

# **THE LEOPARD'S TAIL**

*For Manuk Manukyan, Mary McEvoy,  
Ruben Khatchatryan and Gor Hovhanissyan*

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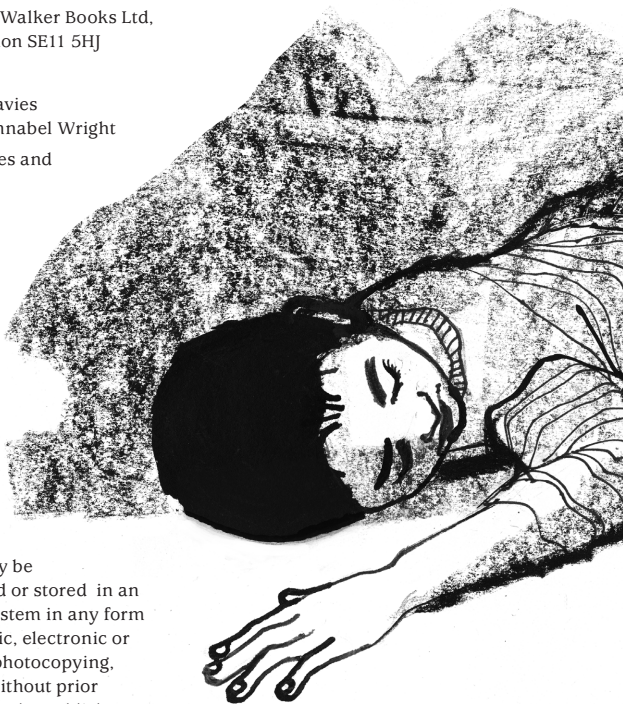
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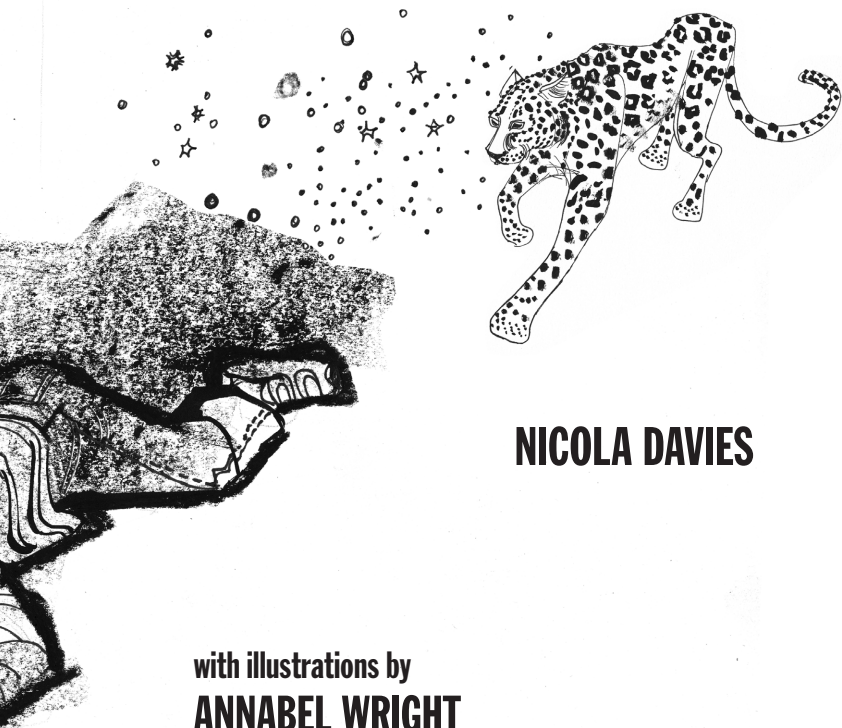
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# THE LEOPARD'S TAIL



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## Chapter One

**G**randpa had told him not to wander.  
“You’ll get lost,” he’d said.

But the mountain slope above the valley where they had camped for the night had cried out to be explored. Malik could not resist.

So, now he *was* lost. He looked around, bewildered. Nothing seemed familiar; he had no idea which way he’d come or which way he should go.

Worse still, he had a crawling feeling between his shoulder blades and felt *something* was watching him. He scanned the steep sides of the gorge, his heart racing, but he could see no eyes, only rocks and sunlight; and that made him even more afraid.

Malik panicked and set off down the slope, sending pebbles clattering and dancing, but his small legs scissored out of control and he fell. As he saw the huge boulder coming up to meet his head, he wondered if he was about to die.

Much later, Malik's eyes opened. His cheek lay against cold stone, and the world had turned dark, all deep blue and pale silver. Above the raggedy side of the gorge, the stars flowed in the black of the sky. Far off, the stream shushed in the night and equally distant, or so it seemed to Malik, his blood shushed in his veins. A patch of darkness was moving down the slope towards him, but not with the jerk and hurtle of a falling rock. There was a smooth intelligence inside the movement. The creature stepped

from the shadows and took shape in the pale starlight: low slung and sinuous, long-tailed and mottled. It moved closer, its paws kissing the ground with silence, its eyes gathering the faint light. It stood looking at him, so close that its shape blotted out the starry sky; Malik felt it breathe, sucking in his scent, assessing him. And then it moved on, down towards the sound of water, dissolving back into the dark. Barely conscious, as he was, Malik still knew he had seen a leopard!

Sometime the next day, Hootie, Grandpa's favourite dog, found him. She licked his face until he opened his swollen eyelids and saw her wagging her tail. Grandpa put Malik over his shoulders like a sack of potatoes and carried him down the mountain, grumbling at every step about the trouble he'd caused.

Back home, his grandmother scolded him too. "Lost on the mountain *all night!*" she exclaimed. "What would your poor mother have said, God rest

her soul?" She even threatened to write to his dad and older brothers in Russia, to complain of his bad behaviour. Malik hung his sore head, and didn't say a word about the leopard. Who would believe him anyway? Everyone knew leopards had disappeared from these mountains long, long ago. They would tell him he'd imagined it. He began to wonder if he *had*.

Yet as the years went by, the leopard, real or imagined, stalked about inside Malik's heart. And as he grew older, it drew him up into the mountains, always venturing further, climbing higher. He got used to sleeping out under the stars, and finding his way about the rocky crags and green gorges. He learnt where the eagles and vultures nested, he found wolf paw prints and watched lynx hunting among the rocks. But the only leopard he ever saw was the one inside his head.

His grandparents gave up trying to stop him wandering, but his grandma fretted that he was



“always running off to the mountains” and missing school; his grandpa began to call him “crazy” for spending all his time up there.

“It was that crack on the head when you were lost,” Grandpa would say, tapping his grandson’s head with one gnarled finger. “It let a madness in!”

Malik wanted to tell them that it wasn’t “madness” and “running off”. But he found it impossible to explain how he felt up in the mountains with only the wild and its creatures for company. At home he grieved over his mother’s death and missed his father and his brothers. He knew many families were divided as his was, the men working far away and sending money home. He knew other children whose mothers had died. That didn’t make it easier. But, alone with nature, Malik almost stopped missing them.

He did *try* to go to school, although it was his idea of torture: sitting still; indoors; all day! He found it hard to make friends and he was always in trouble with the teachers for bringing animals into

school. A small animal companion, an injured bird or a mouse rescued from Grandma's cat made the boring hours pass more quickly. One afternoon the sick hawfinch in his pocket recovered and wriggled free to flap around the room. The children squealed in delight but Mrs Ghazaryan was furious.

"Catch that creature at once and take it home," she growled. "I shall be speaking to your grandparents about this, Malik."

Malik shrugged and tried not to smile: it was noon on a Friday and he'd been told to leave school. He could be high up in the mountains by six!

He ran all the way home, released the bird into his grandfather's apricot orchard, then dashed into the house to grab his rucksack. But his plans for a rapid getaway were spoilt by the uproar in the kitchen. Shapat,\* Malik's magpie, had escaped again. Shapat had lost a wing and although he could never return to live in the wild, the wild definitely lived in him. The magpie was hopping around the kitchen creating chaos, throwing crockery onto the

\*Shapat Armenian word for Saturday, the day Malik found the magpie.



floor with his powerful beak and flapping his one wing. Grandma chased him, swatting at him with one hand while holding on to a loudly squawking chicken, which she was going to cook for dinner, with the other.

She looked very cross and when she caught sight of Malik, she grew crosser. “Catch this wretched creature at once!” Grandma cried. “Why you

can't have human friends instead of animals I don't know!"

Malik darted in, grabbed Shapat and tried to leave by the garden door, but Grandma stepped in front of him. "Before you go running off," the old lady said sternly, "you have to promise to be back for Mr Abalian's party tomorrow night. The whole village is invited."

"Oh, Grandma!" Malik complained.

"Promise now, or you aren't going *anywhere*!" she ordered.

"All right," Malik agreed. "I promise."

Grandma nodded and stood aside, allowing him to run out into the sunshine. "If that magpie gets out again," she called after him, "I'll stretch its neck like a chicken!"