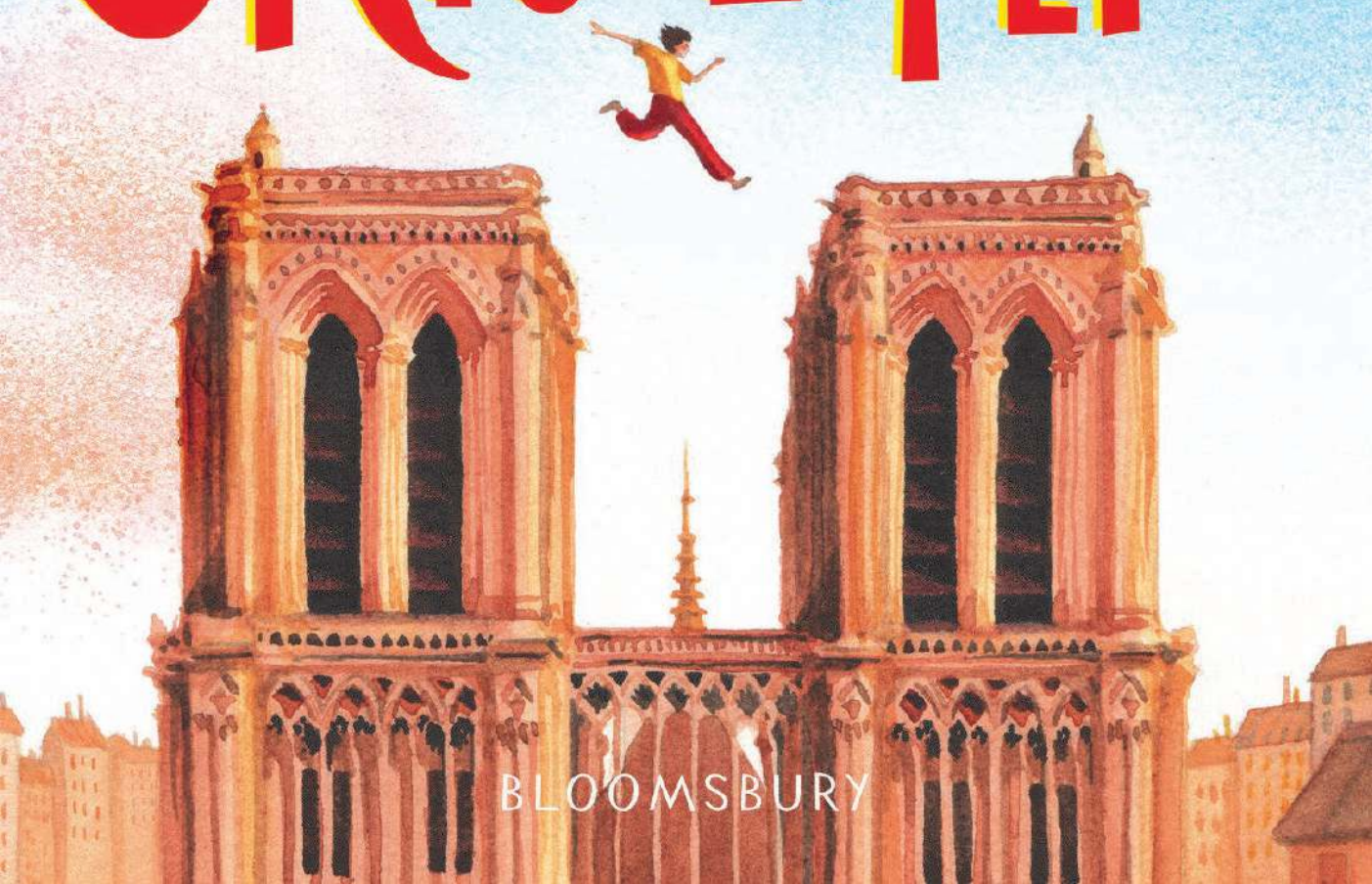
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KATHERINE RUNDELL

SKYSTEPPERS



BLOOMSBURY

CHAPTER ONE

It was the evening of Matteo's eleventh birthday, and he was stealing a cucumber.

There were many ways in which it could have been fine, and only one in which it could have been a disaster. Unfortunately, as Matteo found, probabilities don't always play nice.

He had done it many times before. If the woman behind whom he was hiding had not moved – if the two policemen had not been bored, and looking for something to do – everything, for the rest of his life, might have been different. Instead, the woman twisted to pick up a cabbage, one of the policemen gave a sudden roar, and Matteo and the cucumber took off through the lamplit streets of Paris.

He was fast, and he knew how to move through a crowd. He dodged in front of one carriage, behind another,

around a man on a bicycle, who yelled something which Matteo might, in less urgent moments, have carefully memorised for later use. He ducked under the belly of a vast horse – for a second, he thought about swinging up on to it and away, but the horse was attached to the rubbish cart, and it seemed impractical.

'Stop him! Stop that boy!' The policemen were gaining on him.

Matteo sprinted down the boulevard, holding the cucumber out in front of him like a dagger, and veered into a street called the Rue Gluck. The great Paris Opera was nearby, and that always attracted crowds – crowds, perhaps, that he could hide in.

A group of Belgian tourists, clad in rigorously serious shoes, stood looking up at the great wedding-cake of a building. He tried to merge into them, but there were no other children. Besides, Matteo felt his shoes looked insufficiently earnest. And at the far end of the road, there was another policeman: a lithe, sporting-looking man, fishing something out from between his teeth with the end of his penknife.

'No need to run!' called one policeman. 'He can't

escape!' The lithe officer stopped working on his teeth, and came striding down the street. There was no way out.

It took Matteo less than a second to decide. If there was no *out*, he would go *up*.

The Opera House might have been built to be climbed. Matteo had always felt rather scornful about the pillars and the carved figures and golden faces that adorned its sides. The designer of the building, he thought, must have had an addiction to winged nymphs. But they made it the perfect climbing wall.

He edged round the side, reached out and grasped the drainpipe. He yanked off his boots, shoved one in each pocket, set his toes behind the pipe, put the cucumber between his teeth, braced against the wall, and pushed himself upwards.

The pipe was exactly the right size for his two hands to wrap round. Clammy and breathless and shaking, he climbed; once he was high enough, he stretched sideways and transferred his weight to one of the carved angels. His palms were sweaty with fear; he tried to wipe one on his hair, but hair is no good for wiping. One hand on a goddess's foot, one in the mouth of a golden old man: pull,

breathe. Someone gave a shout below – but he did not look down until he was within reach of the top.

The top of the building was a great copper dome, turned green with age, and on the centre of the dome stood a bronze statue of the Greek god Apollo. Matteo crouched behind the parapet, looking up at Apollo's behind, over which the sculptor had clearly taken considerable time, and tried to get his breath back.

He could hear the policemen calling to each other down below.

'Where'd he go? What happened?' The man took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

'He went up!'

'You're seeing things, Jean-Luc! It's getting dark.'

'I swear, he went up the statues. He put his foot in the mouth of the Angel of Lyric Drama – I saw it!'

The lithe policeman grunted. 'I don't fancy trying to explain that to the captain, I'm telling you. Think of the paperwork.'

'Ach, let's leave it!' said the older man. 'He was just a nuisance.'

It seemed impossibly good luck for someone whose luck had never run particularly lucky – good enough to

make up for the bad luck of being chased. There they were, walking away.

Matteo dusted down his hands and adjusted his clothes, sucked the blood off his arm where it had dragged against the brickwork, and stood up. He leaned over the gold-rimmed parapet and took in his surroundings.

It was a dizzying feeling. Matteo had climbed many trees before, but never a rooftop. His whole body was stuttering. The chase, he realised, had eaten him up: fear is exhausting, and even though he would not have admitted it to himself, he had been afraid. Matteo had no family, which meant he had nobody who would help him if he were caught.

He walked the whole surface of the roof. It was not, he thought, so bad up here. It was quieter – more private. The people in the street below all watched each other and passed judgement, even if just very fleetingly, on each other's everything – shoes, clothes, face, walk, money, power. Up here, nobody could see him. Up here, nobody could chase him.

He looked out over Paris. The lights flickering on made it look unfamiliar and alive. He had been born in Paris – at least, he supposed he had – and knew, as all Parisians

do, that it was the greatest place on earth. Yet he had never really looked at it before now. Its streets twisted and wound round churches and great hotels and tiny cafes, and through it all the great River Seine, turning midnight-blue as the summer evening fell.

Beneath his feet, the orchestra struck up, and the opera began, vibrating through his shoes and all the way into his lungs. The music made him feel reckless. In the dark, he climbed up on to the ledge of the parapet and stood right at the edge, with his toes curled over the drop into nothing. He felt his stomach swoop in an entire cycle of his body: it was in his feet, skull, knees, chest. At one point it felt like it was possibly in his ears. It was terrifying, and electric.

He should really, he thought, go back down.

But up here it was like nothing else he'd ever felt – it was like being drunk on the air. Up here, high above the streets and the world that walks in them, even a child with a hole in his shoe could feel like a king. It was the perfect place for a birthday feast. He stuck a lit match into the cucumber in place of a candle, and sang, very softly, H*appy birthday to me*. And he decided to stay.

* * *

Some people are just born to be a little more skywards than the rest of us. Matteo was one of them.

He developed very strong opinions about brickwork: about those bricks which left space for hands, and the foolishness of those that did not. He developed passions for things he did not expect to have passions for – a good piece of metal guttering, for instance, that could take your weight, and window sills thick enough for you to land on and take off from. Ever since he was very small, Matteo's hands and feet had obeyed him more than other people's seemed to. He told this hand to grip on and not let go, and it did. His temper was not so easily his own: but his arms and legs, yes – most of the time.

Once it was dark, Matteo made his way across the streets of his city on the rooftops, clambering round chimney pots, jumping where it was possible to jump, sliding down and shinning up drainpipes, searching for food. The sliding down was easy; it was too fast to be very afraid. Climbing back up again required him to take hold of every inch of his imagination in both hands, squeezing it down so that it would not serve up thoughts about slipping and falling and dying.

Down at pavement level, stealing food had been grim,

grinding work. But these houses, the rich ones along the banks of the Seine; their window sills were like larders: they left out pies to cool, fruit to ripen. He stamped down, hard, on any guilt he felt. The beautiful kitchens were full of food, and, he told himself, they would probably be glad to give it to him, if he asked. Some of it, anyhow. Probably.

One week passed, and then two, and a third. Some nights it was very good. He lay on his back, on the curved dome of the Opera House roof, listening to the music. He discovered that he liked opera, which was, he thought, an enjoyably furious kind of music – rather as if all the stars in the sky had got angry and hurled themselves into your face all at once. On those nights, it felt like this could become a home.

But on other nights, the Opera House felt very large and empty, and he felt very small and empty, and his stomach would grow heavy and cold – and then he went, carefully, on hands and knees, over other rooftops. He would squat behind chimney stacks and stare in at families, at children, at people laughing and whispering and shouting and living alongside each other. Once, he found his hand stretching out towards them. He bit it, as punishment,

and sat on it sternly. That was sentimental. He was not that. He was a rooftop boy now.

He discovered some families he liked more than others. There were rich families, with tables bending under the weight of fashionable dishes – mutton with cream, roast heron, fish jelly – where he only ever went at dinner-time, to smell it through the chimney. There were poor families, where the meals smelt of potato water, but the jokes tended to be better. Once, he dropped a dead plucked pigeon as an offering down one of the chimneys, but the family reacted disappointingly: more screaming, and less gratitude, than he'd expected.

On days when it rained, and the window sills were empty, he ate bread he kept stored in a tin, so old it was like trying to eat one of his own teeth. He slept curled in a corner of the Opera dome, in a den made of brown sacks stitched with pigeon feathers, and a blanket he had borrowed from a horse. His fingers grew calloused and tough. He spoke to nobody, smiled at nobody. He was safe, but he was also alone.

Except, it turned out, he was not.

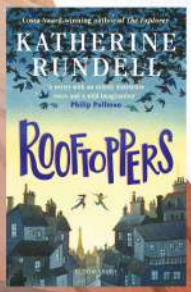
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KATHERINE RUNDELL

High above the streets of Paris live the rooftoppers, a secret gang of children who eat, sleep and tumble amongst the chimney pots.

But for Matteo and Mercédès the adventure is only just beginning. The pair find themselves on a wild hunt across Paris, tearing over the roofs in search of hidden treasure in a race against an enemy who would seek to destroy that which they love best.

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