

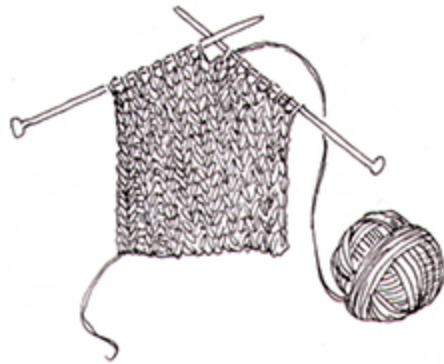


REBECCA  
LISLE

COPPER

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*For Rina Vergano*

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**PART ONE**  
**The Ordinary Place**



# 1

## Leaving

'Phew! Made it.' Copper collapsed into her train seat. The train was due to leave in three minutes. 'Made it, made it,' she repeated, breathlessly. 'Now, please, train, go!'

The train carriage alongside shifted slowly past and for a second Copper's heart raced expectantly, thinking *she* was moving, but then the platform across the rails came into view and she realised what had happened.

Hurry, hurry, she urged. We must go. We must get away.

She stared nervously through the train window at the grey mass of people and suddenly she saw them: even though she'd never seen them before, even though she didn't know what they looked like, she knew it was *them*.

She squashed back in her seat and slithered down out of sight, peeping at the men from below the safety of the window ledge.

They looked foreign; out of context in the busy station. They were bundled about with heavy coats and scarves and big boots. Their hair was long and tangled. Their skin was grey, as if they'd been living under a stone with the worms.



Up and down they paced, like lions stalking prey and there was an intensity in their wild stares which sent a shiver up Copper's back.

Don't let them see me, don't let them, please.

The massive digital clock above the platform showed there were now only 33 seconds to go. They couldn't reach her now, could they? She peeped round the edge of the window.

They were staring intently at the other travellers, scrutinising them, then turning away in disgust. Copper thought she could hear them shouting: *That's not her! That's not her!* their angry voices rising above the roar of the station.

Suddenly the shorter man lunged at a small girl with red hair. He dragged her close, thrusting his face into hers. The girl screamed; her parents grabbed her and at the same moment, a whistle blew shrilly and the two men turned and ran, just as Copper's train eased slowly out of the station with a long metallic squeal.

Copper breathed again. 'Safe,' she whispered, pulling herself back upright again and relaxing her tensed arms and legs.

'Oi, that's my nose!' said a small voice from underneath her.

'Oh, Ralick, sorry,' Copper whispered. She looked round anxiously, but no one was watching her so she pulled Ralick out and sat him on the arm of the seat. She had to be careful no one saw her talking to a toy: they'd think she was mad. 'How did you get under me like that?'

'How did you get on top of me like that, you mean.'

Copper hushed him gently. 'Ssh, ssh, someone will hear you. I saw them! They were there, Ralick: the men Aunt Ruby told me about. They followed us.'

'Dang! I wish I'd seen them. Wish I'd got my hands on those scoundrels. I may be a stuffed toy but I'm full of fight,'

said Ralick, proudly. 'What about you? Are you all right? You look all wobbly.'

'I feel a bit wobbly,' Copper admitted. 'Frayed at the edges. I'm sort of excited and sad and scared all in one go. I'll try knitting, it usually helps.' She pulled the ball of blue wool out of her pocket and cast on some stitches. 'How will Aunt Ruby be managing without us?'

'Very well, I expect, since she was the one who sent us away,' said Ralick.

'She didn't want to,' said Copper.

She began knitting, automatically the wool slipped round: pearl one, knit one, pearl one, knit one, and as the rhythm of the train and the rhythm of her knitting flowed together, her thoughts drifted back to the peculiar events that had brought her to that train on that evening, running from everything she'd ever known.



## 2

### How Copper Left

'I'd like to have a wolf,' said Copper.

She was curled up on the old sofa by the fire in her aunt's studio with a book on her lap, watching Aunt Ruby working on a sculpture. 'It says in this book that wolves are one of the most faithful animals in the world.'

'Wolves?' Aunt Ruby's chisel clattered to the floor.

'Goodness, Copper, what are you talking about *wol/ves* for?' Aunt Ruby noisily blew some fine dust from the curves of her sculpture. 'A wolf? You want a wolf?'

'Yes. It says they're very loyal creatures.' She put her book down. 'Loyal forever ... I'd like a wolf.'

'Ridiculous, my lamb,' said Aunt Ruby, 'although I did have a dragon once and she was loyal ... You know how ducks get fixated on things? The first object they see when they hatch - that's mum, whether it's a bucket or a duck or a piece of paper. Dragons do that too and luckily mine saw me. Dragons are quite intelligent too.'

'Aunt Ruby! What a lie. You *couldn't* have had a dragon.'

'I did. Just a teeny silvery green one called Glinty, though of course she would have grown big by now. Dragons are

more faithful than wolves and she was wonderful at keeping me snug at night, puffing warm breath over me.'

'What happened to her?'

'It was awful ...' said Aunt Ruby, staring into the fire. 'I've tried not to think about her all these years ... I had a terrible fight with my brother - we argued all the time - and he dropped her down some dried-up old well.'

'That's so cruel!'

'And poor Glinty, she was too young to fly, her wings weren't fully developed. I suppose she died, but I could never find out, I didn't even know where the well was, though I looked ... I never forgave my brother for that.'

'I bet you didn't ... but is it really true? Is it all true?'

But her aunt was finished with that topic. 'Now, now,' she said, tucking the chisel into a pocket on her apron. 'That's enough of that.' She stood back to admire her work. 'What do you think of this sculpture?'

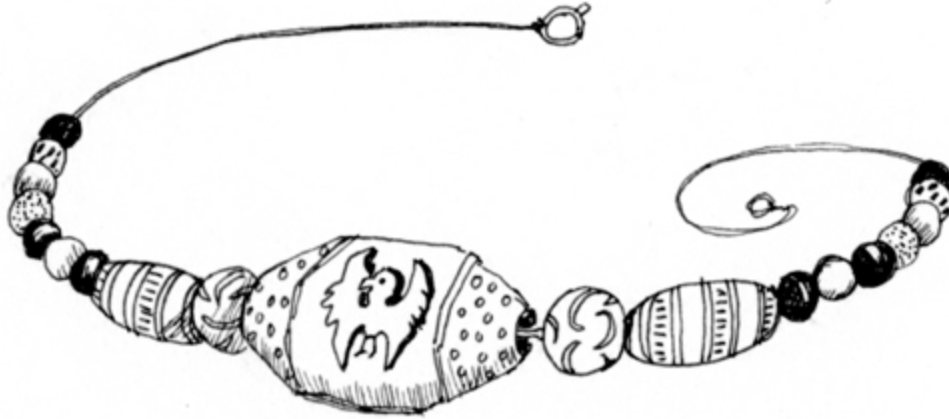
Copper knew her aunt was not going to talk about dragons again. Aunt Ruby's stories often hinted at a place where dragons and wolves lived, where things were strangely, magically different, but she always stopped without explaining, leaving Copper desperate to know more.

Reluctantly Copper turned her attention to the beautiful stone carving of a lion's head that her aunt was working on.

'It's brilliant. He looks really noble and kind. I'd like to have a lion too.'

'Hmm, that would be fun.' Aunt Ruby fingered the large orange beads round her neck thoughtfully.

Copper watched the firelight shining on her aunt, glimmering on her black hair and the sequins and beads on her skirt.



Copper loved her aunt, adored her, even though Aunt Ruby was odd, odder than any other aunt that Copper had ever met, anyway. Which other aunt had wild, jet black hair knotted with scarves into a magnificent pile on her head? Who else wore large beads made from strange exotic stones and shining minerals never seen anywhere else?

And Aunt Ruby was a sculptor. Copper didn't know any other aunts who were sculptors or who had, like Aunt Ruby, a special apron with thirty-nine pockets, one for each of her sharp carving tools. She was certainly the only aunt who had ever carved the stone gateposts of an ordinary little house into eagles and the lintel above the door into a dragon.

'We are a bit different from other people,' she admitted to Copper, 'but we must be glad of that, not ashamed. You see, we don't come from here, we've got rock and wood and the ice from the mountains coursing through our veins. We are earth people. We can make things; we've got the knowledge. You'll understand when you're older.'

'Older? I'm nearly ten now,' said Copper, 'and I don't have any knowledge of anything. I can't use a chisel or a hammer without bashing my fingers and anyway, I don't think I want to be different. Do I want rocks and twigs in me? Earthy people sound dull and muddy.'

'They're wonderful,' said Aunt Ruby, dreamily.

But Copper wasn't so sure. She was thinking about school. What fun was there in being different if it meant the other children ignored you or laughed at you and no one was your friend?

'You can't change what you are,' said Aunt Ruby. 'You're better than anyone at knitting and I bet if that useless school of yours taught you sensible things like woodwork, you'd be top of the class at that!'

Copper made a face. She didn't think so.

Aunt Ruby was right about them being different, though. Aunt Ruby had those purple eyes like amethysts, her wild black hair and skin as white as paper.

And Copper with her long red hair and creamy skin, she was different too. Plus, Copper knitted.

Instead of a small bag to carry her purse and keys in, Copper carried a long knitting needle bag. Instead of pens and pencils jutting out of her blazer pocket, she had crochet hooks. She had every type of knitting needle: wooden, metal and coloured plastic and every size. She had all types of wool too, thick and lumpy and thin and hairy. Copper knitted all the time, but she never finished anything. She *couldn't* finish anything. Her jumpers had one sleeve, her doilies never grew beyond the size of a coin, her socks got as far as the turn in the heel and then she abandoned them.

'I'm like this old three-fingered glove here. Incomplete,' she explained to Ralick. 'I'm half-finished and all filled up with funny feelings.'

'We all are,' said Ralick. 'Plus, I've got woolly fillings filling me, too.'

'I know everyone has feelings,' said Copper, 'but not like mine. I used to think it was normal to feel undone like this, as if someone started me but never finished me, but no one else feels like this, I've asked them. I'm like a half-drawn picture.'

'Like a teapot without a spout?' put in Ralick.

'Exactly.'

‘Like a chocolate éclair without any chocolate?’

‘Yes ... Ralick you’re teasing me! But honestly, I just don’t feel right ... And everyone else at school has at least one mother and father if not several and dozens of half- or step-sisters or brothers and I’ve only got Aunt Ruby ... and you. And actually, you’re a whole family rolled into one.’

Ralick growled gently to show he was pleased.

‘There’s nobody quite like you, Ralick.’

Ralick agreed. He had brown fur rubbed bare in places and he had stiff, sticking-out legs. His nose was pointed and so were his ears and he might have been a dog or a bear or a tiger with no stripes, it was hard to say what sort of animal he was. He had round black eyes, set rather close together, which looked glassy to ordinary people, but to Copper were full of life.

Having Ralick was another way in which Copper felt special: no one else had a talking cuddly toy, unless, perhaps they didn’t own up to it.

There was the mystery of her birthdays too.

Each year, somebody sent her a tiny gold charm which was so beautifully made, so intricate and delicate that when Copper was very young, she’d imagined they were made by fairies. For years Copper thought that all little girls got a gold charm for their birthday and was surprised to find they didn’t. Then as she got older, Copper was sure that the charms were sent to her by her mother. A mother who loved her and knew where she was but was kept apart from her by some cruel twist of fate.

Copper felt sure Aunt Ruby could explain, but Aunt Ruby fended off any such question with a smile.

Whenever Copper felt particularly incomplete (she called it her unravelled feeling), she would knit and knit and knit until she’d knitted herself back together again.

Copper and Ralick and Aunt Ruby were happy together until Copper’s tenth birthday which is really when everything changed.



### 3

## Copper's Birthday

On the morning of Copper's tenth birthday, Aunt Ruby rushed into Copper's bedroom.

'Darling, are you all right?'

Copper struggled to sit up, blinking and shoving back her curly hair.

'What is it?'

Her aunt looked so upset: her hair was hanging down with the colourful scarves all loose and tangled and there was panic in her eyes.

'Oh, my angel,' cried Aunt Ruby, gathering Copper up in a giant hug. 'After all these years, when I thought we were so safe! But *they're* here. I thought we were well hidden, and there's never been any sign they were looking for you ... Oh, why did I carve that dragon over the door? It was such a giveaway ... They were out in the lane at the back. I'm sure, I'm *sure* it was them.'

'Who?'

'*Them,*' said Aunt Ruby, grimly. 'What will we do? Where can we go? And today is your birthday. I never thought ...'

Copper patted her aunt's back and made soothing noises.