

The City of Secret Rivers

Written by Jacob Sager Weinstein

I was excited about seeing Aunt Polly. A long time before I was born, my mom and her eight sisters had left England and moved to a little town in Illinois, where my grandmother had bought a farm. I had grown up surrounded by family, and since Aunt Polly had moved back to London last year, I'd missed her terribly. Spending time with her was the only part of this whole crazy move that I expected to actually enjoy.

Mom let us into the building with the key Aunt Polly had mailed her, and we lugged our bags up two flights of steps. Then we had to lug them up another flight. "I thought Aunt Polly's flat was on the second floor," I said.

"Oh, here in England, they call... No, I should say, here in England, we call the first floor the ground floor. So when we say 'the first floor', that's actually the second floor, and when we say 'the second floor', that's actually the third floor."

Great, I thought. It's not just Mom. The whole country is lying to me.

Mom unlocked Aunt Polly's door and swung it open. "Hello, Polly! We're here," she called. There was no answer.

I spotted a note on a nearby table and read it out loud:

Dear Cleo and Hyacinth,

So sorry I can't be there to meet you. One of my companies in Tokyo is on the verge of collapsing, and I've had to fly over there to fix it.

I'll be back in a month or two.

Until then, please make yourselves at home.

Love, (Aunt) Polly.

That was strange, because when it came to being organized, Aunt Polly was kind of the anti-Mom. Even when she had a million different things going on at once (which was usually), Aunt Polly never missed a single detail. Flying off at the last minute was totally unlike her.

It looked like it was going to be just me and Mom for most of the summer. Whoopee.

"That's disappointing," Mom said. "I was really hoping Polly would be around to help me sort out my life. But I was worried we'd be too dependent on her, so I'm glad we have some time to ourselves. I'm sure she'll be back soon, unless she takes a long time to fix her company, which she might, so it will probably be ages. Oh, did I tell you Grandma gave me a present to give you when we arrived? I've got it here somewhere."

I had kind of tuned Mom out, like I usually did when she started on one of her monologues, but that last bit caught my attention. Despite everything, I felt a little tingle of excitement. Grandma always gave the best presents.

I waited impatiently while Mom opened up her suitcase and sorted through all the junk she had packed. Finally, she emerged victorious and handed me a gift-wrapped package.

I ripped open the wrapping and found a book inside: *A History of the Sewers of London*.

Huh. Well, I guess it kind of made sense. Grandma knew I liked history. She knew I was good at plumbing and stuff like that. She knew I was moving to London.

I wasn't sure I'd put all those facts together in quite the same way she had, but she'd never given me a bad present, so I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt.

I opened it up and found she had written something on the front page:

My dearest Hyacinth,

I write this with heavy heart, for you and your mother are heading into terrible danger you cannot possibly anticipate. I wish I could guide you through it, but you must face it on your own. All I can do is tell you this: your aunts and I have done what we can to prepare you. Remember, my child.

As long as you remember, I will always be with you.

With eternal love,

Grandma

Wait, WHAT???. If Grandma knew about real danger, why wouldn't she do something about it? And how had she and my aunts prepared me? They had told me a million random stories, and they had taught me a million random skills, but if I was heading towards terrible danger, knowing how to milk a cow or fix a harpsichord wasn't going to do me much good.

I showed the note to Mom and said, "What does that mean?"

Mom shrugged. "I think she meant what she said, sweetie. She just wants you to have fun in London."

Puzzled, I looked back down at the page. Grandma's note now said something completely different:

Dear Hyacinth,

Have fun in London!

Love,

Grandma