

# THE RUNAWAY SUMMER

Nina Bawden





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PUFFIN BOOKS

## THE RUNAWAY SUMMER

Mary hardly ever cried, but she was unhappy (and angry) most of the time. That was because her parents were getting a divorce and had dumped her on Aunt Alice, and she didn't know if they were ever coming back. Besides, Aunt Alice was fussy and a bit frightened of her.

She couldn't get angry with Grandfather even though he said things like 'But she's a good child underneath.' But when, on the beach, she met Simon, the policeman's son, she was in the mood to do, as she puts it, 'something really *bad*'.

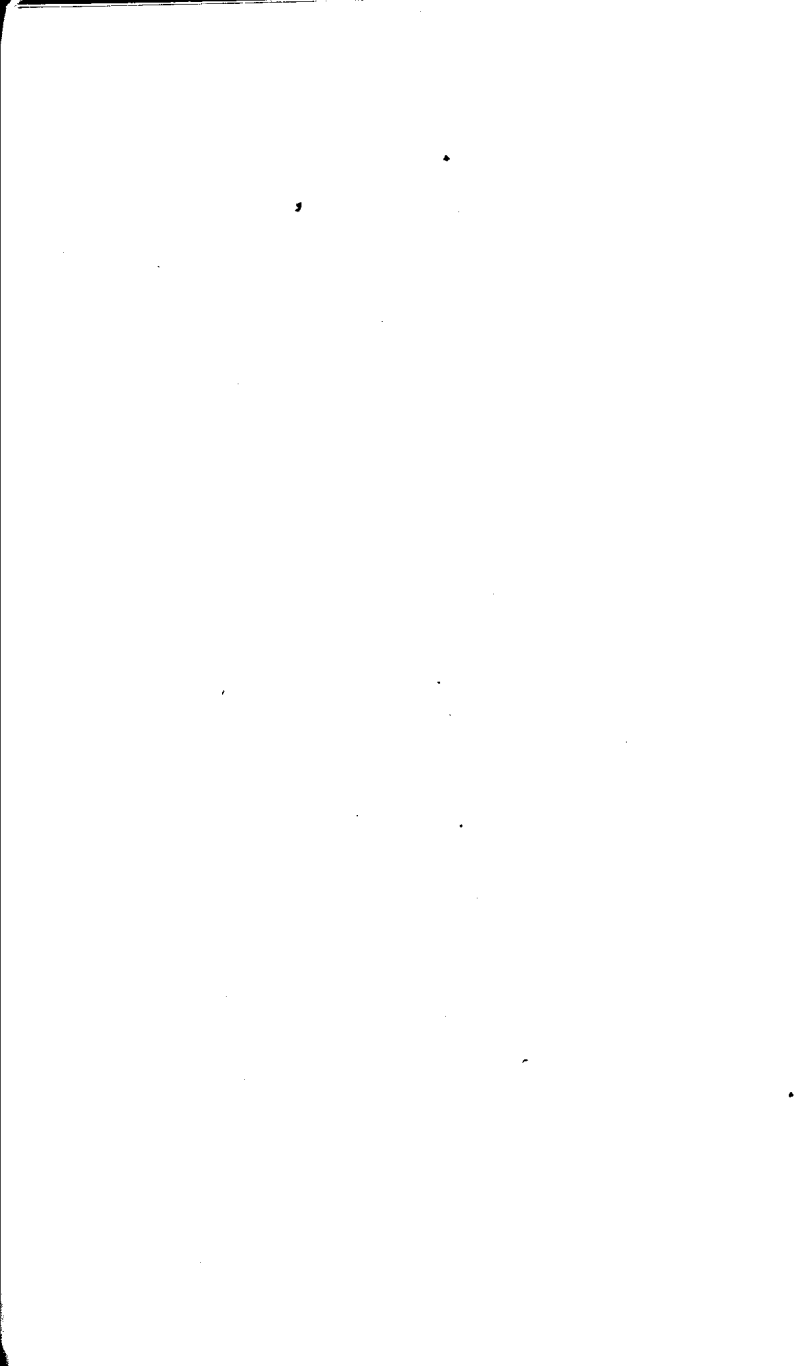
Only the 'really bad thing' turned out quite differently. First of all not only Simon but his family of four sisters were so nice they made her feel happy; then she and Simon discovered Krishna, the little Kenyan boy who had been smuggled into England illegally, and they hid him from the sinister people who were chasing him, while they tried to find his mysterious uncle. In the end, the business of worrying about someone else makes all her own problems seem much more bearable.

This is a thoroughly exciting book which is also strong on people and their feelings, and if readers don't think Simon is one of the nicest boys they've ever come across, we shall be very surprised.

*For Charlotte Sington, and Perdita Kark*  
*With love*

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'I WISH I COULD DO SOMETHING  
REALLY *BAD* ...'

MARY was angry. She had been angry for ages: she couldn't remember when she had last felt nice. Sometimes she was angry for a good reason – when someone tried to make her do something she didn't want to do – but most of the time she was angry for no reason at all. She just woke in the morning feeling cross and miserable and as if she wanted to kick or break things.

Aunt Alice could make her angry just by being there, with her rabbit face and grey hair in a bun and the little tuft of spiky beard on her chin that waggled when she talked; and her teeth that made a clicking sound at mealtimes, and her stomach that sometimes made a noise in between – a watery suck and gurgle like the last of the bath running out. And when *she* tried to make Mary do something she didn't want to do, it made Mary so cross that she grew hot inside.

This morning, Aunt Alice wanted Mary to wear her woollen vest. It was such a lovely July day, with the wind blowing and the small clouds scudding, that Mary had been in a better mood than usual when she came down to breakfast. She had even eaten her porridge because she knew her grandfather believed it was good for her. When he saw her empty plate, he had beamed over his newspaper and said, 'Well, it looks as if our good sea air is giving you an appetite at last,' and seemed so pleased, as if in eating a plateful of porridge Mary had done something quite remarkably good and clever, that she wondered what else she could do. She thought

she might say, 'I think I'll go down to the sea and skim stones after breakfast,' because she knew this would please her grandfather too: he worried when she did what he called 'moping indoors'.

And now Aunt Alice had spoiled everything by asking Mary if she had put on her woollen vest!

'That jersey's not thick enough for this treacherous weather,' she said, looking nervously at the window as if the weather were a dangerous dog that might suddenly jump through it and bite her.

Mary scowled and felt her face go solid and lumpy like a badly made pudding.

'It's not cold,' she said. 'And I'm hot *now*. If I put my vest on, I'll be boiling to *death*.'

'There's quite a wind out. It's blowing up cold. I know I'm wearing *my* vest! Just between you and me and the gatepost!'

Mary looked carefully round the room. 'I don't see any gatepost,' she said.

Aunt Alice laughed in her high, silly way – not as if she were amused, but as if she were trying to apologise for something.

'It's just an expression, dear. Haven't you heard it before?'

'I've *heard* it all right, but I think it sounds potty,' Mary said. 'And I just *hate* those horrible old vests. They've got sleeves! Sleeves and *buttons*! I expect you knew I'd hate them, that's why you bought them for me!'

She stabbed her spoon into her boiled egg, and some of the yolk spattered out.

'Oh Mary,' Aunt Alice said in a sad, fading voice. Pale eyes bulging, nose twitching, she looked like a frightened rabbit.

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Mary knew her aunt was frightened of her, and this made her more bad tempered than ever. It was so ridiculous for an old woman to be frightened of an eleven year old girl.

She said bitterly, ‘No one else in the *whole world* wears vests with sleeves and buttons.’

Aunt Alice said, ‘Oh, Mary,’ again. She sounded as if she were trying not to cry. Grandfather put down his newspaper and looked at her. Then he smiled at Mary.

‘My dear child, someone must wear them or the shops wouldn’t stock them, would they? It’s a case of supply and demand. No demand, no supply.’

For a second, Mary almost smiled back at him. It was, indeed, quite difficult *not* to smile at her grandfather, who looked, with his round, rosy face, and round, blue eyes, rather like a cheerful, if elderly, baby. He was bald as a baby, too – balder than most, in fact: the top of his head was smooth and shiny as if Aunt Alice polished it every day when she polished the dining-room table. Usually, just to look at her grandfather made Mary feel nicer – a bit less cross, certainly – but now, after that first second, she felt worse, not better, because she saw that his blue eyes were puzzled and that he was playing with his right ear, folding the top over with his finger and stroking the back with his thumb. This was something he only did when he was thinking hard or worried about something, and Mary knew he was upset because she had been rude to Aunt Alice. Although this made her ashamed and miserable underneath, it made her angry on top.

She said, ‘But children don’t buy their own clothes, do they? They just have to wear what grown-ups buy for them, horrid, prickly old vests and beastly *skirts* if they’re girls. They don’t have any say, they just have to do what they’re told.’

A lump came into her throat at this dreadful thought and she swallowed hard and glared at Aunt Alice.

'Children don't have any say in anything. They have to wear what they're told and eat what they're given and ... and ... live where they're *put*. It's not *fair*.'

The lump seemed to have gone from her throat and settled on her chest, like a stone.

Aunt Alice made a funny noise, midway between a gasp and a sigh.

Grandfather said, 'Mary, since you don't seem to want any more to eat, perhaps you'd like to leave the table and go upstairs for a while.'

He spoke gently and reasonably, as he always did, whatever Mary had said or done. Sometimes she wished he would shout at her instead: his being so nice, made her feel nastier, somehow.

She got down from her chair and left the room without another word, but as soon as she had closed the door, she stopped to listen. She knew that people always talked about you, once you had gone.

'Oh Father, it's all my fault.'

'Nonsense, Alice.'

'Of course it is!' Aunt Alice sounded crisp, almost indignant. She liked to think things were her fault, even things that couldn't possibly be, like bad weather or a train not running to time. 'I just can't manage the poor child,' she said. 'I blame myself.'

'I know you do. I wish you wouldn't.' Grandfather spoke quite sharply for him. 'Alice my dear, try not to worry. It's natural that Mary should be a bit difficult, in the circumstances. She'll settle down, given time. She's a good child, underneath.'

Mary gritted her teeth and stumped upstairs. She wasn't

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good underneath. She was bad. She was so bad that everyone hated her except her grandfather, and he only didn't hate her because he was differently made from other people and didn't hate anyone.

Mary went into her bedroom and scowled at herself in the looking glass. 'I hate you, too,' she said, aloud. 'Pig.' She doubled her fists on either side of her jaw and pushed up the tip of her nose with her little fingers so that the nostrils showed. 'Now, you even *look* like a pig! An ugly, horrible pig.'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that. Only when you pull that face at yourself.'

Mary turned and saw Mrs Carver, who came to help Aunt Alice in the house on Wednesday and Friday mornings. She was a little, thin woman with a thin, pale face that looked thinner and paler than perhaps it actually was, because it had so much red hair frizzed out all round it.

Mary said crossly, 'You shouldn't come into people's rooms without knocking. It's rude.'

'You're a fine one to say what's rude and what isn't.' Mrs Carver grinned, showing big, square teeth that seemed too big for her face, rather as her hair was bright for it. 'I was going to make your bed. You can give me a hand, since you're here.'

'Why should I? It's your job, you're paid for it,' Mary said, and then caught her breath. This was really a very rude thing to say, and she knew that red-headed people were supposed to be quick-tempered.

But Mrs Carver only looked amused. 'True,' she said, and twitched off the bedclothes. In spite of being so thin and small, she seemed strong and very energetic, darting round the room in a series of short, sharp rushes, rather like a terrier; snatching at blankets, picking up Mary's clothes. Mary

stood by the window and watched her. When the room was tidy, Mrs Carver said, 'Your Auntie was talking about having the room painted up for you. What colour do you fancy?'

Mary looked out at the garden, not answering.

'Come on, now,' Mrs Carver said. 'You must have some idea. What about a nice yellow? Would you like that? Your Auntie wants you to have a colour you'd like.'

'She can paint the room black if she likes,' Mary said. 'I don't care. I shan't be here long.'

'Won't you?'

Mary said quickly, 'My mother's gone on holiday and my father's had to go to South America, on business. He's gone to Chile.'

'I know.' There was a funny look on Mrs Carver's face, as if she knew something else, too. Something that Mary didn't know. She decided that she hated Mrs Carver.

She said, 'I don't suppose *you* know where Chile is!'

'I went to school once.'

Although Mrs Carver smiled as she said this, Mary could see she was beginning to be angry.

'Well, then.' Mary tossed her head. 'If you know where Chile is, you know it's a long way away, don't you? And costs a lot of money to get there. So he couldn't take me, and I had to come and stay with stupid old Aunt Alice. But as soon as he gets back, he'll come and fetch me straight away.'

Mrs Carver's face had pinched up during this speech and now looked paler than ever, as if all its colour had drained into her hair. 'If you were my little girl, I wouldn't be in too much of a hurry,' she said.

'I'm glad you're not! I should just *hate* to be your little girl. I should hate to be anything to do with you *at all*.'

Mary's heart was thumping as if it had suddenly come

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loose and was banging about in her chest. She ran out of the bedroom, across the landing and into the bathroom. She locked the door. She heard Mrs Carver rattle the knob, and then her voice, calling softly as if she didn't want anyone else to hear. 'Mary. Mary, dear ...' but Mary sat on the edge of the bath and stared in front of her, and after a minute, Mrs Carver went away.

Mary stood up and pulled faces at herself in the bathroom mirror until she felt better. Then she unlocked the door very quietly, crept across the landing, and went down the stairs. Aunt Alice was in the kitchen, singing, 'Eternal Father, strong to save, Whose arm doth rule the restless wave.' She had a light, trembly voice that wobbled on the high notes.

Mary opened the back door, which had blue and red stained glass panels, and went into the garden. It was a big garden, with a lonely, dark, tangled shrubbery all round it, and what Aunt Alice called a 'nice tidy bit' in the middle, where there was a lawn and flower beds cut in neat shapes. Grandfather was standing on the lawn and looking at a rose bed. He always said he was fond of gardening, though it seemed to Mary that he really meant he liked standing and looking at things growing while Aunt Alice did the weeding. But all the same, he had special clothes for gardening which he was wearing now: an old check jacket that was too big for him, since he had shrunk up as he had got older, and a woolly hat Aunt Alice had knitted out of odds and ends of bright wool, with a fat, red bobble on top.

When Mary came up to him, he smiled as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened at breakfast, and said, 'Hallo, there. Come to give me a hand in the garden?'

Mary said, 'Grampy, when am I going home?'

She hadn't meant to say this. The words just came out, as if there was someone else inside her, speaking them.

Grandfather looked at her. There was a funny look on his face as there had been on Mrs Carver's – as if they both knew something Mary didn't – but there was a sort of sadness mixed up with it, as if Grandfather were sorrier about whatever-it-was than Mrs Carver had been.

He said, 'Don't you like it here?'

Mary wriggled her shoulders and sucked at a strand of hair as if she found this a difficult question to answer, though in fact it shouldn't have been, and not only because it was pleasant to live near the sea instead of in London, and have a garden to play in, and a shrubbery where she could be private when she wanted to be, and light fires and make camps. Mary was fond of her grandfather – as fond as she was of anyone, that is – and he and Aunt Alice were always at home and never left her by herself in the evenings as her father and mother sometimes did, with only a bad-tempered black cat for company. This cat was called Noakes; he had a raggedy ear and a blind eye, both scars from old battles, and he bit and scratched whenever Mary tried to stroke him. She didn't blame him, because she knew how he felt, being shut up in a stuffy flat when he longed to be out, roaming the streets and fighting other cats, but there had been times when she wished he would curl up on her bed and purr, instead of crouching resentfully on the window sill and glaring with his one, good eye. Mary wasn't frightened of being left alone, indeed, she wasn't frightened of anything very much (she was a little like Noakes in that way as she was in some other ways too) but she had often been bored, and, since she had been staying with her grandfather, she had found it was comforting to hear voices downstairs when you were lying awake in bed. Particularly when you knew that these voices would never get loud and shout at each other.

In fact, Mary could have said, with absolute truth, 'Yes,



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I do like being here.' But she always found it hard to say she liked anything, just as she found it almost impossible to say 'Thank you,' or 'I'm sorry.' Sometimes she wanted to, but the words stuck in her throat, like pills. So all she said was, 'Oh, it's all right, I suppose.'

Grandfather prodded a weed with his walking stick. 'You know, Aunt Alice and I like having you. Very much indeed.'

Since Mary knew this could not be true, she scowled and said nothing.

Grandfather said, 'Of course, it's natural you should miss your Mum and Dad.'

'Oh, I don't miss *them*.' Mary was so surprised that he should think this, that she spoke quite naturally for once. Then she saw the look on her grandfather's face and knew that it was the wrong thing to have said: nice children always missed their parents when they were away from them. She looked away and muttered, 'Always quarrelling and banging doors.'

Grandfather cleared his throat. 'Well, your friends, then. You must miss your friends.'

'I didn't have any.' Mary thought for a moment. Grandfather clearly wanted her to miss somebody. 'I suppose I miss Noakes a bit. My cat.'

'I remember.' Grandfather chuckled. 'He once bit me. Right through my trousers. Drew blood. I suppose we could have him here if you really wanted, though your Aunt isn't very fond of cats.'

'Oh, Noakes isn't an *ordinary* cat,' Mary said. 'He's more of a wild cat, really. He once killed a ginger tom, a *huge* one, *twice* his size, and he's driven hundreds of others away. The people in the other flats are always complaining.'

'I don't think Alice would like that,' Grandfather said. 'She prefers to be on good terms with the neighbours. But