



# *The Porridge Plot*

CHE GOLDEN



ALMA BOOKS



FOR MAYA

MAY YOU ALWAYS  
HAVE KETCHUP



# THE PORRIDGE PLOT





## CHAPTER ONE

It was a pretty house. Surrounded by a white picket fence with a gate that swung open into a small garden full of summer flowers, it was very different from the cramped flat they had left behind in the city. In their old flat, the sound of the traffic had been a constant hum, a backdrop to their lives. But all Maya Brown could hear now was the drone of a furry bumblebee, as it glided from flower to flower, and birds singing in the trees around the house. Sitting all by itself in a lush garden, it was picture-perfect. It even had a plant growing around the door that was covered in tiny, star-shaped pink flowers.

Maya hated it.

“Come on then, little squid, let me carry you over the threshold,” said her father, and before she could say anything he scooped her up in his arms, kicked the gate open and walked down the garden path, bouncing her in his arms.

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Maya was in no mood to be cheered up, and she scowled at her mother's laughing face over her father's shoulder, and she scowled at her brother, Liam, who scowled back, earphones firmly jammed into his ears.

Her father struggled to turn the key in a rusty-looking lock; when the door finally swung open, he said, "Welcome to your new castle, my little princess!" before sweeping Maya into the house. It was a shame he forgot the door frame was lower on the new house than it was in their old apartment block.

"*Ow!*" shrieked Maya, clutching at her forehead as the hallway spun around and stars sparked in front of her eyes.

"Would you *please* be careful," Mum scolded behind them, as Dad put her down on the ground. He bent his long legs until his brown eyes were level with her green ones.

"You OK, little squid?" he asked. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

But it did hurt, and Maya could feel hot tears building up behind her eyeballs as her forehead throbbed. Before she could burst into tears, Mum was crouching down in front of her, taking her flushed face in her hands and kissing the lump that was beginning to swell on her forehead. "There, there, darling, let Mummy kiss it better."

Liam stood over her and sighed, pulling the white plastic earphones from his ears.

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“Just let her cry – it’s all she ever does anyway,” he sneered. “It will make the place feel more like home.” He looked around the gloomy hallway. “It needs all the help it can get.”

Maya gritted her teeth, darted round Mum and kicked her brother hard in the ankle. He yelled and clutched at his shin, while Maya spun round and made a run for it. “Could you not leave her alone, just for one day?” she heard her mother say to her brother, while her father chuckled and said, “There’s nothing wrong with her aim.”

But this wasn’t home, where her feet would guide her quickly to her bedroom or the nearest small space that she could squeeze herself into and hide away from the rest of her family. She had no idea where she was going and, as she stumbled into the living room, she stopped and stared.

“Do you like it?” asked Mum.

Maya looked at the faded floral wallpaper, the dusty floorboards, the shadows that hung like cobwebs in the corners, the dirty fireplace that smelt of wet coal dust and the filthy multi-paned window, which seemed to dilute the sunlight. She looked up at her mother and shook her head. Mum sighed and held out her hand. Maya clutched at it and felt her heart lift when Mum gave her fingers a little squeeze.

“After a good scrub and with all our things in here, it will feel just like home,” said Mum. “You’ll see.”

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Maya looked around, a frown puckering her forehead. “It’s dark,” she said, in a voice so small it was almost a whisper.

Mum shrugged. “Older houses often are,” she said. “They didn’t have double glazing when these houses were built, so they didn’t want to put in huge windows and let too much heat escape. But we’ll take down all this dark wallpaper and paint the walls bright colours – it will make a big difference.” Her eyes sparkled. “In fact, I can show you right now how good it can look. Follow me, I have a surprise for you!”

Maya took one last look around the neglected living room and then followed her mother back into the hallway and up the narrowest staircase Maya had ever seen. It was enclosed on both sides, and she was sure Mum was having to breathe in to have enough room to move.

“Ta-da!” Mum threw open one of the wooden doors on the upstairs landing and ushered Maya into the room.

It was pink and green, her favourite colours. Billowy white curtains hung at the small window. Maya walked across the polished floorboards, her footsteps echoing in the empty room, and peered out of the window. Open fields stretched away from the garden fence. There was nothing moving in it, except for a few birds. It looked as empty as a desert to Maya.

“What do you think?” asked Mum, a big smile on her face. “I came down here on the weekend to get

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the room ready for you. Isn't it lovely? I tried to make it look like your old room – I know you loved it, but this one's much bigger: you have a lot more space to play here!”

Maya bit her lip as she tried to imagine her stuff in here. She had liked her tiny boxroom in their old flat. She liked the way all her cuddly toys, dolls and books had taken up every bit of wall space. When she lay in her bed, she felt cocooned by them all. Her room had been her den, the one place in their flat that didn't have two people in it all the time, because there just wasn't the space. She had liked the view from her old window better as well. She could watch all the children playing in the park opposite their block of flats, and no one even knew she was there. In her old room she could lie in her bed and listen to the babble of sounds – slightly muffled by the double glazing – that was London, plucking noises from the stream and holding each one in her mind, like a bright, shiny pebble, while she figured out what that noise was. She could take her time and do it without other children laughing at her and telling her she was stupid or adults getting frustrated.

Maya noticed that Mum was still watching her, her happy smile wavering a little. She felt guilty, realizing all the hard work Mum must have done to surprise her, and she offered her a weak little smile of her own.

Mum sighed. “I know it's a lot to get used to, but we are going to be very happy here, Maya – just give it a

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chance. Shall we go and give the boys a hand unloading the car?”

Maya nodded and followed Mum out of the echoey room. But as Mum started to walk down the stairs, Maya noticed a door that was narrower than the others on the landing, and it was slightly ajar, showing stairs with light filtering from above. Curious, Maya opened it and climbed stairs that were so steep it was almost like climbing a ladder – she had to use her hands on the steps above to get a secure grip. But once her head poked through the floor above, her mouth dropped open in surprise.

The attic room was huge, with deep, sloping eaves that Maya could just about stand beneath. There was a tiny little cast-iron fireplace at one end of the room and a square window set in the roof with a clear view of the sky above. It was filthy and unlivable, and the dust on the floorboards was so thick it puffed up in little clouds beneath Maya’s feet as she walked across the room. Dirty cobwebs hung like rags from the beams, and the whole place smelt like old apples. She loved it.

“Maya, what are you doing up here?” asked Mum as her head appeared through the floor. She frowned when she saw how happy Maya looked. “Oh no, Maya, it’s so dusty up here, and there is a lovely room waiting for you downstairs.”

“Please, Mummy,” said Maya, clasping her hands in front of her face. “I really, really like this room. *Pleeeeaase.*”

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Mum grimaced as she tried to stand up straight under the eaves and realized she couldn't. "But it isn't really a proper room, Maya. There's no central heating up here, for a start."

Maya's face fell.

Mum sighed. "Let's see what your Dad thinks."

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Luckily for Maya, pleading and sad eyes worked better on Dad than they did on Mum.

"I suppose she could sleep up here," he said as he looked around the room. "It's got floors, proper walls, and we could put a couple of portable radiators up here," he said. He ran his hands over the exposed beams. He tried to straighten up and bumped his head off the low ceiling. "It's going to be hard getting all your stuff up here, squid. We might not fit your wardrobe up here. You OK with that? The room downstairs would be much easier."

"I really, really, *reeeeeeally* like this room. Can I have it?" said Maya.

"How are we going to get Maya's furniture up here?" asked Mum.

"It all comes apart, so we'll just carry it up bit by bit," said Dad. "Are you sure you are going to be OK, Maya?"

Maya nodded at him eagerly.

Mum and Dad looked at each other and shrugged. "Fine, we know when we are losing. But if it gets too

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cold, you move to the room downstairs, no arguments – agreed?” said Mum.

Maya nodded again, a huge smile breaking out across her face.

So, instead of helping Dad and Liam unload the removal van when it turned up an hour later, Mum and Maya dragged the Hoover and a mop up the steep flight of stairs and did their best to clean the room. They mopped and dusted and hoovered, and Maya could hear Liam moaning that she always had to get all the attention. The room had been pretty dirty, and bits of rubbish had collected in the corners, including something that had looked oddly like a nest. But it was like no bird’s nest Maya or her mother had ever seen. It had been a swirl of faded rags and downy feathers, laced with shiny pieces of paper and odd coloured stones. Maya had shuddered as her mother had swept it up, and wondered what strange kind of bird would want such a bizarre nest. Later that night, snuggling into her bed in her new room with her boxes of toys and clothes stacked up around her and the ceiling arching just over her head, she felt safe and snug. The floor was still dusty enough for her to write her name on the bare wooden boards, but she didn’t care.

Mum leant down and kissed her goodnight. “Are you sure you’re going to be OK up here all by yourself?” she asked.

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Maya nodded, her eyelids feeling heavy with sleep.

“Well, just call me if you get scared, OK?” said Mum.

Maya smiled, her eyes closing as Mum tiptoed away and climbed down the stairs. She snuggled deep under her duvet so only her eyes were showing, and yawned as she gazed at the silvery moonlight pouring through the little window in the roof.

Just as she was drifting off to sleep, she heard a little thump on the floor next to her bed. Her eyes flew open and her body tensed. She had issues with her hearing: she got her sounds mixed up a lot. Maybe she didn’t hear a thump? She swallowed. She had cleaned every inch of the attic with Mum, so it couldn’t be a great big rat...

A pattering sound made her gasp and sit up in bed just in time to see teeny tiny little puffs of dust hammer the air as *something* ran from under her bed straight across the attic to the fireplace, where it disappeared.

Maya could hear nothing but her own ragged breathing in the still night air. Her heart pounded against her chest as she glared at the fireplace, daring whatever it was to come out and show itself. But nothing appeared. She had a plastic sword among her toys. She *could* get it out of its box and poke it up the chimney. But she decided that whatever was in the chimney was best left alone. She pulled the duvet over her head, in case the rat tried to run across her face in the middle of the night, and screwed her eyes tight shut. If she ignored it, it would go away.



Photo: Lou Abercrombie

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