



## MAIDEN VOYAGE

Lila was waiting outside the den. Her arms were wrapped around her knees, and she was glaring at him furiously. 'You! I thought you were dead!'

'I was down by the river.'

'Scratch a message in the dirt next time!'

'Yes, of course. Sorry.' But Fred could barely concentrate on what she was saying. 'The raft is ready! Will you come and try it out?'

'Max has to brush his teeth first. His breath is disgusting. It's scaring the dragonflies.'

Lila picked four twigs and shredded the tops with her fingernails until they looked like paintbrushes.

'Here.' Lila handed one to Fred. 'If our teeth drop out it will just make everything worse.'

It did feel better, Fred had to admit, to sweep some of the fuzz from his teeth. But he was bursting with impatience. He gave three scrubs and dropped the brush.

'Come on!' he said, as soon as Con had spat, decorously, into the stagnant pool.

Fred led them at a run down to the river. They stood, panting, while he showed them where the loops had been made double-thick, and how he had added extra branches all the way around the outside.

'What do you want us to do?' said Con, 'clap?'

Fred did, secretly, just a little, but he grinned. 'No, I want you to get on it.'

He edged the raft on to the bank. It slid down the mud, landed on the water with a splash, tipped up on its right side – Fred drew in his breath – and righted itself. It swayed on the water, steady as a battleship; it was more beautiful, Fred thought, than any millionaire's yacht. He kept a firm hold of the liana tied to the right-hand corner.

'It floats!' said Max.

'Of course it floats,' said Con. 'It's wood.'

Fred waded into the water, crossed his fingers, and hauled himself up. The raft dipped and spun under his weight as he climbed on; then steadied, rocking on the current. He paddled it closer to the bank.

'Climb on!' he said.

'Max, wait –' said Lila.

Before anyone could stop him Max had tipped himself head first down the bank into the river. He came up spitting mud. 'Pull me up!' he said.

Fred hefted him by his armpits. Con and Lila followed more slowly, studying the water for piranha. Fred offered a hand to each. Lila took it; Con did not. The raft shook as they arranged themselves but soon they were sitting, crouched on the wood and vines, bobbing high on the water.

'It works!' said Max.

'For now,' said Con ominously.

'Let's go down river!' said Fred.

'Why?' demanded Con. 'We know it floats with us on it. That's what you wanted.'

'We needn't go far. Just to test it?'

Here, under the cover of the trees, the current was slow, but out in the middle of the river, it spat and bubbled with speed. Fred could feel his skin twitching to send the raft down those waters.

'Let's try,' said Lila. Her knuckles were pale where she was gripping the edges of the raft, but her eyes were hungry with curiosity. 'If we're going to sail it to Manaus we need to test it first.'

Fred seized the pole he had made; he'd smoothed

its bark with the edge of a flint, and it was twice as tall as he was. The raft bucked under them. Fred felt his heart buck in unison.

'Careful!' said Con. 'The skin around her nose and lips was greyish-green. Don't go too fast. We need to be able to get back.'

But the current caught at the raft and spun them, dragging at the wood and pushing it fast down river.

They sank a little in the water but remained upright. Fred ducked, as an overhanging branch threatened to hit him in the eye.

'Is that a caiman?' asked Con, pointing at the far shore.

Max's eyes widened. 'Make it go away!'

'No! Of course not. It's just a log,' said Lila, taking her brother's wrist in her hand. But, over his head, she met Con's eyes and whispered, 'Maybe.'

Fred steered closer to the bank, his heart thumping. They sped down the corridor of green. Fred tried to hold their course with the pole. Trees dipped into the water on either side of them, like curtains at

the theatre, Fred thought, with the river as the stage. Two bright birds with yellow bellies flapped over-head.

'Blue macaws!' said Lila. 'I tried so hard to persuade Mama to let me have one of those as a pet, but she said Max was loud enough on his own without a parrot.'

'It's funny,' said Con, 'I never really thought much about birds before. The birds here make the birds in England look like they're dressed for a job interview.'

The sun beat down on the river, sending up green and silver light in their eyes. Fred followed the current downstream. They came to a fork in the river. 'Someone will have to remember which way we've come,' he said, 'or we'll get lost.'

There was a pause. Then Con said, 'I'll remember, if you like.'

Fred looked round, surprised. Con hadn't struck him as the volunteering sort.

'I've got - I've got a photographic memory, actually,' she said.

'Really?' asked Lila, fascinated. 'You mean, you see pictures? Do you remember everything that way, or only some things?'

'Mostly just maps, and formulae, and blueprints for things. I used to like taking them out to look at, during lunch break in school. In my head, I mean. The others thought I was weird.'

'In that case they're stupid,' said Lila bluntly. 'I'd love to be able to do that.'

The raft swept round a corner with Fred poling hard. 'We turned left coming out, so the final turn home will be right,' said Lila.

'Right: right,' said Con. She grinned. Her smile changed the whole shape of her face: her cheeks rose and pushed her eyes into little squints, and her mouth stretched up and out to her earlobes. Her touch-me-not look vanished. 'If you shout out the directions, we could do it together. If you want.'

Fred kept poling. The branch was giving him new, shilling-sized blisters on the pads of his hands, but he didn't slow down. There was a twist, he found, that

he could give the pole that made them speed faster. It blew Max's snot in a high ribbon up his face. The sun was hot and sharp-out here. The air tasted brand new. 'Faster!' shouted Max. He rocked backwards and forwards on his haunches.

They hadn't gone far before there was another fork; one looked choked with weeds, so Fred chose the other. 'Left!' called Lila.

'Left,' Con echoed and nodded.

The left bend took them into a narrower river, winding slowly among close-set trees. Fred pulled up his pole and they drifted, staring down into the water. A shoal of fish swam helter-skelter under the raft. Max leant dangerously over the edge, dangling his fingers in the water.

Suddenly Con jumped. The hairs on her arms rose up in a blonde wave. 'What's that?'

'What's what?'

'Something down there. Silver. Down there! A piranha!' Con's voice came out thin and high. 'Max, get your hands out of the water!'

They all peered down into the water. There was something small and silver, trapped among the weeds.

'It's not moving,' said Fred.

'What is it?' said Con.

'It's ... I think it's not alive,' said Lila.

'A dead piranha?' said Con.

'It's ... a silver box?' said Lila. 'It's hard to tell. It's probably just a trick of the light.'

'I'm going to jump in and see,' said Fred. 'Just quickly.'

'No you're not!' said Con.

Lila, very softly, took hold of his wrist. 'Don't,' she whispered. 'It wouldn't be clever.'

'But it could be a knife!' said Fred. 'It looks man-made. Please. You keep the raft close by. I need to see. I'll be in and out: it's simple.'

'Fred!' said Con.

He pulled off his shirt, evaded Max, who tried to grab his ankle, and jumped over the edge of the raft.

The water was calm here without the current and cool against his skin. Fred kicked downwards. Weeds wrapped themselves around his ankle as he went

deeper. His lungs began shrieking at him. The silver something was just a little further – he brushed it with his fingertips, kicked desperately, and snatched it. It was sharp against his fingers.

He shot to the surface. 'Got it!' He held his fist up to show them, treading water.

But the two girls weren't looking at him. They were staring into the water a few metres from the raft.

'What's that?' whispered Lila.

Fred glanced down. There was something black, undulating through the water towards him.

Fred gasped, swallowed a mouthful of water and began to choke.

'An eel!' said Max brightly.

'An electric eel!' said Lila.

'Swim!' screamed Con. She snatched the pole and tried to steer towards Fred, jabbing the branch into the water. Lila held out her hand over the edge of the raft.

Fred swam the distance to the raft faster than he had ever moved in his life. He launched himself on to it. The raft tipped drunkenly under his weight. Con

threw herself to the opposite end to stop it over-turning, and Lila's hands grabbed at him; they were small but surprisingly strong as they hauled him up.

Fred lay on his stomach, gasping for breath, staring into the water.

The eel was immense. It looked like a deep-grey snake, as long as a grown man, winding in and out of the weeds.

Lila sucked in breath, and some of her own hair. 'Oh, wow,' she breathed. It wasn't just fear in her voice; it was fascination too.

'Are eels dangerous?' asked Con.

'I don't know, but if you call someone an eel —' gasped Fred, coughing. His heart was trying to break out from his chest. He swallowed: 'It's not a compliment. So maybe.'

"They are. Very," said Lila. "They pass an electric current through the water to shock their prey, and then eat them. They probably wouldn't be able to kill something Fred's size, but for Max it would be different." She was shaking. She picked up the pole

and, very slowly, so as not to risk tipping them all in, began to guide them away — away from the eel, and away from the canopy of trees.

'What was it, down there?' asked Con.

'Here.' Fred opened his fist. It was a rusty rectangle, made of tin, coloured silver, with blue swirls writing. 'It's an empty sardine tin!' said Con, her voice full of disgusted disappointment. 'That's all.'

'Yes,' said Fred. He rubbed at the rust on the tin and closed his fingers tightly around its jagged edge. A sardine tin in the wildest place in the world. "That's all,"