clams, wiped them on both sides, pulled on a pair of rubber gloves and started attacking the grill with squeegee, scraper and a stack of cloths.

Under normal circumstances, Kid liked cleaning grills. It was the one job that everybody else hated, but he liked the uniformity of it. Liked the fact that, once you'd got the hang of it, you didn't need to think. But then Kid liked hard work. On a good night, he'd have the floor swept and the cashing-up done before the last customer disappeared and the sign went up on the door. The knack was not to get dragged into helping with any last-minute cooking, otherwise everything would have to start all over again.

But not tonight, Kid thought, dragging the scraper back and forth until the grill was shining. Please God, not tonight. He finished off the second grill and peeled off his gloves.

'That's it, boys and girls,' said Jet. 'Shut the door and pull down the blinds. No one else comes in. We're off.'

Kid didn't need to be told twice. He headed for the door. 'Hey, you slacker – have you put the buns out by the toasters?' Jet called after him.

'Yes,' Kid called back.

'Have the pots all been returned to their stations?'

'Yes.'

'Are you bloody perfect?' Jet called. 'Yes, *of course* you are! Get out of here – I don't want to see your ugly face again until tomorrow night. Six on the dot, or else you're fired!'

Kid knew Jet would never fire him. Who else was going to do what he did for the pittance he was paid? Sometimes it really got to him how mean Jet was and he'd go home grumbling. But tonight he headed off into the south London night with better things on his mind.

The streets were still busy, even though it was late. Horns honked as he ducked and dived his way across roads, and late-night revellers swore as he pushed past them on the pavement. Leaving the main roads behind, he ducked into a network of back streets and alleys, taking a short cut up and down a couple of fire escapes and ending up at the top-floor flat where he was living these days with Nadine, his mother's ex-boyfriend's half-sister.

Usually when Kid came in, the flat would be in darkness and Nadine would be out somewhere partying. Tonight, however, there was a light under her door, which Kid knew meant she had a visitor and wasn't to be disturbed. Not that Kid would want to

disturb her. Nadine always had a short fuse, particularly when she'd been out drinking. Besides, Kid had better things to do.

He looked around. The box he'd come rushing home to open wasn't anywhere obvious. He checked the hall. Checked the kitchen. Checked the sitting room, under the table and behind the sofa where his bedding was kept. Ever since the message had come down the long, convoluted line of his mother's friends and acquaintances that, when she'd died, she'd left behind a box with his name on it, Kid had been trying to retrieve it. He'd gone round every last person he could think of, trying to find out where it was, but it had got him nowhere – until tonight.

Kid found the box at last – in the bath. One flap had been torn, as if somebody like Nadine had tried to see inside. The other had his name on it – the one he never used, printed in full beneath the name he was known by. Marcus Aurelius Cato. His real name.

Kid stood for ages, staring down at the box. All evening he'd been imagining what might be inside, but now just having it in front of him felt like enough. Opening it wasn't necessary. In fact, opening it was only going to make his mother seem more dead than she already was, because then everything about her would be in the past.

But then everything about her already *was* in the past, Kid told himself, and it had been for a long time. Kid closed his eyes, trying to track back in his memory past the sometimes frightening, sometimes endearing, strange, batty, unpredictable person his mother had become to the person she'd been when he was small. His memories were a warren of hidden byways and things he'd rather forget, but the ones he wanted to remember were all lost.

'This is stupid,' Kid said at last. 'Just get on with it.'

He climbed into the bath and started ripping open the box. On top, wrapped in tissue paper as if it was fine porcelain, he found an old tin kettle which had a hole in the bottom and wasn't even the plug-in sort. He put it on one side and lifted out another tissue-paper offering which turned out to be a squashed hat. He bashed it into shape. It was made of red, yellow and emerald-green feathers and resembled a flower-pot.

Kid hung it over the taps, unable to imagine his mother wearing any sort of hat, let alone this one. Then he dived back into the box and pulled out a pair of baby dungarees worn through at the knees, a steam iron burned out at the plug and an old toaster which smelt like the grills at work when they hadn't been cleaned.

Kid shook the crumbs out into the toilet, then

stuck it on the floor underneath the basin. The cardboard box was half empty by now, but so far he'd found nothing to get excited about. What he'd been hoping for were personal things – old photographs, letters, maybe even diaries which might unlock the mystery of who his mother really was and what had made her the person she became. He dived down again, pulling out a bag of tangled Christmas fairy-lights, a plastic angel and a box of brightly coloured glass baubles that he vaguely recognised from Christmases long ago when the two of them had had a proper home.

Kid threw the whole lot on the floor, then brought up a pair of ladies pyjamas and a thin cotton dressing-gown, a towel, some slippers, a crumpled dress which he recognised, a couple of blank postcards from exotic places and a wallet which had no money in it, but did at least contain a photograph of him.

Kid pocketed the wallet, but threw aside the rest. Then he dug down into the box one final time, coming up with his birth certificate and two envelopes, on one of which had been written the word MOTHER – which Kid guessed meant the grandmother he'd never met – and the other, on which was written the word KID.

That had been the only name Kid's mother had

ever used for him. His other, longer name had always been unspoken. It had been *Kid, come here*, or *You there, Kid*, or *Hey, Kid*, or, as now, just plain *Kid* on its own.

Kid climbed out of the bath. The box was empty now, but this was what he'd been looking for. Back in the sitting room he made up the sofa bed and climbed into it, then sat staring at the envelope as if afraid of opening it. Finally he slit it open and shook out a collection of pages covered in his mother's handwriting, which went in every direction, ignoring all the lines. Kid spread out the pages on the bed-cover, and sat before them. Every inch of paper was covered. There was scarcely any space between the lines. It was as if Kid's mother had been trying to cram in everything she wanted to say before running out of pen or paper or time, but the result was that it was all completely unintelligible.

All the same, Kid read it through, trying to make sense of it. But his mother had never made much sense and in this, her last letter, nothing had changed there. Only at the bottom of the last page was anything legible, Kid's mother abandoning her scrawl to print her words carefully.

'It's not very pretty,' she'd written. 'But there you are. He was a devil, that man. A charmer, but a devil too. I never wanted you to grow up like him. Never

even wanted you to know he existed, let alone was your father and me his wife. God help me. What was I ever thinking of? I'm sorry Kid.'

A wife. Kid's mother had once been somebody's wife. Kid shook out the envelope again, hoping for another page to give him an explanation. There was no other page, but a photograph fell out of a black man with a flower in his button-hole, and a white woman who was a dead ringer for the mother Kid had been trying to remember earlier. The man was dressed in a pin-striped suit. The woman wore the feathered hat. It really didn't suit her but she wore it with pride. She wasn't dressed in white, but she too had a flower in her lapel and it was obviously her wedding day.

Kid stared at the photograph, taking in the man's features, realising with a shock that he looked just like an older version of himself. He'd always known he must have a father somewhere, but it had never crossed his mind that his mother had married him and that Cato might be his father's name as well as his.

Kid picked up the hat that, even all these years later, his mother had kept. Then he turned to his birth certificate, registered in the District of Wandsworth, and read it line by line. His mother's middle name was Edith, which Kid had never

known, and his father's name was Marcus Aurelius Cato, just like his own. His occupation was recorded as 'businessman', which came as a surprise to Kid because he couldn't imagine someone as other-worldly as his mother marrying some fancy, big-deal businessman.

But it was Kid's father's place of residence that came as the bigger surprise. Belize City, said the certificate. And where the hell was that? Kid knew where Brixton was, and Battersea, Brockwell Park and Balham. But up until that moment he'd never heard of Belize.