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Reckless

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Cornelia Funke

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Reckless





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For Lionel, who found the door to this story and
who so often knew more about it than I did,
friend and finder of ideas, indispensable on
either side of the mirror.

And for Oliver, who again and
again tailored English clothes
for this story so that the Englishman and
the German could tell it together.



From the Chicken House

It's Jacob I can't get out of my mind. Desperate, brave, romantic and achingly flawed, he's a hero to set your heart racing. In a world where fairytales take on new meaning, Cornelia makes his fate as unpredictable as the spells that come to haunt him.

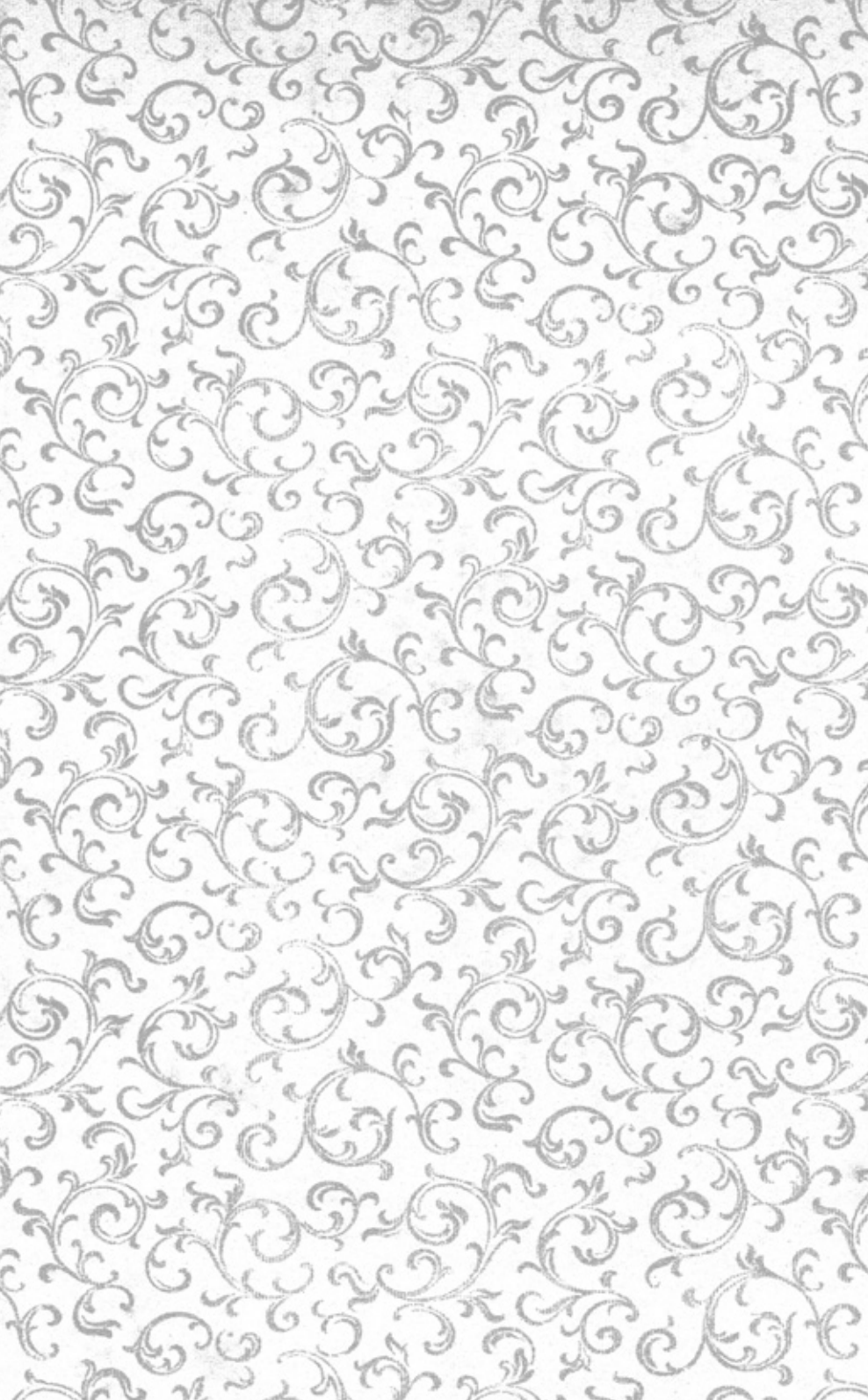
You are in for a real treat. Cornelia has a new gritty plot with a kind of grown-up magic that makes her storytelling even more fabulous – and it's told with page-popping pace! I just want to join in!

Could I be as brave as Jacob in love and war? And could I befriend Fox? Could I deal with the truly scary bits, and the amazing underground city, and . . .

Barry Cunningham

Publisher







CHAPTER ONE

Once Upon a Time

The night breathed through the apartment like a dark animal. The ticking of a clock. The groan of a floorboard as he slipped out of his room. All was drowned by its silence. But Jacob loved the night. He felt it on his skin like a promise. Like a cloak woven from freedom and danger.

Outside the stars were paled by the glaring lights of the city, and the large apartment was stale with his mother's sorrow. She did not wake as Jacob stole into her room, even when he carefully opened the drawer of her bedside table.

The key lay right next to the pills that let her sleep. Its cool metal nestled in his hand as he stepped back out into the dark corridor.

There was still a light burning in his brother's room – Will was afraid of the dark – and Jacob made sure he was fast asleep before unlocking the door to their father's study. Their mother had not entered there since his disappearance, but for Jacob this was not the first time he had sneaked into the empty room to search for the answers she did not want to give.

It still looked as if John Reckless had last sat in his desk chair less than an hour ago, instead of more than a year. The sweater he had worn so often hung over the chair, and a used tea bag was desiccating on a plate next to his calendar, which still showed the weeks of a previous year.

Come back! Jacob wrote it with his finger on the fogged-up window, on the dusty desk, and on the glass panels of the cabinet that still held the old pistols his father had collected. But the room remained silent – and empty. He was twelve and no longer had a father. Jacob kicked at the drawers he had searched in vain for so many nights. In a silent rage, he yanked the books and magazines from the shelves, tore down the model aeroplanes that hung above the desk, ashamed at how proud he had once been when his father had allowed him to paint one with red varnish.

Come back! He wanted to scream it through the streets that cut their gleaming paths through the city blocks seven storeys below, scream it at the thousand windows that punched squares of light into the night.

The sheet of paper slipped out of a book on aircraft propulsion. Jacob only picked it up because he thought he recognised his father's handwriting on it, though he quickly realised his error. Symbols and equations, a sketch of a peacock, a sun, two moons. None of it made any sense. Except for the one sentence he spotted on the reverse side:

THE MIRROR WILL OPEN ONLY FOR HE WHO CANNOT SEE HIMSELF.

Jacob turned around – and his glance was met by his own reflection.

The mirror. He still remembered very well the day his father had mounted it on the wall. It hung between the shelves like a shimmering eye, a glassy abyss that cast back a warped reflection of everything John Reckless had left behind: his desk, the old pistols, his books – and his elder son.

The glass was so uneven one could barely recognise one's own reflection, and it was darker than other mirrors, but the rose tendrils winding across the silver frame looked so real they seemed ready to wilt at any moment.

THE MIRROR WILL OPEN ONLY FOR HE WHO CANNOT SEE HIMSELF.

Jacob closed his eyes.

He turned back to the mirror.

Felt behind the frame for some kind of lock or latch.

Nothing.

Only his reflection was looking him straight in the eye.

It took quite a while before Jacob understood. His hand was barely large enough to cover the distorted reflection of his face. But the cool glass clung to his fingers as if it had been waiting for them, and suddenly the room he saw in the mirror was no longer his father's study.

Jacob turned around.

Moonlight fell through two narrow windows onto grey walls, and his naked feet stood on wooden floorboards covered with acorn shells and the gnawed bones of birds. The room was bigger than his father's study, and above him cobwebs hung from the rafters of a roof like veils.

Where was he? He stepped towards one of the windows, the moonlight painting patterns on his skin. The bloody feathers of a bird stuck to the rough ledge, and far below he saw scorched walls and black hills with a few lost lights glimmering in the distance. He was in a tower. Gone were the sea of houses, the bright streets – everything he knew was gone. And high among the stars were two moons, the smaller one as red as a rusty coin.

Jacob looked back at the mirror, and in it he saw the fear

on his face. But fear was an emotion he had grown to like. It lured him to dark places, through forbidden doors and away from himself, and even the yearning for his father could be drowned in it.

There was no door in the grey walls, just a trapdoor in the floor. When Jacob opened it, he saw the remains of a burnt staircase melting into the darkness below, and for a moment he thought he spotted a tiny figure climbing up the stones. But a sudden rasp made him wheel around.

Cobwebs fell down on him as something jumped onto his neck with a hoarse growl. It sounded like an animal, but the contorted face flashing its teeth at his throat looked as pale and wrinkled as an old man's. It was much smaller than Jacob, and as spindly as an insect. Its clothes seemed to be made of cobwebs, its white hair hung down to its hips, and when Jacob grabbed for its thin neck, the creature sank its yellow teeth deep into his hand. Screaming, he punched the attacker off his shoulder and stumbled towards the mirror. The spidery man got to its feet again, licking Jacob's blood from its lips. Jacob kicked at the creature, but before it could reach him Jacob was already pressing his hand on the reflection of his scared face. Immediately, the scrawny figure disappeared, together with the grey walls, and behind him Jacob could once again see his father's desk.

'Jacob?'

His brother's voice barely registered over the beating of his heart. Jacob gasped for air and backed away from the mirror.

'Jake? Are you in there?'

He pulled his sleeve over his mauled hand and quietly opened the door.

Will's eyes were wide with fear. He'd had another bad dream. Little brother. Will always followed him like a puppy, and Jacob protected him in the schoolyard and in the park. Sometimes he even managed to forgive Will that their mother loved him more.

'Mum says we shouldn't go in there.'

'Since when do I do what Mum says? If you tell on me, I won't take you to the park ever again.'

Jacob thought he could feel the glass of the mirror like ice on the back of his neck. Will peered past him, but he quickly lowered his head as Jacob pulled the door shut behind them. Will. Careful where Jacob was rash, tender where he was short-tempered, and calm where he was restless. Jacob took his hand. Will noticed the blood on his fingers and gave him a quizzical look, but Jacob just quietly pushed him into his room.

What the mirror had shown him was his. His alone.