

RUNCIBLE JONES

The Gate to Nowhere



IAN IRVINE

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藏书章

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The Runcie series is for Elinor

A decorative banner with ornate, symmetrical flourishes at each end. The word "CONTENTS" is centered within the banner in a bold, serif, all-caps font.

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The Prison Visit

As the children's bus turned in to the gates of Hopewell Women's Prison, Runcible Jones felt his panic rising. He'd been rehearsing what to say to his mother, Millie, all the way but, after the hysteria his last visit had caused, he couldn't think of a single safe topic.

The bus stopped at the guard house with a clash of gears and a shuddering jerk, and black fumes puffed up through a rust hole in the floor. Runcie covered his nose. He desperately wanted Millie to talk about his dead father, Ansible Jones, though if Runcie ever mentioned the topic she would have a fit. Ansie's book on magic, his life's work, had caused all the trouble in the first place. Magic was not only illegal; it was a serious crime. Besides, the prison warders listened in to their conversations, hoping to gather more evidence.

The kids scrambled off the bus, jostling each other in wary silence as they formed a queue in the driving rain. Runcie ended up last, as usual, next to the belching exhaust pipe. He was soaking wet and his head was throbbing by the time the line

inched up to Security, where it stopped again. At this rate, visiting hour would be over before he got to see Millie. And he still had nothing to say.

Runcie wasn't game to ask her about the break-up, much less the divorce. He'd been just seven when Millie had left his father. That day was burned into his memory, and it was all his fault.

He couldn't bear to question her about the mysterious fire that had killed Ansie and destroyed all his work three years later. Millie had wept for weeks, then refused to mention his name ever again.

And Runcie was too scared to ask his mother why, why, *why*, a year after Ansie's death, she'd been arrested for having a copy of his banned book. Of all the strange events of his unhappy life, that was the oddest.

He already knew the answer to his one remaining question – when are they letting you out, Mum? Seven more years, with good behaviour.

Runcie handed his card to the warder, a stout man with bristling white eyebrows like worn-out toothbrushes and ears covered in a felt of grey hairs. Runcie remembered him from last time; he was the only decent warder here.

He waved Runcie inside but, as he passed through onto the grimy linoleum, he caught his breath. He would have known Hopewell Prison in pitch darkness, for its cold reek of unwashed clothes, sweaty fear and stewed Brussels sprouts would live with him all his days. It was the smell of his mother's despair.

He could see her now. Little Millie sat hunched behind wrought-iron bars thick enough to hold back King Kong. She was shivering and her hair, which last year had been as golden as flowing honey, hung over her ears like mouldy straw. Runcie waved, then had to look away. Her grey eyes were fixed on him as if she were starving and he couldn't bear it. Each visit she looked thinner and more tormented. Runcie was terrified that she was going mad.

That left only one good thing in his life – the memory of those times he'd shared with his father, just playing in Ansie's workshop while he told stories, laughed, joked and talked about his work, his passion. Magic! It had been the happiest time of Runcie's life. But later, in her anguish, Millie had attacked his father's work unceasingly. She'd refused to admit that magic existed, and called Ansie a fraud and his book a lie. Runcie felt as though he was expected to deny his own father. Even though he was desperate to find out more about Ansie's work, in his worst moments Runcie found it hard to believe in him.

The line inched forwards. Forty minutes of visiting hour were gone already. Millie's blue fingers were clenched around the bars now, her pale face crumpled like a discarded rag. A whippet-thin warder, standing by the far wall, was watching her, and everything about him shone, from the braid encircling his hat to the metal caps on his black bootlaces and the tip of his bony nose. All but his eyes which, like coal in a cellar, took in everything and reflected nothing.

Now the authorities were blackening Ansie's name, making him out to be a dangerous criminal. It was a lie! His father had been the kindest, gentlest man in the world. He wouldn't even tread on an ant. Why were they doing this to him; to *us*?

The warder with the furry ears tapped him on the shoulder. 'Your turn, laddie. Better hurry.'

Runcie glanced at the clock. Five to twelve, and visiting time ended on the hour. He scuttled across the room, slipped into the seat and his eyes met his mother's. Despite the bone-aching cold, she was sweating. He tried to smile but couldn't.

'You're looking well, Mum,' he lied.

Millie smiled but he wished she hadn't, for it was a ghastly deceit. He clenched his fists under the bench until his nails dug into his palms. She wouldn't last seven more years. What could he say to her? How's the food? What did you do today? Are the other prisoners *nice*?

'Mum,' he blurted without thinking, because thinking did him no good at all, 'please tell me about Dad and the good old days.'

He should have known better. Millie gave a cracked moan then said savagely, almost madly, 'He destroyed our family. Don't *ever* mention his name again.'

'Then why did you have his book?' he whispered. 'Just tell me that, Mum.'

Down the far end of the row, the coal-eyed warder's head whipped around and he leaned forward like a hunting dog straining at the leash.

Millie's mad look disappeared and she reached through the bars. 'Runcie, promise me one thing.'

'Of course, Mum.' He took her little freezing hand. Her whole arm was shaking. 'Anything.'

'Promise that you'll *never* have anything to do with magic.'

He stared at her, aghast. How could he promise that? 'Mum?' he whispered.

The minute hand jumped, then the clock began to bong the midday hour. 'Promise, Runcie!' She crushed his hand.

Runcie couldn't make that promise; he just couldn't. He looked up and the warder was stalking towards her, scribbling in his notebook. For the first time, Runcie wanted him to hurry.

Millie must have seen the hesitation in Runcie's eyes, for she hissed, 'Runcible!'

He crossed two fingers behind his back and took a deep breath. He hated lying to her, but he had to. Then he looked into her wet, ravaged eyes and hesitated. Prison was agony for Millie, yet her only thought was how to keep him safe. He couldn't do it.

The warder jerked Millie to her feet. Runcie clung to her hand but it slipped free. It was his chance to say nothing but he couldn't bear to leave her facing that terror. 'I promise,' he whispered, and felt the weight of Hopewell Prison descend on his thin shoulders.

The warder hauled Millie away, still staring over her shoulder at him. The iron door thudded shut.

'Time to go, laddie,' said the kind warder.

Runcie stumbled back to the bus, eyes stinging. He wasn't going to cry. Not a single tear, even in the gloom where no one could see. He had to be the strong one.

What was he supposed to do now? He had to learn about magic. How could he truly know his father, or even believe in him, without it?



Grindgrim Academy

Runcie's computer, the one thing he'd inherited from Ansie, was acting strangely again. Every so often the screen image spun like a propeller and the whole computer rocked back and forth as if trying to creep off his desk. In between, peculiar pictures flashed across the screen. Presently it was a range of icy mountains but the ice was green, while the sun was huge and red.

Runcie shivered. It was cold in his shabby attic room, and the rats in the roof seemed agitated today. He went to shut down the computer but his hand froze above the keyboard. An eye was staring at him as if peering *through* the centre of the screen. A deep-set, heavy-lidded eye, yellow around the edges and brown in the centre.

The eye went out of focus then snapped back, twice as big and ringed by a brass circle, as if Runcie were being studied through a telescope. His stomach throbbed. Now a bony finger and thumb appeared, ending in sharpened nails that twisted the brass ring; the eye blurred then reappeared, this time filling the screen.

Runcie threw himself backwards off his chair, landing painfully on his elbow. By the time he looked up, the eye had gone and the computer was shutting down, all by itself. He got into bed, turned out the light and pulled up the threadbare covers, but the eye stayed in his mind for hours. What kind of a government spied on kids, anyway?

Runcie, thinking about Millie, let out a heavy sigh. He'd lost hope of getting justice for her months ago. He had phoned every adult in her address book and at least a hundred others, written letters until his fingers were blistered, and pestered people in the street to sign his petition, though few had. He'd even written to his member of parliament, but she hadn't replied.

Though nothing made the slightest difference, he had to keep fighting. He couldn't let them destroy his family. Millie was shrinking with every visit, slipping through his fingers, and one day, soon, he'd lose her completely. That's why he clung so desperately to the magic and the mystery of his father. Those wonderful memories were the one thing that could keep the black fog of despair at bay. It was behind him all the time now, and every day it felt a little stronger, a little closer, but he wasn't going to give way to it. He had to hold out, for if it took him he was afraid his whole family would cease to exist.

If only he could uncover the truth about Ansie.

Thump, thump, thump.

It was six a.m. and still dark, but Runcie slid out of bed at once. Frost made feathery patterns on his grimy window and

the floorboards were freezing. He dressed hastily. After Millie's arrest he'd been stuck in an orphanage for months. No one wanted to take in a kid whose mother was in prison for possessing a book about illegal magic, and whose father had died writing it.

It wasn't fair. He'd loved his old school. All the kids there had normal families and normal lives, with mobile phones, high-speed internet and holidays in the sun. And they weren't spied on.

He'd eventually been fostered out to the Nightingales, the strangest couple he'd ever met. They lived at 13 Thirteenth Avenue and they didn't care about his reputation. The only thing they cared about was money – getting it and never spending a penny. Runcie didn't like them much, but he did everything he could to please them, for he was desperately afraid of being sent back to the orphanage.

Lifting the trapdoor, he climbed down the ladder into the upstairs sitting room. That's what Mrs Nightingale called it, though there was nowhere to sit and precious little space to stand. He edged between the leaning stacks of newspapers and magazines that towered two-thirds of the way to the cracked and cobwebby ceiling. She'd collected every newspaper published in the past eighty-seven years and was constantly reading them, though not in any particular order.

Mr Nightingale stood at the bottom of the stairs, tapping fingers as plump, pale and squishy as pork sausages. An odd little man, he wasn't much taller than Runcie, but as wide as he

was high. He was as hairless as a garden slug and his flat ears stuck out sideways like fly's wings. His face was red and sweaty, his lips plump, moist and habitually pursed. His body was exactly like a globe – shoulders that were just bumps on top, a belt around his bloated middle long enough to tie up a hippopotamus, and tiny, prim feet that belonged on a plastic doll.

‘Good, morning, Mr Nightingale,’ said Runcie politely.

Mr Nightingale nodded like one of those puppets whose head is held on with a spring. He handed Runcie two buckets and a knife, then waddled down the junk-filled hall. Runcie followed, yawning.

Two huge sacks of turnips leaned against the back door, grown by Mr Nightingale in an allotment down the street and wheelbarrowed back by Runcie yesterday after school. He took out the first turnip, peeled it and dropped it into a bucket.

‘Don’t bruise the vegetables, Runcible,’ piped Mr Nightingale in an absurd, reedy voice. ‘It kills the vitamins.’

‘Sorry.’ Runcie was always apologising for something. Dropping the peelings into the other bucket, he reached for another turnip. He had to peel both sacks before breakfast. The Nightingales were paid to be his foster-parents but they believed children should work for their living. Runcie could bear that. They treated him well enough, in other respects.

‘Waste, Runcible!’ Mr Nightingale clapped his flabby hands with a horrid splatting sound, like raw liver plopping onto the floor.

One of the peelings had landed behind the second bucket.