



Chapter 1: The Book

“That’s just not fair, Maman¹!” she yelled.

“Isabelle!” cautioned her Swiss mother. “Do not shout at me. Apologise to your father at once then go to your room.”

Isabelle scowled at her annoying little brother, Joe, when he stuck out his tongue, then she turned towards her father.

“Sorry,” she said without looking him in the eye and in a voice so quiet it would have been drowned by the squeak of a mouse.

Mr Scott sighed as his daughter left the room in tears. If Isabelle had only known how he felt that day—as though the weight of the whole world was bearing down on his shoulders—she would not have been so cross about Gramps coming to stay and about him ‘only caring for Joe’.

The news that ‘Grumpy Gramps’ would be staying during the summer holidays, and that she would not be going to Switzerland to have that longed-for time with Mamie, her beloved Swiss granny, was just too much for Isabelle. It was like being kicked in the face by one of the caramel-coloured cows that her Mamie’s young Swiss friend, Emil, looked after, and would warn her to be wary of whenever he took her on a nature walk or ‘*promenade dans la nature*’.

A kind young man who always smiled, Emil also kept a caring eye on Mamie as well as looking after the deer beyond the Patinoire in the Alpine village of Leysin. The thought that she would not be seeing Mamie, Emil nor his young cousin Angélique—now definitely her best friend in Switzerland—felt more terrible than being swallowed by an avalanche. An expert skier, Isabelle knew all about avalanches and how to look out for them.

As she lay on her bed cuddling Florence, the fluffy snow white Swiss chamois that Mamie had given her the previous summer, she tried to come to terms with the other thing Daddy had told her; the reason for changing plans for the summer vacation and cancelling the trip to Switzerland for her and Maman...

Old Jamie, who helped her father run the zoo, was ill in hospital.

As happened every summer, Joe was supposed to have gone to Gramps’ house in Edinburgh whilst Isabelle and Maman were in Leysin. Isabelle knew the real reason for Joe not coming with them, though it was never talked about. He would have wreaked havoc in Mamie’s old wooden chalet perched on the mountainside at the edge of town. Quite possibly even have burned it down, with everyone inside, because he had developed an interest in striking matches and seeing what happened when he set things alight. At the age of seven, soon turning eight, he was not only a nuisance but a dangerous one. Why Gramps doted on him Isabelle could never understand, but to be

¹ Mummy. Maman pronounced Mam-o, the ‘o’ as in ‘on’ in English, the ‘n’ silent.

with Joe and Gramps all summer, and without those precious times with Jamie, because he was in hospital, would be the very worst thing imaginable. That was why she threw to the ground the little doll her Daddy gave her as a sop to soften the shock after telling her she would not be going to Mamie's in the holidays.

If Jamie had been there for her, she would not have reacted like that. For sure, she would have been upset for she did so love being with Mamie. The cosy little bedroom upstairs, the *chocolat chaud*² and *croissant* every morning, those nature walks with Emil and many super fun times playing his younger cousin, Angélique. But Isabelle might have just shed a few tears, shrugged her shoulders and said, 'Okay, Daddy!' No, it was hearing that old Jamie was ill, and that he and his wife, Jenny, had to stop working at the zoo, that really upset Isabelle.

Every moment Isabelle had with old Jamie was magical. His understanding of animals was such that they were all his friends. Lizards and snakes included. As soon as she got home from school, Isabelle would run to seek out Jamie, and together they would sit in his little hut, munching Jenny's delicious home-made biscuits, whilst she told him what she had been up to at school and he told her stories about his 'friends', the animals. She learned so much from him, not only about animals in her Daddy's zoo but also about their lives in the wild. Daddy had told her that Jamie used to be a 'zoologist', so it made sense to the girl that the man now worked in a zoo. The thought that she would not be sitting with Jamie in that little hut learning about the animals in their care seemed the worst thing ever, and this was why she had been so upset.

Daddy came into her bedroom and closed the door quietly. He had a book in his hand. Seeing her lying face down on her bed, and so upset, he came and sat beside her.

"I have a much better present for you. From Jamie," he said.

From Jamie?

Isabelle sat up quickly. She stared at the book in her father's hands.

"For me?" she asked in disbelief, reaching out to stroke the cute koala joey on the book cover.

"Not only that. It's dedicated to you. Just been published. Jamie wanted to give it to you himself and we were keeping it safe, but Maman says you should have it now. To cheer you up."

Isabelle took the book from her father. The koala joey, peering anxiously out at the world, seemed to be looking straight into her eyes. Wiping away her tears, she opened the book at the title page:

Animals in the Wild

Changing Lives in a Changing World

by

James McKendrick

Isabelle always knew that Jamie was clever but, until now, never knew he was clever enough to have written a whole book about wild animals. What made this super

² Hot chocolate

special was the next page called, Daddy informed her, the ‘dedication page’. All that was printed there was:

For Isabelle Scott
A very special girl

Daddy left her alone with Jamie’s book. Now shedding tears of joy, Isabelle flipped through the pages, pausing at each of the many photographs. Beautiful photographs of animals in the wild. Many of these were recognisable as cousins of the animals in her daddy’s zoo, but in the wild they looked so different. And there was something else about the book. Something that she could not quite put her finger on. Something even more special than the dedication page.

“Would you like to join the animals?” a voice asked in French. This came from her bed, just behind her, where Florence lay on her side. Isabelle stared at the little chamois. Surely it could not have been Florence who had just spoken! Then, “*Il peut t’aider à le faire, tu sais!*”³ The chamois’ mouth moved. Being Swiss, and a present from Mamie, it made sense that she spoke in French.

“Who can help me join the animals?” asked Isabelle in French. But before the chamois could answer, the door opened and Maman entered.

“*Je comprends, ma chérie,*”⁴ she said. “Really, I do understand how you feel. *Viens! On va manger*”⁵. You must be hungry!”

Isabelle glanced briefly at Florence. She felt sure the chamois gave her a wink, but she said nothing. It would be their shared secret and might even make up for not seeing Mamie during the holidays. A little, anyway.

“Maman, I want to write a letter to Emil,” Isabelle said. “Tell him how much I long to see Mamie and him again. Angélique too, of course. And tell him why I won’t be in Leysin this summer. Will he mind if I write to him?”

“*Pourquoi, ma chérie?*”⁶ And Mamie, she knows your Maman and Daddy have to work twice as hard. Because poor Jamie, he is very *malade*. In hospital now.”

Very sick? Oh no!

“I could go on my own. To Switzerland. I am old enough,” suggested Isabelle.

Maman shook her head and hugged her daughter close. Isabelle thought she would never ever stop crying as she held on to her mother.

³ “He can help you make it happen, you know!”

⁴ “I understand, my darling.”

⁵ “Come! We’re going to eat.”

⁶ “Why, my darling?”

I Sabelles Room ♥





Chapter 2: The Spider

As soon as Isabelle sat down at the table for supper, Joe stuck out his tongue when their parents weren't looking. Isabelle ignored him. It was what Jamie had told her to do whenever her brother was mean. Any reaction from her, the wise old man said, would be like a reward for his bad behaviour. Throughout the meal of cauliflower cheese, which always cheered her up, Florence's words, *'Il peut t'aider'*, kept going around and around in her head. *He can help me?* Isabelle sat wondering who the mysterious 'he' was. Did 'he' wish to help her escape from the boredom of staying with Gramps and Joe all summer? Maybe let her live free with the animals in the wild, like those in Jamie's book?

When supper was finished, and she had cleared the table and washed the dishes for Maman, and whilst Joe, who never lifted a finger to help, played noisy battle games on the floor with his Lego, she asked if she could read Jamie's book in bed.

"Bien sûr?" agreed Maman.

On her way back to her bedroom, Isabelle halted in the living room. A rather large spider was on its way across the floor just behind Joe who was making noises that were supposed to sound like guns being fired but just sounded silly. Joe was terrified of spiders, but for Isabelle they were friends, as were all animals. Jamie had once told her how useful house spiders are, busily controlling the numbers of flies that can spread diseases.

"There's a big spider right behind you, Joe, and he might just gobble you up!"

Joe flipped around, screamed, jumped upright and began to stamp about on the floor. Luckily the spider was too quick for him. Isabelle pushed her brother aside, knelt down, gently scooped the spider into the palm of her hand and threw Joe a withering look.

"Not much of a soldier if you're scared of a little spider, are you?" she teased.

"Mum! Iz is chasing me with a ginormous spider!" Joe yelled.

Joe was the only person who called Isabelle 'Iz' and she hated it. Sounded too much like 'isn't', as though she didn't even exist. Sometimes it really felt like that, particularly when Joe and Gramps played together and totally ignored her.

Maman was far too busy to come to Joe's aid. With her free hand cupped over the spider, Isabelle gave a haughty sniff for Joe's benefit then took the little creature into her bedroom to introduce it to Florence. With the door closed, she crouched down and tipped the spider onto the floor.

She had to admit it was rather large. Even Maman might have been scared of it, but Isabelle knew the spider would never bite her if she were to treat it as a friend. She watched it run around in circles on the floor, as if looking for something or someone, before coming to a halt beside the bed. It was most definitely looking up at her. She

⁷"Of course!"

leaned forwards to get a better view of its tiny face, wishing she had a magnifying glass handy to see its eyes better.

“What are you waiting for? *Dépêche-toi!*”

It was most definitely Florence who spoke. But why did she say, ‘*Hurry up?*’

Isabelle stood, went over to her bed, carefully avoiding the spider, and picked up the fluffy white chamois.

“You never told me before that you can talk,” Isabelle said in French.

Florence said nothing.

“‘Hurry up,’ you just said. In French. Why?” she asked.

“Because ‘e’ isn’t got all day,” Florence said in English with a lovely French accent.

“So, you can speak in English and French?” Isabelle said.

“Of course! *Comme toi!* Like you!”

“And who is ‘he’? The spider?”

“*Oui! L’araignée*⁸. You didn’t think I meant that naughty little brother of yours, did you?”

“You said he hasn’t got all day. All day to do what?” the girl asked. “Anyway, it’s nearly bedtime.”

The chamois let out a gentle sigh.

“*Tant mieux!* So much the better!”

“To do what!?” questioned Isabelle again, and rather irritably.

“Take you there.”

“Where?”

“Where you want to go, of course,” replied Florence. “In Jamie’s book. To be like one of those animals. Wild and free.”

Isabelle grinned.

“You’re having me on!” she said.

“*Quoi? Je ne comprends pas*⁹.”

“An English expression. Means you’re joking. *Tu rigoles, n’est-ce-pas*¹⁰?”

“We chamois never joke. Particularly Swiss ones. We are very serious animals. You see, the spider can take you wherever you want to go to in the book.”

“How can he do that?” As Isabelle said this, the door opened and Maman entered.

“How can he do what, *ma chérie*? And who were you talking to?” She saw the spider on the floor, gasped and backed away.

“Just talking to myself, Maman. And don’t be frightened of the spider. He’s really very friendly. And I do know it’s a ‘he’.”

⁸ “Yes! The spider.

⁹ “What? I don’t understand.”

¹⁰ “You’re joking, right?”