

*For the staff of The Yard Kitchen, Penrith,  
at which this was partly written.  
Is finished!*

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The  
Golden  
Butterfly

Sharon Gosling

  
**stripes**

# Chapter One

There were tiny lights glinting on the snow, as if the last breath of magic in the world had collected right outside the window. Luciana pressed her forehead against the cold glass and watched them form shimmering lines in the night-dark of the orchard, spinning apart every few minutes before coming together to dance again somewhere else. She knew it wasn't really magic. It would be Charley tramping about in the pasture between their two houses, hunting winter rabbits by the light of his portable gas lamp.

Luciana shut her eyes, wishing that she could turn back the clock. She already knew exactly when and where she would go. It would be to a time and place

she held close in her heart and thought about often: the theatre, the one and only time she had seen the Golden Butterfly. In her mind she heard the orchestra start up, and suddenly Luciana was there again, watching from her seat. The lights on the stage were full and bright. The theatre was packed to the rafters and the air fizzed with excitement. Everyone there knew that they were about to witness something spectacular: the most extraordinary illusion ever performed. Then her grandfather stepped into the spotlight and the audience erupted with rapturous applause. They were all under the spell of the Magnificent Marko, and they wanted to see the wonder that he had promised them. They wanted to see him transform a woman into a butterfly.

Luciana's grandfather raised his wand and his assistant appeared from the other side of the stage in a dress of shimmering gold silk. The audience fell into silence. The Magnificent Marko waved his wand through the air and drew her out of the shadows, into the light cascading from above. Tiny jewels glinted in her hair, her dress flowed around her like water. She was magic personified, wonder sewn into her every movement. She reached the centre of the stage and the Magnificent Marko flicked his wand. She began to rise into the air, as lightly as a mote of dust. A susurrations ran around the auditorium: the sound

of five hundred people all drawing in their breath. Then wings sprouted from the woman's back, gossamer-thin and stitched from the colours of moonlight.

The Golden Butterfly danced in the air, beautiful and impossible, yet there before their eyes. The audience murmured and laughed, astonished and delighted. Then the Magnificent Marko flicked his wand again. There was a shower of sparks, a bang and...

The Golden Butterfly vanished.

Luciana opened her eyes. Her forehead was still pressed against the cold window, and outside Charley's light was still bobbing on the snow. Her heart felt heavier than ever. There was no magic here. There was no magic anywhere. Not any more.

The murmuring in the shadows behind her grew a little louder. She recognized the whispers as first her grandfather's voice, then her grandmother's. Then, finally, there was Doctor Stott's.

"Luciana," her grandmother called quietly. "Your grandfather wants to talk to you, darling."

Luciana slid from the window ledge, landing lightly on the Persian rug. When she had been little, she had played in this room for hours. Her grandparents' four-poster bed had been her chariot then: in her mind it had been given wings to go with its lion's-paw feet. On it she

had ridden to faraway places, searching for the butterflies he had taught her about.

*What did you find today, little chick?*

*Today I found the Distant's silverstreak, Grandfather.*

*And what would it be called in my books?*

*The Iraota distanti, Grandfather.*

*Wonderful! And where did you find it?*

*In a place called Sumatra.*

*Very good, little chick, very good. Now show me Sumatra on the globe, and draw me a picture of the butterfly's wings, and then I will show you how to make a coin appear from Charley's right ear.*

She stepped into the puddle of candlelight around the bed. Her grandfather was small among the shadows, propped up by white pillows. Luciana was dismayed by how frail he looked. She reached out and took his hand. "I'm here, Grandfather. I have been here all the time."

Her grandfather smiled. "I know you have, my dear. What a good child you have been for us."

His voice was hoarse and thin, like the winter wind. Where was the giant who had often carried her on his shoulders? Where was the man she had once seen turn a woman into a butterfly in front of a theatre full of people? The patient teller of funny stories who had finally managed to banish her nightmare fear of fire? Luciana felt

tears pricking her eyes.

“Now, now,” her grandfather said gently. “There is no need for that. I have had a good life, a very full life. Everything changes, Luciana, but that does not mean that everything ends, even when it seems to. Remember the caterpillar and its cocoon; the butterfly it becomes. There are wonderful things ahead of you. I want you to try to be happy, my dear.”

Luciana felt the tears weighing on her eyelashes. In that moment she could not imagine ever feeling happy again. Then Doctor Stott asked her to move away. Luciana squeezed the frail fingers in hers once more and let them go. She went back to her place on the windowsill. Outside, Charley’s light had disappeared. Instead she watched through her own reflection as the night turned into a new day. By the time the stars were lost to the low sun of winter, her grandfather had faded with them.

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“Do you remember,” Charley asked, “the time that your grandpa pulled a whole string of silk scarves out of half a walnut shell?”

It was a week later, a Tuesday, and the day of Marko Cattaneo’s funeral. Charley had tramped up the hill from the vicarage, where his mother was housekeeper. He’d

been doing that since he was old enough to walk, and before that his mother had brought him in her arms. Over the past week he and Luciana had wandered the house together, five storeys that held memories of their shared childhoods. Luciana was struggling to comprehend that Marko would never be there again. She had been an orphan since she was two and she couldn't remember her parents at all, however hard she tried. Her grandparents were her whole family – apart from Charley, who might as well have been a brother – and now, at thirteen, with Marko gone, Luciana felt as if she had lost half the landscape of her world.

Charley's words prompted a memory: the two of them kneeling right there on the rug in the drawing room, her grandfather sitting in his favourite chair. It was a rainy day and Marko had been keeping them entertained. The room had been chilly, but they had not lit the fire. That was back when Luciana's dreams had been so haunted by flames that she could not bear to be near one, even in daylight. Charley had brought them a blanket each and they had watched as Marko pulled the shell from his pocket. He held it up for Luciana and Charley to inspect before turning it over and tapping it with one finger, as if shaking out a bug trapped in a glass. A corner of bright blue silk had poked from the shell. Her grandfather



had tugged at it and a whole line of silk scarves had appeared, sheet after sheet of vivid colour pulled into existence from nowhere.

Luciana laughed. “That was so funny,” she said. “You couldn’t believe it!”

“Neither could you,” her friend said, grinning. “I think I’m still deaf from you shrieking in my ear.”

Luciana thumped him lightly on the arm. “Yeah, but I’m the one who learned how to do it for myself.”

“You did not,” Charley scoffed.

“I did!”

“I don’t believe you,” the boy said, and then sighed. “I don’t believe anyone could do magic like that except the Magnificent Marko.”

The use of her grandfather’s stage name brought a new lump to Luciana’s throat. She looked up at the old framed poster on the wall. It had been colourful once – daubs of yellows, reds, greens and blues – but now the bright hues were beginning to fade.

*The Magnificent Marko!*

*Be Amazed!*

*Be Intrigued!*

*Be Flabbergasted!*

*See the Greatest Magician Alive!*

He had performed at a big theatre in London three

nights a week and Luciana and her grandmother would attend a show once each month. Sometimes, as a treat, Charley would go with them. What excitement those days would always bring! The bumpy carriage ride to the station, then the train journey from the country into the smoky city. It felt like magic itself to watch the landscape transform as they steamed closer to the metropolis. The fields grew smaller, turning first into gardens and then into mazes of streets. The colours would change too, from vivid watercolour-greens into drab angles of grey and brown, brick-red and ochre.

Then just before Luciana's ninth birthday and at the height of his fame, the Magnificent Marko had vanished from the stage himself. No one had ever told Luciana why her grandfather had stopped performing, and every time she had asked, he had simply smiled. *Not everything is meant to last forever, little chick*, he would say. *Now, show me how to chase the king of clubs. I know you have watched me do it.* Overnight her grandfather had ceased to practise his talents, abandoning the world of magic without explanation. Luciana missed it, and knew that her grandfather did too. She'd often found him reading *The Magician's Times* and sighing mournfully. But he would never tell her why.

Now, four years later, the Magnificent Marko was gone for good.

Luciana went to the small table beside the fire. Pulling open its little drawer she took out the empty walnut shell. With one hand she held it up for Charley to see, quickly using her other hand to fold the thin sheaf of silk, which had been in the drawer beneath it, into her sleeve before he noticed.

“Here,” Charley said, astonished. “That’s not the same one, is it?”

Luciana held up the shell and tapped it, just the way her grandfather had. A glimpse of purple silk pushed its way out of the shell. She pulled at it and there was another colour behind it, blue this time, then red, then green, then yellow. Charley stared as the scarves floated down to settle on the floor around their feet.

“I told you,” she said, laughing again, happy that she hadn’t forgotten how to perform the trick.

“But how—” Charley began, when he’d found his voice.

He was interrupted by the door opening. Luciana’s grandmother, face pale and back stiff in her black mourning dress and veil, gave a small smile.

“It is time, my dears,” she said. “The carriage is here to take us to the church. Are you ready?”

Luciana nodded. She didn’t put the shell back in the

drawer. She slipped it into the sleeve of her dress instead, and gathered up the silks too. It seemed important to have something of her grandfather with her as they said a final goodbye.

# Chapter Two

The snow began to fall again as the mourners stood by Marko's graveside. Luciana lifted her face and let the flakes land on her cold cheeks and the curls that had escaped from beneath her black bonnet. Charley slipped his hand into hers and she squeezed his fingers. When it came time for her to scatter a handful of earth on her grandfather's coffin, she let go of the walnut shell too. With it went the bright silks. The scarves drifted down to cover his last resting place. Marko would have loved the flash of vibrancy. His life had been full of colour. Why should his death be any different?

The other mourners began to filter away, but Luciana

and Charley remained at the graveside, even though Luciana's toes were becoming blocks of ice in her best black shoes.

"Come now," said her grandmother, slipping an arm round Luciana's shoulders and pulling her close. "We should go home, before we both catch a chill. Your grandfather wouldn't want that, would he? Charley, take your mother home, dear. We will see you tomorrow, I'm sure."

As Luciana turned away from Marko's grave, she remembered some of the last words he had said to her. *Everything changes, but that does not mean that everything ends.* But this, here, now, was an ending, as sure as there ever could be one.

\*

They turned into their gate to find a large black carriage waiting beside their steps. Luciana's grandmother frowned as the hooves of their old grey mare crunched to a halt on the gravel behind it.

"Grandmother?" Luciana said, leaning forward to look out of the window. "Who is it?"

Before her grandmother could answer, both doors of the carriage opened and six men dressed in black suits and heavy black coats stepped out. One of these figures turned in their direction and Luciana felt her grandmother start in

surprise. Then a look of intense dislike flashed across her pale face. Luciana was astonished. She could not remember her grandmother ever disliking anyone.

The man strode towards them. He was big, with dark eyes in a round, pale face. He reached the trap and looked up at them. Luciana felt a chill pass down her spine and coil itself in her gut.

“Isabella,” he said in greeting. His voice was crushed glass, its edges sharp and unpleasant.

“Thursby,” replied Luciana’s grandmother. “What are you doing here? If you came to pay your respects, you are too late.”

The man’s lip curled. He held out a hand. “Please,” he said. “Do let us try to make this as civil as possible.”

Luciana watched as her grandmother hesitated for a second, then reluctantly allowed him to help her to the ground. Luciana followed but the man barely cast her a glance.

“You know why I’m here,” Thursby said, once they both stood facing him.

“Oh yes, I know,” said Luciana’s grandmother calmly. “What you are looking for no longer exists, Thursby. And you are not welcome in this house.”

He smiled coldly. “Welcome or not, Isabella,” he said. “We will come in. For all his many – *many* – faults, Marko

at least understood the way of such things. And I do not believe that you can do without the widow's pension he arranged for you through the Society. Or perhaps you can. Shall we find out?"

Luciana stood watching, willing her grandmother to send this person away. But after a moment Isabella Cattaneo took a single step back.

"Go," she said, raising her chin stiffly towards the house. "But you will find nothing. Marko gave away or destroyed everything when you forced him from the stage."

"We shall see, dear lady." Thursby was already half turned towards the house. "After all, it would take a man – a magician – to recognize it."

Luciana watched as Thursby's bulk disappeared through their door. A shadow passed the drawing-room window: one of his men inside, searching for ... what?

Luciana reached out and touched her grandmother's hand. Isabella's fingers twitched, then grasped Luciana's tightly.

"Who are they?" Luciana asked.

Her grandmother shook her head, thin-lipped, and her grey eyes glinted with anger. "Men unworthy of our time or energy. Come, let us walk a little."

Luciana did not want to walk. She wanted to go into her house and throw out the men who were violating it,



but fear held her back. She allowed her grandmother's grip on her hand to remain as she was tugged towards the skeleton of their orchard.

"What did you mean," she asked, as they tramped through the snow, "when you said that Thursby had forced Grandfather from the stage?"

Her grandmother looked down at her, pale face highlighted by two flashes of pink anger tinting her cheeks. "It is not worth talking about, my dear," she said. "It is done with, it is gone. As Thursby and his men will be soon enough. Then that will be an end to it, once and for all. Marko is dead, and at least he will not be here to see the age of great magic fizzle out thanks to that *monster*."

The vehemence in her grandmother's words shocked Luciana into silence.

When they returned to the house, the strange men were preparing to leave. A look of thunder was rolling around Thursby's face. Luciana felt the fear coiling in her stomach again, that horrible twist of dread.

"I told you it was not here," said Isabella Cattaneo, as he stalked down the steps. He moved past her without a word and she called after him, her strong voice rising with the wind. "This is the last time you will gain access to this house, Thursby. I am not bound by the rules that Marko swore to. Should you ever again set foot on my property,

I will call the constables. Marko is gone, and with him the Golden Butterfly. Let it *rest*.”

Thursby paused but didn't turn back. A moment later he had vanished into the carriage. Then it clattered quickly out of their gate and away.

Luciana's grandmother did not watch them go. Instead she pulled her granddaughter into the house, both of them shivering. Luciana could feel the tread of those horrible men everywhere, as if they were still lurking in the shadows of their home.

“Go into the drawing room,” said her grandmother. “I will find you a change of clothes.”

“Don't light the fire,” Luciana heard herself say, as if from very far away. “Please don't light the fire.”

Isabella stared at her. “But you haven't been afraid of the fire for a long time, my darling,” she said. “A fire in a grate is safe, don't you remember? And anything else is nothing but a bad dream.”

Still Luciana hesitated. The cold was eating into her bones, but the thought of sitting in front of a fire seemed at that moment to be the most terrifying thing in the world. It was daylight, but she felt herself surrounded by the same nightmare that had haunted her when she was little. It had been brought back by Thursby and his horrible men.

Her grandmother squeezed her shoulder gently. “Go,”

she said softly. "I will bring you a blanket instead."

Luciana did as she was told, her teeth beginning to chatter with cold and some other emotion she could not identify. She pushed open the door to the drawing room, walked inside, and stopped dead.

The poster of the Magnificent Marko was no longer on the wall. It lay on the floor, its frame smashed open and the poster itself torn in two.



Sharon Gosling's first middle-grade book, *The Diamond Thief*, won the Redbridge Children's Book Award in 2014. Her young-adult horror title, *Fir*, published by Stripes, was shortlisted for Lancashire Book of the Year 2017. She also writes books and articles about television and film, and has written, produced and directed audio dramas. Sharon lives in a small village near Carlisle, in Cumbria.

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