

Chapter 1

An ill wind

It was a day like any other in the small town of Chillabamba. Or so it seemed.

Sofía García got home from school at one fifteen in the afternoon, as she always did. She walked into the house and went straight to her bedroom, as she always did.

The bed was not made. The computer on her desk was open, and the floor was covered with papers and reports – World Wildlife reports about endangered species around the world. Beside her bed lay seventeen library books about animals. Most of them were overdue, but the librarian had learned to be easy on Sofía. As long as no one else wanted the books, she let her keep them for as long as she liked.

Sofía's walls were covered with posters and photos she'd got off the internet of endangered species: rhinos, orangutans, gorillas, elephants, whales, condors.

She had pictures of all her friends from the forest: Cecilia the toucan, Luci the golden orb weaver spider, the Jesus Christ lizard she called Cristo, and, of course, Silvestre the sloth.

The one exception was the poster of Jane Goodall, who Sofía thought was the greatest person on the planet. Goodall was the famous zoologist who studied the behaviour of chimpanzees and was a world leader in animal conservation. Sofía didn't want to be *like* Jane Goodall, she wanted to *be* Jane Goodall.

Her mother kept telling Sofía to clean up her bedroom. She called it messy. Sofía always said she liked it just as it was. She knew where everything was. Everything was in its place. Everything had a reason to be there – just like the things in the jungle, and no one called the jungle messy.

Sofía took off her green school uniform and threw it onto the bed, then changed into old blue jeans, her T-shirt with the face



of Jane Goodall, the baseball cap that she always wore backwards and her running shoes. She grabbed her backpack with notebook, pencil and metal water bottle. She was ready to go.

Her mother was waiting in the kitchen, as she always was. 'Are you going to say hello to your mum?'

'Hi, Mum.' Sofia sat down at the small table beside the kitchen. Her mother had prepared her favourite lunch, the lunch she ate every day: black beans, rice, fried egg and fried fish.

'How was school?'

'Same.'

School bored Sofia. It was hard to sit in a class when you knew more than the teacher. Today had been particularly challenging.

They had been talking about the solar system, and the science teacher had asked students if they ever got up to see the sunrise. 'Did anyone see how red the sun was this morning?'

This was too much for Sofía. 'The sun doesn't rise,' she said. 'The earth turns. That creates the illusion of the sun rising. But it doesn't actually rise.'

'Technically, that's true,' the teacher said. 'But we talk about the sun rising.'

'That's just telling lies. It's better to tell the truth,' Sofia said, looking at the teacher directly. What was the point of a science class if they didn't talk about the facts? Then she added, 'The sun is not really red. It's white. It just looks red because of the atmosphere. We create colour in our brains. Our brains are always tricking us into believing things that aren't true. That's what our brains do. They lie to us.'

'Thank you, Sofia,' the teacher said.

So, when Sofia said 'same' to her mum, this was what she was talking about. This was Sofía's daily challenge. To somehow learn to accept teachers and students saying silly things that weren't true.

She finished eating and headed towards the door.

'Here, take a banana,' her mother said. 'Have fun in the forest and come back before it gets dark.' She knew Sofía would ignore the instruction. Many times she'd had to go into the forest at night to search for her daughter.

One time she found her sitting in a cave looking at glow worms.

'Aren't they beautiful, Mum? Do you know what makes them light up like that?'

'No, I don't.'

'It's to do with chemicals. They have a molecule called luciferin. Together with oxygen, it makes the worms glow. Isn't that fantastic?'

'Yes, it is.'

Emma García smiled as she watched Sofía disappear out of the door. How was it that she had such a challenging and brilliant daughter?

Sofía ran past the houses in her street. They all had iron bars on the windows to keep the capuchin monkeys out. Sofía called them ‘cappuccino’ monkeys because of their coffee-with-milk colouring.

The monkeys were not scared of people. They jumped onto balconies and took anything they could get their hands on.

Sofía thought this was funny. She was possibly the only person in the town who did. Jane Goodall would think it was funny. Sofía had asked her mother to take the bars off the windows of their house, but her mother said no – she did not want monkeys anywhere near the house.

Sofía walked along the main street of the town, past the local supermarket, the cinema and the shoe repair shop that had been there over fifty years. She came to her father’s car repair shop.

‘Hey, Dad,’ she called out.

Elmer García came out from under a car and cleaned his hands with a cloth. ‘How’s my lovely daughter?’ he said, giving her a hug.

‘Same.’

‘Good same or bad same?’

‘Good.’

‘Good, then. Don’t get lost. And say hi to Silvestre.’

It was a short walk to the edge of town. When Sofía took that first step along the trail and felt the coolness of the forest and smelled its sweet smell, she started to smile.

The forest was her happy place. The place where she could be herself, where she was accepted for who she was.

A few metres into the forest Sofía was in another world, a world she felt comfortable in. A world of tall trees and flowering plants. A world where it was impossible to see more

than ten metres into the forest. A dark and mysterious world, one she knew and loved.

She walked a little further and came across her good friend Luci, the golden orb weaver spider, with a big web that stretched right across the trail. Sofía could see that Luci's web was filled with insects.

'Hi, Luci. How are you? I can see you've got plenty to eat.'

The spider moved its long legs, as if replying. Sofía loved its long, golden body and golden legs with black marks like socks.

Further along the trail she came across Cristo, the Jesus Christ lizard that could run on water. He was resting on a banana leaf.

High up, she saw Cecilia the toucan. And a little further on, the howler monkeys were moving through the trees, making their barking sound like dogs with sore throats.

But her best friend in the forest was Silvestre the sloth. She went to her favourite tree, the fig tree with the huge roots and a wide, straight trunk that reached high above the roof of the forest into the sky. Nearby, high up in a guarumo tree, was Silvestre.

He slowly climbed down to be closer to Sofía.

'Can I ask you something?' she asked.

'Of course.'

'Do you realise how slowly you move?'

'Slow is a relative idea. Slow compared to what?'

'Compared to almost everything.'

'Is that a bad thing?'

'No, it's a good thing.'

It seemed to Sofía that everyone moved too fast. Life was too fast, and this was a problem. No one stopped to pay attention to what was happening around them. Coming to the forest made her slow down, stop and pay attention.

'Something is not quite right,' Silvestre said.

'What do you mean?'



‘There is an ill wind that blows in the forest. Can you smell it?’
The forest smelled damp and sweet, as always.

‘No, I can’t. You’ll have to explain.’

‘There’s an ill wind. That is all I can say. Follow the trail and you will know what I mean.’

This was the thing about Silvestre. He spoke to her – but he spoke in riddles. He always left it to Sofia to work out what he meant. Sofía liked that. It was why she was so close to him.

Silvestre challenged Sofia to think and use her imagination in ways that her teachers at school didn't.

An ill wind. What did that mean? 'It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good' – so the saying went. Sofia was sure the ill wind was not a good thing.

Sofia continued walking towards the river. Even before she got to it, she noticed a bad smell. She pulled her T-shirt over her nose.

From the riverbank, she could see dead fish floating in the water. She counted twenty-three silver shapes. The ill wind that Silvestre talked about was the stink of dead fish.

Sometimes at night she'd seen the moonlight turn the water to silver. But this was strange. Fish were not meant to die in groups like this.

What had caused this? These were the fish she ate every day for lunch. These were the fish the people of Chillabamba depended on for food.

She'd read about this before. Sometimes fish died because there was too little oxygen in the water. Sometimes they died because the water was contaminated with chemicals.

She had to find out what had caused this ill wind.

At her feet she noticed a line of leaf-cutter ants. Each ant carried a piece of leaf many times its own weight. They were wonderful, she thought – they worked so hard and cooperated so well.

Sofia followed the ants into the forest. She followed them for fifty metres. Up ahead she saw Narizon the coati sniffing with its long nose and scratching at the soil.

'Hey, Narizon, what have you got there?'

Suddenly, there it was, right next to the line of ants: a human hand sticking up out of the soil.

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