



FIRE

The grubs, when mixed with the cocoa beans and pounded with a clean stick, turned into a paste which, if you squinted and were of an optimistic temperament, looked like flour and water.

'Now we just make a fire and cook them,' said Fred.

'Just,' said Con.

'We need a flint,' said Fred.

'We need kindling,' said Lila.

'And matches,' said Con.

'I'll do the kindling,' said Fred. Most of the wood surrounding them had dried since the rain the night before. He held the hem of his cricket jumper in

his teeth and made a hammock for the wood. The night in the jungle had not improved the taste of the wool.

He came back to the clearing and tipped the wood into a pile, a few paces away from the den.

"There were flints in there," said Lila. "We could rub away the moss and use them to make a spark. Flints don't go off."

'Flints aren't enough by themselves,' said Fred. 'I've tried. You need a bit of steel.'

Lila ducked into the den to fetch the flint. Con was staring at Fred's watch. 'What's that made of?'

Fred stared down at the watch, covering it protectively with his hand. 'Glass.'

'And?'

'And steel,' he said. 'My father gave it to me, when I went to boarding school.'

'But it's broken,' said Con.

'I know that,' he said.

'So,' said Con, 'if it's broken, it's not really a watch any more, is it? But what it is, is a lump of steel.'

Fred jerked his hand back. His father never bought his birthday gifts; he left it to his secretary to take Fred to Harrods and pick out something sensible. This was the only gift Fred could remember his father choosing himself: He had had it engraved with Fred's initials.

Lila nodded. 'It might be the only way,' she said; her voice had sympathy in it, but grit too.

'Fine!' said Fred. He had an unaccountable, absurd need to cry. 'Fine! We'll use it.'

'Can I have first try?' asked Con.

'It's *my* watch!'

'I know. But I've never lit a fire before,' she said, 'not even the ones in the fireplaces at home.'

'Not even on Bonfire Night?' Fred asked.

'Not allowed.' There was longing and hunger in her eyes. She looked away from him, turning the flint

over and over in her hand as if it was a jewel. But there was something written in her face, Fred thought, something in a code he couldn't begin to read.

'Here.' Slowly, he undid the strap. He held the watch in his fist, surreptitiously tracing the letters on the back with his thumb. Con watched in silence. He put it in her palm. 'I get second go.'

Lila heaped shredded leaves and dried grass in a pile. 'You do it over that,' she said, 'so the spark has something to catch.'

Con struck the back of the watch against the stone. Fred winced. She overshot and dug the flint into her own skin. She said nothing and tried again. She bit down on her tongue, concentrating, her eyebrows furrowed so deeply they nudged against her eyelashes, striking and striking until her fingers were raw.

Suddenly flint and steel let off a tiny spark. Con was so stunned she fumbled the flint.

'Again!' shrieked Max. 'Again, again!'

The spark came again, a brief flare into the world that vanished as it came.

'It needs to be lower over the kindling,' said Lila.

Con struck again, and again; the spark caught against a blade of grass, which caught against another. Fred's heart leapt and he dropped to his stomach and blew on the scrap of fire, terrified he would blow it right out. The flame faltered.

'No! No, no, don't die!' said Con.

Lila added a handful of dry moss. Fred blew again.

The fire seemed to breathe in, and then exhaled a cough of flames. Max whooped. Lila held out a sheaf of twigs. The fire caught at them, made five burning fingers, ate them whole. It belched upwards.

'More!' said Max. He was dancing in a tight circle, slapping at his ribs. 'Feed it more!'

Fred added a handful of bone-dry leaves, and then another and another. The fire made a noise like an idea being born, a crackle that sounded like hope, and sent up a column of flames.

They all rocked back on their ankles, grinning at each other.

'We could sleep in shifts,' said Con, 'to make sure

it doesn't go out.' She looked at the fire with proprietorial pride. 'We made that. By ourselves!'

Fred put the watch quietly in his pocket. It was scratched now and deeply dented, but inside his pocket he clutched it so tightly it dug a circular bruise into his palm.

'It's the most beautiful fire I've ever seen,' said Lila.

'Yes,' said Con. 'By far.'

Max bit lightly at Lila's arm. 'Can we eat now? I'm so hungry I might die.'

Fred scrawled in the dust with his nails until he found a flat stone, and balanced it, wobbling dangerously, on four green-wood sticks over the centre of the flames. Lila divided the grub paste into four balls and spread them on the stone.

Eventually the pancakes began to bubble. Lila poked them. 'They're getting harder,' she said.

'And they smell like a shoe,' said Con. 'That probably means they're done.'

One of the trees near the den had 'vast fleshy leaves, as big as serving dishes. Fred pulled four of

them down and dropped a grub pancake on to each one; they were hot to the touch, and gooey.

'They're probably best while they're so hot you can't taste them,' said Fred. He bit off half the pancake, trying not to chew much. It tasted disconcertingly animal. It was, he thought, like eating porridge mixed with fingernail-grime, but it was better – wildly, infinitely better – than nothing.

Con nibbled the corner of hers. She grimaced, but she didn't spit it out. 'To be honest, it's not that much worse than school dinners,' she said. And she smiled half a smile.

Max kept his food scrunched in his fist, guarding it from the others. 'I don't like sharing,' he said. His pancake oozed out from between his fingers.

The clearing was growing darker every minute. Con stood. 'I'm going to go and use the ...' she hesitated, and coloured, '... the lavatory – so don't come over there. Or look round. Or I'll punch you.' She paused. 'Please.'

'We could decide on a place,' said Fred. 'Quite far

off. And then we could mark a path – and nobody would get lost.'

They got up, all four of them standing close together in the gathering dark, and began looking for a suitably large tree far enough from their fire, but not far enough away to risk getting lost.

'This one's big,' said Fred.

'And this one,' said Con. The trees were immense, stretching at least as high as a church.

'We could make that one the boys' toilet, and this one the girls,' said Con.

Lila's smile was sudden, and enormous; it showed that one of her teeth was wonky and she had a dimple in her cheek. 'We could call it the lavo-tree.'

It wasn't terribly funny, but once Fred started laughing he couldn't stop. Con choked and had to bite her fist. Max's laughter sent a ribbon of snot flying out across the glade. They laughed loudly enough to scare the birds, and to make the distant monkeys roar angrily from their night perches in the trees.