

The bushes rustled. The rain hammered down on Fred's face.

'We need to find shelter,' he said. 'A big tree, or a cave or something that would —'

'No!' Max gave a sudden scream: a yell that was wet with spit and fear.

Fred stepped backwards, raising his hands. 'Don't cry! I just thought —' Then his eyes followed Max's pointing finger.

There, three inches from Fred's shoe, was a snake.

It was speckled brown and black, patchworked to match the jungle floor, and its head was as big as a fist. For one second nobody breathed. The jungle waited. Then Max let out a second scream that dug deep into the night and the four of them turned and fled.

The ground was sodden and they ran pell-mell, sending up mud into one another's eyes and grazing their elbows against trees. Fred ran as if his body were not his own, faster than he'd ever run, his palms stretched ahead of him. He tripped over a root and

turned a full somersault, coming up spitting earth. He ran on. The rain blinded him and shadows flashed past him in the darkness.

There was a yell behind him.

'Please, Max!' said Lila.

Fred turned back, skidding in the mud.

'He won't run!' Lila bent over her brother. 'And I can't carry him!'

The little boy lay on his back, weeping up at the sky, his whole body shaking in the driving rain.

'Come on!' Fred heaved Max over his shoulder. The boy was far heavier than he'd expected and he screamed as Fred lifted him, but Fred grabbed both of Max's knees and started running, his whole body screaming with pain. He could hear Lila, her feet thumping close behind them.

The stitch in Fred's side was almost unbearable when he tore out of the trees and into a sudden clearing. He halted, and Max bumped his head against Fred's spine and yelled. Angrily, he began trying to bite one of Fred's shoulder blades.

'Please don't,' said Fred, but he was barely paying attention to the boy on his back. He stared, stunned, ahead of him.

They were standing at the edge of a wide circle of trees, open to the sky and lit by the fat moon. There was a carpet of green moss and grass, and the stars above them were clustered so thickly that the silver outnumbered the night. Fred lowered Max to the ground and stood bent over, his hands on his thighs, panting.

'Did the snake chase us?' said Max.

'No,' gasped Con.

'How do you know?' wailed Max.

Lila dropped to her knees, clutching at her side. 'Snakes don't, Maxie. We both know that. I just ...'

'Panicked,' said Con. Her voice was bitter. 'That's what happened. See! Look: no snakes. We were stupid. Now we're even more lost.'

The ground in the clearing sloped slightly towards a large puddle of water. Fred crossed over to it, his muscles aching, and sniffed; it smelt of rotting things, but he was feverishly thirsty. He took a tiny sip and

immediately spat it out. 'No good,' he said. 'It tastes like a dead person's feet.'

'But I'm thirsty!' said Max.

Fred looked around the clearing, hoping to find water before Max started crying again.

'If you wring out your hair,' he said, 'there'll be water in it.' He tugged his dark fringe down over his forehead and twisted it: a few drops fell on his tongue. 'It's better than nothing.'

Max chewed on his hair for a second, then scrunched his eyes closed. 'I'm scared,' he said. It was said without whining, as simple matter-of-fact. Somehow it was worse than the tears, Fred thought.

'I know,' Lila said softly. 'We all are, Maxie.' She crossed to her brother and pulled him close to her. His small bony fingers closed over a burn on her wrist, but she didn't brush him away. She began to whisper in his ear in Portuguese: something soft, almost a song, a lullaby. They were both shaking slightly.

Fred swallowed. 'All this will look less bad in the morning,' he said.

'Will it?' said Con. There was bite to the question. 'Will it, really?'

'It can't look much worse,' he said. 'Once it's light, we'll be able to work out a way to get home.'

Con looked hard at him: there was challenge in the look, and Fred stared, unblinking, back at her. Her face was all geometry; sharp chin, sharp cheekbones, sharp eyes.

'What now, then?' she said.

'Our mama and papa say —' began Lila. The mention of her parents made her face crease and crumple, but she swallowed and went on. 'They always say: you need to sleep before you think. They say, when you're exhausted, you do stupid things. And they're scientists. So we should sleep.'

Fred found his whole body was aching. 'Good. Fine. Let's sleep.'

He lay down on his side in the wet grass. His clothes were soaked through, but the air was warm. He closed his eyes. Perhaps he would wake up in his bed at school, he thought, next to the snoring

of his roommates, Jones and Scrase. An ant crawled over his cheek.

'But aren't we supposed to stay awake in case we die of concussion?' said Con.

'I think if we'd got concussion we'd be dizzy,' said Lila.

Fred, already half-asleep, tried to work out if he was dizzy. The world began to spin away from him.

'If we all die in the night, I'm blaming both of you,' said Con.

It was on that cheering thought that Fred felt himself dropping down, down, away from the jungle and the thick night air and into sleep.