

NEMI

WINDWARD

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Preface

There is a summer in most people's lives that stands out — sometimes it is a single moment, a night, a weekend, and other times it is a couple of weeks spent with strangers. It leaves its mark not in postcards or photographs, but in the way your chest feels a little lighter, your thoughts a little sharper, and the world seems bigger than the day before. *Windward* is about one of those summers, caught between sun-warmed sand and the restless energy of youth.

It is a story of work and play, of laughter that echoes across a campsite, of friendships forged in mud and sweat, and of the quiet moments when the ocean seems to hold all your questions. It is about finding yourself while the tide comes in and out, about the people who leave a trace on your heart, and the choices that matter most when the world feels new.

For the children of abusers,

who carry strength in silence,

and hope in the smallest moments.

Chapter One

The air smelled faintly sweet from the lime trees lining the narrow bike path as Louise rode past Coldham's Common. Last day of school was over, and she wanted to scream with joy. The world lay spread out before her feet, bright and wide and full of possibility.

By the time she reached home, the sun had dipped low, casting long golden streaks across her bedroom floor. Her bags were packed neatly by the bed, the straps crossed like soldiers ready for deployment. Her mum bustled about in the kitchen, drying a saucepan with a teatowel and frowning at the crumbs on the counter.

"You could at least wipe up after yourself, Louise," her mum called, a note of exasperation in her voice.

"I will, I will," Louise replied, rolling her eyes. She tugged at the straps of her bag. "I've got bigger things to worry about than your crumbs."

Her mum's lips pressed into a line, but she didn't push. Louise felt the familiar pull of freedom and the hum of possibility in her chest. Soon she would be long gone from here, from all their rules, from being treated like a child.

Louise sank onto the edge of her bed and let her gaze wander over the familiar clutter: a row of books she'd read a dozen times, postcards pinned to the corkboard, her laptop closed, its surface covered in stickers. The summer air drifted in through the half-open window, carrying the faint scent of cut grass and the distant tweeting of sparrows in the trees across the street. For the first time in months, she felt a looseness in her chest, a quiet thrill that she was leaving — even if just for a while.

But leaving also meant she would be all alone in the world. What if she got it wrong at the campsite? What if she embarrassed herself in front of the other staff, or worse, the guests? She chewed her thumb unconsciously, her mind flicking between hope and doubt like sunlight dancing on rippling water. She wanted this freedom so badly, but a small, stubborn part of her still clung to the certainty of home.

She glanced at her packed bags again, their straps taut, ready to carry her away. Somewhere between the tangle of nerves and excitement, a small, fierce smile formed

on her lips. Tomorrow, she reminded herself, tomorrow she would ride the bus to Norfolk and step into a summer that belonged to her alone.

Later, Louise padded to the bathroom, her bare feet cool against the tiles. She flicked on the light and caught sight of herself in the mirror — her hair a tangle from the bike ride earlier, eyes bright and restless. As she brushed her teeth, her mum's voice floated from the bedroom doorway.

“Louise, can I have a word?”

She wiped her hands on a towel and leaned against the doorframe. Her mum's expression was serious, the kind that made her pause.

“You're really going through with this, aren't you?” her mum said, her voice low but firm. “I just... I worry. Campsites aren't always what they seem. People take advantage, accidents happen. You don't have to do this. You could change your mind — it's not too late.”

Louise met her mum's gaze and shook her head fiercely. “I'm not changing my mind. I can do this. I'm not a child.”

Her mum's shoulders sagged, a quiet surrender in her posture. “Alright,” she said softly. “Just... be careful, okay? Promise me you'll think.”

“I promise,” Louise said, though the words felt heavy on her tongue, almost pointless compared to the sharp, impatient urge to just leave, to be anywhere but here.

Louise turned off the light and went back to her room. She ran a hand over the stack of clothes she would wear tomorrow, then checked her alarm one last time before crawling into bed. The ceiling loomed above her as the room darkened, the hum of the city drifting in through the open window — distant traffic, sparrows settling for the night, the faint rustle of leaves. Her chest tightened with nerves and impatience. She wanted to sleep, wanted the hours to pass, but sleep wouldn’t come. Tomorrow was real. Tomorrow she would be gone.

Chapter Two

Saturday arrived before the sun. Louise stirred awake to the shrill beep of her alarm, blinking against the dim grey light creeping around the edges of her curtains. 5:45 a.m. Her parents were still asleep, the house heavy with ungodly peace. She groaned and swung her legs over the side of the bed — too early, but she couldn't lie there; she had to get moving.

The kitchen was quiet, still steeped in sleep, something Louise rarely experienced on weekends, since she usually slept in. She grabbed a mug and poured cereal, staring out at their street, empty and silent, trying not to think about the hours ahead. She'd spoken to Sue twice on the phone for the interview — warm, friendly, clear — and knew that the Windward campsite would be full of other teenagers, each with some job to do. She would be behind the little store, stacking shelves, and maybe helping campers find what they needed.

Her mind flicked between excitement and nerves. What if she got it wrong on the first day? What if the other kids were all experienced, confident, and she stood out immediately as a complete novice? She shook her head, the spoon hovering uselessly in mid-air. There was no turning back now.

And on top of all this, she even had to get to Norfolk by herself. Her mum had made that clear enough. Louise could still hear her voice from the night before, calm but immovable, relayed firmly to her dad: If she's all that grown up, she can surely get to work herself.

By 6:15, Louise was fully dressed, bags ready, shoes laced tight. She checked the clock again, heart hammering. The bus timetable swam in her head, every minute stretching. She didn't want to be late, not for this, not for the first step of something that felt like freedom and adulthood.

Louise stepped out into the cool grey morning, the street still empty and faintly misted with dew. Sweat was already trickling down her back from the weight of the bag slung across her shoulder, and the small wheeled suitcase dragging behind her insisted on zigzagging sideways instead of rolling straight. She muttered under her breath, yanking it back onto course for the third time in as many minutes.

The bus stop wasn't far, but every step felt longer than it should. She tried not to think about being late, tried instead to focus on what waited for her at Windward. She'd checked the maps more than once — the campsite stretched right along the water, dunes and sand and salt air — a world she could only picture for now.

She'd sunbathed in the park at home, sprawled on the grass with a book, or in the garden when the sun was strong, but this felt different already. More open. Vast. Alive with possibility, even from a distance.

And the people. Sue and Dave, warm voices on the phone, had already given her a sense of the place, but the other kids? What would they be like? Teens like her, working, laughing, learning the ropes — or perhaps they already knew everything, and she would be the odd one out. An outsider, unused to sand and beach, having been to a campsite only once as a child. She shook the thought away. She'd let herself imagine a summer where she belonged somewhere entirely new.

The bus station was already stirring when Louise arrived. A handful of early risers stood scattered along the pavement, shoulders hunched, eyes half-lidded. The air smelled faintly green from the bushes lining the edge of the road, mixed with the warm, oily exhaust of

a bus idling nearby — a smell she didn't mind at all. It felt like movement, like leaving.

She shifted her weight, the suitcase handle digging into her palm, and checked the departure board again. Too early to panic, she told herself, though her foot tapped restlessly against the concrete. Her thoughts slid back to her mum, sharp with irritation at first. They could have driven me. It wouldn't have been that hard.

But the anger dulled as quickly as it had flared. Louise exhaled slowly, watching the exhaust blur the air. She knew she'd pushed for this, insisted she was old enough, capable enough. She couldn't demand independence and still expect to be ferried everywhere. The thought settled uneasily in her chest — not quite peace, but something close to understanding.

When her bus finally pulled in, brakes hissing, Louise tightened her grip on the handle and stepped forward. Whatever waited for her in Norfolk, she was getting there on her own.

Chapter Three

By the time the bus pulled away, leaving Louise alone by the roadside, the heat had already settled into her skin. The last stretch of the journey had been stifling, sunlight pressing through the windows, and she knew it would be another hot day. Her clothes clung faintly to her back as she adjusted the strap on her shoulder and turned to face the entrance to Windward.

The campsite gate stood open, a simple wooden affair with a weathered sign nailed to one post, the letters faded but still cheerful enough. Beyond it, the ground opened out into sandy tracks and low grasses, the air tasting different here — saltier somehow, even this far inland from the beach. To the left sat the little store she'd been told about, squat and practical, its door propped open despite the early hour.

Louise hesitated. The bus ride already felt strangely distant, like something she'd dreamt rather than lived

through, and now that she was here, she wasn't quite sure what to do with herself. Where was she meant to go first? Who was she supposed to be looking for? She scanned the area, heart thudding, suddenly very aware of her bags and of herself, standing at the threshold of a place she didn't yet belong to.

Her eyes flickered around, down the wide sandy track running through the middle of the site, searching for the staff caravans she'd been told about. Nothing obvious. To the right were the toilets and washrooms, their doors already propped open. Her bladder twinged in sudden, urgent agreement — she really needed a wee — but the thought of being seen stepping back out again, made her hesitate.

Instead, her gaze drifted left, settling on the open door of the store. The choice felt small but safe. Louise tightened her grip on her bag and set off towards it, heart thudding, hoping she was heading in the right direction.

As Louise neared the door, someone stepped out, almost as if they'd been waiting for her. A middle-aged woman with sun-weathered skin and fine lines etched deep around her eyes, the kind of face shaped by years spent outdoors. She wiped her hands on her shorts and smiled.

“You must be Louise,” she said, already halfway towards her. “I’m Sue.”

Relief washed through Louise. This was her.

Sue glanced back over her shoulder towards the store, where voices and movement were beginning to stir. “It’s a bit mad on Saturdays,” she added briskly, but kindly. “Once everyone wakes up, it all kicks off. You made good time?”

She didn’t wait for much of an answer, already stepping aside to let Louise in, but her smile lingered — warm, efficient, reassuring all at once.

Inside the store it was already warm. Sue grabbed a bottle of water from a crate by the counter and pressed it into Louise’s hand without ceremony. “Drink,” she said. “You’ll need it.”

Louise did as she was told, draining half the bottle in one long gulp before she even realised how thirsty she was. Sue took one of her bags, slinging it over her shoulder with practised ease, and headed out through the back door. Louise followed, wrestling her suitcase behind her as its wheels sank stubbornly into the sand. It swerved left, then right, refusing to cooperate, until she huffed in frustration and gave up, hauling it the rest of the way.

Behind the store the campsite felt rougher, more utilitarian. A stretch of worn wooden fencing hemmed in an area cluttered with bins, crates, and the odd forgotten chair. The air smelled faintly of warm wood and rubbish baking in the sun. Beyond it stood the wagons — long, boxy living wagons on wheels, the kind you'd expect to see trundling behind a fairground lorry rather than parked on a campsite. Their paint was chipped and sun-faded, but curtains hung in the small windows, and one door stood ajar as if someone had only just stepped out.

Sue gestured towards them. “That’s where you’ll be staying, girls in the left one, boys in the right” she said, already moving again, Saturday urgency tugging her forward.

Louise slowed despite herself, taking them in. This, then. Not home, not quite. Something else entirely.

Sue walked to the wagon on the left and popped her head inside. “Rise and shine, Dana!” she called.

A muffled groan came from somewhere beneath the blankets, followed by a sleepy jumble of words.

Sue turned back to Louise. “You’ll be in the made bed in there,” she said, gesturing toward the bottom bunk of the nearest bed. “I’ll leave you to settle in — plenty to

do this morning.” And with that, she was gone, already moving off toward another task.

Louise stepped inside. The wagon was narrow and dark compared to the bright light outside, the wooden panels sun-warmed and faintly fragrant with polish and a hint of salt air that must have drifted in from outside. The floorboards creaked softly under her shoes. Two bunk beds ran along the far wall. On the right, the bottom bunk was neatly made, the covers tucked in tightly, a pillow fluffed and waiting. Above it, the top mattress was bare, pale and smooth, the sheets folded away, waiting for another occupant.

The other bunk was a different story. The bottom bed was rumpled and clearly lived in — a postcard pinned crookedly to the wooden wall above the pillow, tiny seashells scattered along the windowsill behind the bed catching the morning light. On the top bunk, someone’s long blonde hair peeked out from under the blankets, a soft tumble of gold against the pale sheets. Slowly, a pair of fluttering eyes appeared, followed by a big yawn, and then Dana rolled onto the floor in her knickers and vest, stretching her arms wide.

“Hi,” she said, voice thick with sleep but friendly, wobbling slightly on the floorboards. “You must be Louise.”

The wagon smelled faintly of sunscreen, warm wood, and the lingering tang of the sea. The blankets were cotton, a little scratchy, but homey; the walls carried dents and marks from years of use, each telling a story. Sunlight slanted through the small window, catching dust motes dancing lazily in the air. Louise took it all in — the narrow space, the lived-in chaos — then turned her eyes to the girl in front of her, bent over a bag and pulling out a pair of shorts. It struck her that this was the first time in her life she'd been introduced to a complete stranger who was standing there in her underwear.

Dana shuffled around, rubbing at her eyes, then gestured toward the wooden shelves set into the far wall. "Left side, bottom two. That's your space." "Don't worry if it's a bit cramped — everyone has their own little corner." She gave a half-grin, ruffling her hair. "I got in late last night, so my things are still buried in my bag. Don't mind me living out of it for a bit."

Louise nodded, offering a polite smile, and began pulling clothes and toiletries from her bags. She tried not to look at Dana as the girl changed her top — bra first, then a plain white T-shirt — a routine so matter-of-fact that Louise's stomach fluttered with a small, guilty embarrassment. She hadn't expected to

catch even a glimpse of a stranger's breasts, and it made her cheeks warm, while Dana moved about completely unconcerned, as if it were the most ordinary thing in the world.

She turned her back, focused intently on folding her shorts and stacking her T-shirts on the narrow shelves, letting the sound of zippers, fabric rustling, and the occasional creak of the wagon floor fill the space.

It was awkward, a little chaotic, but also strangely comforting. Louise could feel the heat of the morning sun through the small window, smell the faint lingering scent of sunscreen mixed with the soft cotton of blankets, and hear the subtle shuffle of Dana moving about. Piece by piece, her little corner of the wagon began to look like a home away from home.

Chapter Four

The first day of work hit Louise like a wave. The campsite was alive, buzzing with motion. Families loaded cars, suitcases thumped over the sandy paths, and somewhere behind the store a kettle whistled. New arrivals stumbled up to the counter, purchasing forgotten essentials, while others headed straight for the cabins or the beach. The smell of sunscreen, hot metal from the grills, and fresh coffee drifted in the air, mixing with the faint scent of the sea.

Inside the store, Louise met a girl with sun-streaked hair tied back in a ponytail and a calm, efficient air that immediately made Louise feel slightly flustered. “Hi, I’m Ellie,” she said with a quick smile, holding out a hand.

Ellie gestured toward the cramped aisles. “Come on, I’ll show you around.” She moved confidently between the shelves, pointing out the snacks, toiletries, and camping

essentials — charcoal, bottled gas, matches — explaining where everything went. Louise tried to keep pace, taking mental notes, her eyes flicking from labels to aisle numbers as Ellie demonstrated the rhythm of restocking without blocking the narrow passageways.

Soon, the counter drew Ellie's attention. New arrivals were rolling in, laden with forgotten supplies, and she slipped behind the register with a quick "Don't worry, I've got this — you keep the shelves sorted." Louise nodded and continued, trying to keep pace with the rhythm of the store as families bustled past, the hum of conversation and the occasional laugh filling the space.

The day was already hot, the sun pressing against the windows, and Louise could feel the unfamiliar but energising buzz of responsibility settling over her. It wasn't home, and it wasn't easy, but she liked it already.

Once the first flurry of arrivals had passed, the store fell into a quieter rhythm. Louise and Ellie moved slowly along the aisles, pulling items from the back and placing them neatly on the shelves. Golden fingers of sunlight slanted through the tall, slatted windows, catching the dust in lazy streaks across the shelves. The air smelled rich and earthy — ground coffee, fresh bread, and the whiff of cleaning polish mingling with the faint sweetness of packaged goods. Louise could

feel the warmth on her arms, the narrow aisles lined with tins and packets, and for a moment, the bustle outside faded into a soft, steady rhythm.

Ellie leaned against a shelf, checking a small stack of packets. “It’s a bit calmer now,” she said, “so I can actually tell you a bit about everyone.” She smiled, brushing a stray lock of hair from her face. “Dana’s been here the longest — four summers already, even though she’s only eighteen. She knows everything there is to know about the campsite and the store. I’m in my second summer, so I’ve got a handle on things, but I still have plenty to learn.”

Louise nodded, absorbing the information. The store suddenly felt less intimidating, the space a little more familiar, and the work less abstract. She tucked a few boxes of cereal onto a shelf and glanced at Ellie. “And the rest of the kids?” Louise asked, curiosity creeping into her voice.

Ellie laughed softly, nudging a box of biscuits into place. “There are only two boys, really. Cody — he’s seventeen, usually running around sorting deliveries or helping out with the beach stuff. And Ryder, he’s sixteen, mostly keeps an eye on the grounds, makes sure the tents and paths are in order, and sometimes runs errands into town if we need anything.” She

shrugged with a grin. “They’re both busy, but easy to get along with.”

She leaned back against the shelf for a moment and wiped the sweat from her forehead. “And then there’s... well, you might see another girl later. She’s been here the longest of all of us, nearly five summers now. But you never know with her — might show up, might not. She keeps everyone guessing.”

They moved along the shelves in companionable silence for a while, stacking tins and checking labels. Louise tried to memorise the layout, but her mind kept flicking back to the wagons, the dunes, and the idea that, for the first time in her life, she was in a place she could call her own for the summer.

By dinner, the heat of the day had softened, and a cool breeze stirred through the dunes. Louise, Ellie, and Dana gathered under the small canopy behind the wagons, cooking a tin of tomato soup over a portable stove. The boys had gone into town and would be eating there; Ellie mentioned that most of the time, it was just the girls. The low, golden light caught the

strings of fairy lights they'd draped around the canopy supports — tiny bulbs twinkling somewhere between day and night.

Louise shivered slightly and tugged at her T-shirt, then remembered the shorts she'd worn all day. She gave a small sigh, ducked into the wagon, and emerged a few minutes later in jeans and a sweater, the denim snug and grounding, helping her feel a little more at home in the strange space.

Dana had been working outside most of the day, but now she leaned back against the wooden railing, stretching her legs. “Finally got a chance to rest,” she said, eyes rolling toward the stove.

Ellie stirred the soup and shrugged. “I’ve been here since Thursday, helping Sue with sorting and cleaning in the store, so at least I know where everything goes.”

Dana made a face. “Still need to get the loos done before the day’s over. Ugh. Would’ve been easier if we were four. Then it’d be done already.”

Louise paused mid-sip and stared at her bowl, a little jolt of recognition running through her. Four? That reminded her — there had used to be a fourth girl. She hadn’t thought much about her before, but the mention made a fleeting image of the missing girl flick through

her mind, like the final piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Louise hoped there would be an extra pair of hands soon — she was so exhausted she could fall asleep right there in the camping chair.

The soup simmered, sending a rich, strong smell into the cool air. Louise wrapped her hands around her mug, listening to Dana and Ellie swap stories from the morning, feeling the day's work settling into a rhythm, the camaraderie of shared space and small duties, and the tiny flicker of belonging that came with it.

Chapter Five

By Tuesday morning, the first few days had already slipped by in a dizzying blur. Saturday had been frantic, the campsite alive with new arrivals and errands, but Sunday dawned slower. Louise woke to the faint creak of the wagon floorboards and the rustle of curtains. Sue's voice drifted in from outside, calling something indistinct but cheerful — not scolding, just amused. She obviously knew how teens were.

The girls fumbled around the narrow space, all trying to get dressed at once. Louise bumped shoulders with Dana as she wrestled into her T-shirt; Ellie's backpack tumbled off a shelf and spilled socks across the floor. Giggles bubbled up despite the groggy start.

Dana and Ellie shot off toward the washrooms, quick and purposeful. Louise paused, a small smile tugging at her lips. She was grateful for the long shower she'd taken the night before, the one they had cleaned

together after the day's work. There was something indulgent about starting the morning without immediately diving into a queue or wrestling with soap and towels in a crowded bathroom.

The three of them fell into the rhythm of the campsite morning: laughter, movement, the occasional thump of a dropped item, all underscored by Sue's distant, knowing voice carrying through the air. Louise felt lighter, buoyed by the familiarity and the quiet amusement of shared chaos.

But now it was Tuesday, and the campsite had settled into a steady rhythm. Dana had the day off and sprawled across a lawn chair, arms flung wide, legs stretched out as if she owned the sun itself. When Louise and Ellie passed on their way to the wagon, Dana made a point of looking as lazy as possible, arching back with a loud yawn and stretching like she hadn't a care in the world. "Ah, camping this time of year," she called, voice breezy and teasing, "there's nothing better!"

In the afternoon, Louise suddenly heard Sue's voice carrying through the open door — no laughter this time, just sharp, quick words, as if she were in the middle of a serious discussion with someone. Ellie glanced up briefly, then returned to stacking fizzy drinks with practiced ease.

Louise shifted on her feet, trying to get a better look, but could only see Sue through the doorway, her back straight, gestures tense. The voices gradually softened, replaced by a quiet murmur. And then, to Louise's surprise, Sue stepped forward and wrapped the other person in a brief, firm embrace — the same figure she had clearly been arguing with just moments before.

Louise's eyebrows lifted, and she felt a small, unbidden flicker of curiosity. Something about the scene made the campsite feel bigger and stranger than she had thought, full of lives and stories she was only just glimpsing.

Louise glanced at Ellie, but she was more absorbed than ever, adjusting the goods on the shelves with a precision that seemed uncalled for, the neat row of boxes considered. Louise debated whether she should ask what had just happened, but the sight of Ellie so focused told her it wasn't the right moment.

She didn't have to wait long though. Sue appeared in the doorway a few minutes later, bounding in with the energy of someone who had barely paused to breathe. In one fluid motion, she jumped up onto the counter, resting her hands on her knees. "Well, there's your extra set of hands!" she said, grinning. "And trust me, the washrooms and loos will be done by the time you're finished in here, I promise!"

After Sue left, Ellie finally looked up from the restocking, stretching her back with a long sigh. “I guess Skye’s back then,” she said.

Louise tilted her head, quizzical.

Ellie shrugged, already turning back to the shelves. “You can’t really count on her like that. I’m just glad she’s here — Sue’s right, we do need the extra hands.”

Chapter Six

Wednesday morning dawned cool and golden. Skye was still asleep as the other three shuffled about the wagon, getting dressed in the cramped space. Dana, with a mischievous glint in her eye, gave her bed a push against the wall, sending a loud *bang* echoing across the floorboards. Skye shot upright with a startled squeak, eyes wide and unfocused, caught somewhere between sleep and wakefulness.

She stayed there, topless, sitting on the bed and looking from one girl to the next, utterly still, as if she were studying them. The others paid her no mind, hastily pulling on clothes and scrambling out to brush teeth and wash up, leaving Skye behind. Louise couldn't put her finger on it — there was something different about Skye, something about the way she moved, or didn't, but she couldn't quite name it.

Louise took her time in the shower, luxuriating in the warm spray and the space to herself, a small indulgence she hadn't tried before at the campsite. Today she had the day off, and she planned to spend it on the beach, letting the waves carry away the sticky heat of the past couple of days, and then — why not — treat herself to a second shower later.

She smiled to herself, thinking back to yesterday, watching Dana stretch out under the sun, languid and almost regal. Now she understood a little of what that had felt like — the slow, sun-warmed ease of doing nothing and belonging to the morning for a while. Living the princess life, if only for a few stolen hours.

Louise slung a small backpack over one shoulder, the straps digging lightly into her skin. Inside were a towel, a few snacks from the store, a fizzy drink, a bottle of water, and her phone, earbuds already tucked in, music spilling softly into her ears. She stepped onto the sandy path leading to the ocean, the warm grains shifting under her feet, the breeze carrying the sharp smell of salt and seaweed.

She had been here before, briefly, but never truly ventured onto the beach. It had always felt foreign and vast, almost pulling her to it, but she had been too tired to do more than stand at the end of the path, letting the water gleam under the sun while her mind spun with the

day's work. But today was different. Today, she had all the time in the world.

Her eyes scanned the coastline, noting families sprawled on towels, children shrieking in the surf, the occasional dog bounding through the shallows. She veered left, away from the crowd, feeling the sand give under her feet in a rhythm that matched her heartbeat. The wind tugged at her hair and the hem of her top, but she barely noticed, lost in the gentle, rolling swell of the dunes.

After a while, she spotted a small dip in the sand, a little valley tucked between low dunes. Perfect. She sank onto the warm sand, brushing stray grains from her legs, unfolded the towel and leaned back against the gentle slope. Here, she could be entirely alone, undisturbed, the only sounds the distant cries of seagulls and the lapping of the waves. Finally, she exhaled fully, letting herself feel the calm, the freedom, the quiet thrill of a morning that belonged to her alone.

Louise sank into the sand, letting her fingers sift through it, warm and fine, combing out little stones and shells the way she might have as a child. One tiny stone caught her attention — a smooth pebble with a perfect little hole through it. She turned it over in her palm for a moment before setting it carefully on her towel.

She lay back, the slope of the dune cradling her, half closing her eyes, the sun warm on her face. Her earbuds were tucked safely back in her bag, leaving only the natural soundtrack of the beach, the waves rolling and crashing onto the shore, seagulls crying overhead, and the occasional rustle of the wind through the dunes. Time seemed to stretch and soften, and for the first time in days, Louise let herself simply be.

She was almost nodding off when a sudden shadow fell across her face, and Louise scrambled upright, hands flying instinctively to cover herself. Her heart skipped a beat. “Oh—!”

“Relax,” a voice said, calm but amused. Louise’s gaze landed on a taller figure standing at the edge of the little dune hollow. Sunlight glinted off her hair, and she looked utterly at ease, every movement measured yet effortless. Skye.

“This is my spot,” Skye said, nodding toward the small nook of sand and low dunes. “I usually hide here when I come to the beach. Quiet, no crowds.” She gave a small, confident smile, and Louise felt, inexplicably, that it was an invitation.

Louise lowered her hands slowly, suddenly aware of the warmth of the sun on her skin and the faint sea breeze tousling her hair. The sound of waves filled the silence

between them, broken only by the occasional distant cry of a gull.

They settled into the nook together, the sand shifting softly beneath them. Louise watched Skye move, the casual confidence in the tilt of her head, the easy way she stretched her legs out, and felt a flutter of something unfamiliar and exciting in her chest.

Skye stretched her arms above her head, completely at ease in the sun, letting the warmth settle on her skin. She glanced at Louise with a half-smile, eyes sparkling with mischief. “So... how’s the new one settling in?” Her tone was teasing, effortless, as if she already knew the answer.

Louise shifted on the sand, brushing stray grains from her legs. “Pretty well, I think,” she said, a small grin tugging at her lips. “Though I’m still figuring out your beach hiding spots.”

Skye’s eyes twinkled. “Ah, well, consider this one officially yours for the day. Just don’t hog all the sunshine.”

Skye’s smile widened just slightly, enigmatic. “You’ll like it even more once you figure out how to survive the

heat and the sun,” she said. “And the people,” she added lightly, a flicker of mischief in her eyes.

Louise nodded, heart thumping, feeling both nervous and thrilled. This was different — not like work, not like the wagon, not like anything she’d done before. Sitting here, alone with someone she didn’t yet understand but already wanted to, the beach seemed larger, wilder, and somehow full of possibility.

Chapter Seven

The week passed in a blur of work, sun, sand, and the constant hum of the campsite. Mornings were early and sticky with dew; afternoons stretched long and hot, the kind of heat that pressed against the skin and left a slow, drowsy ache in the shoulders and back. Louise moved through it all — stocking shelves, sweeping floors, running errands, hauling bags of coal or bottled water — muscles tired but mind alert, heart a little lighter than it had been in months.

Each day brought small victories: remembering where a particular snack was, finally getting the rhythm of the register, or catching the right moment to grab a break while the store calmed for a while. She thought about home sometimes, and the pang came sharp and fast, the worry of missing something, of being missed herself. Texts from her mum were brief but pointed, a mixture of curiosity and worry. *“Have you eaten?”* one would

read, or *“Don’t forget to be careful.”* Louise answered quickly, sometimes teasing, sometimes defensive. She didn’t really want to admit how exhausted she felt, how much she missed the small certainties of home, or how much she was enjoying being somewhere entirely hers. Heck, even how much she missed Mum and Dad.

Skye was never far from her thoughts. Even when the store hummed with customers or Ellie barked instructions at her, Louise noticed the easy way Skye moved along the store or around the campsite — the casual confidence, the small gestures like brushing hair back from her face, the quiet way she seemed to belong wherever she went. She found herself curiously tuning into Skye, lingering in thoughts a little longer than she meant to, imagining what it would be like to talk more, to understand her better.

At the end of long days, Louise often walked to the water, letting the waves cool her feet and the horizon stretch her thoughts wide. Here, in the wind and salt, she could let go of the tight coil of worry from home, feel the sun on her shoulders, and marvel at her own audacity. She was young, miles from Cambridge, yet alive in ways she hadn’t been allowed to be before — free, exhausted, exhilarated. She was happy.

Ellie and Dana were there in rhythm too, moving through their tasks, joking, teasing, or quietly solving

the same small problems every day. And sometimes, when the chaos slowed, Skye would appear, leaning against the something, cigarette in hand, hair tousled by the breeze, offering a wry smile that made Louise's chest lift. There was something magnetic about her, something that pulled curiosity and admiration into a quiet orbit that Louise didn't entirely understand yet.

By Thursday, Louise's texts home had become a routine. Sometimes her mum's voice lingered in her mind when she read them, worried but softening, a small thread of connection. They weren't at peace, not yet, but maybe that would come. Louise typed her replies carefully, letting a little of herself slip into each one: a laugh, a reassurance, a hint of adventure, a reminder that she was growing, learning, surviving — thriving even, in small ways, away from the nest.

Louise and Ellie were in the back room, elbow-deep in dusting and restocking, the smell of cleaning polish sharp in their noses. The quiet hum of the store was broken by a sudden commotion — voices raised, the clatter of something hitting the floor.

“What now?” Louise muttered, grabbing a rag and hurrying to the door with Ellie close behind.

They burst into the main store just in time to see Sue, face flushed with anger, standing rigid behind the counter. Across from her, Skye was frozen mid-step, a guilty tilt to her shoulders, before she spun on her heel and darted toward the door.

“Skye!” Sue’s voice cracked like a whip. “Get back here, now!”

But Skye didn’t. She vanished outside in a blur, leaving the echo of hurried footsteps and a faint trace of her perfume in the warm air. Louise’s heart thumped, half in shock, half in disbelief. She exchanged a glance with Ellie, who only shrugged, equally stunned.

The store felt suddenly smaller, the shelves closer, the hum of the fridge and the jingling of the doorbell somehow sharper. Louise knew, even before Sue’s heavy footsteps followed, that this was serious — and that Skye had crossed a line she hadn’t expected.

Sue turned to them, the anger drained from her voice, replaced by a tight, controlled calm. “Skye isn’t allowed near the till again, understood?”

Both girls nodded, quiet, caught somewhere between relief and unease. Louise felt a strange tug in her chest

— irritation, curiosity, and a small pulse of worry all at once.

Without another word, Sue strode toward the door, her steps brisk on the wooden floor. She called after Skye, but this time her voice carried concern rather than anger, a soft edge that made Louise glance toward the doorway. Outside, the faint rustle of the dunes hinted at movement, and for a moment, Louise imagined Skye lingering just out of sight, bracing herself, wild and untamed as ever.

Louise glanced at Ellie, brow furrowed. “What was that about? Did she... steal money?”

Ellie shrugged, leaning against the shelf with a concerned look on her face. “What else could it be?”

The store felt heavier somehow, the usual hum of customers and jingling bells replaced by an odd quiet.

Louise let out a long, tired sigh when the day finally ended and they could close up, the warm late-afternoon air outside feeling like a small relief from the strange, prickly tension that lingered inside.

Chapter Eight

Work continued, steady and exhausting, and Louise found herself pulling back from Skye. She couldn't shake the tension from the incident at the store, the sharp line Sue had drawn between rules and recklessness. Part of her still wanted to be near Skye, to watch the way she moved and listened, the confident tilt of her head, the easy grin she wore like it belonged to her. But another part recoiled at the thought of what had happened — the stealing, the anger, the way it had made Sue's voice hard and sharp.

Days passed in the rhythm of chores, customers, and errands. Louise moved through the work with quiet diligence, stocking shelves, tidying displays, and keeping her eyes down when Skye passed nearby. She felt the tug of curiosity and attraction, but also a prickling unease she couldn't quite shake. Even in the small routines, her mind kept flickering back to the

dunes, to the freedom of the beach, to the scent of the sea and sun on her skin.

More than once, Louise caught herself wondering why Sue hadn't sent Skye away after what had happened. Wasn't that what usually happened? The normal thing to do? The thought hovered at the edge of her mind during slow moments in the store, but she never let it reach her lips. She couldn't imagine asking Sue outright, and asking Skye felt even more impossible, like prying open a door that had been deliberately left closed. Instead, the wondering settled into something heavier, the growing awareness that Skye was made up of parts Louise hadn't seen yet, histories she didn't have access to, choices shaped by things far beyond this place. And that, somehow, unsettled her more than the stealing itself.

By Wednesday, the morning heat had settled into a warm, persistent hum. Louise grabbed her small backpack, snacks tucked inside, water and phone ready, and made her way to the beach. She'd meant to settle on her towel and soak up the sun, but seeing Skye occupying their little hollow made her hesitate, nudging her toward a walk instead. She set off along the shore, sand soft and warm under her feet, waves curling gently at the edge, the breeze tugging her hair and carrying the faint smell of salt.

She walked for a long stretch, letting her thoughts drift as freely as her feet moved. With every step, she felt some of the tension in her chest loosen, a quiet exhilaration replacing the knot of worry and attraction she'd been carrying. The coastline stretched out endlessly, unbroken except for the occasional gull or distant family, and for the first time in days, Louise felt entirely alone with her own thoughts — free from expectation, from conflict, and even from the pull of Skye's magnetic, complicated presence.

As she looped back along the beach, Louise noticed the hollow was empty. The sun still warmed the sand, but the urge to lie down and soak it in had evaporated. She shrugged, tugged her backpack higher onto her shoulder, and turned toward the campsite.

As Louise turned back toward the campsite, she spotted Skye ahead of her on the path, already halfway up the dunes, walking with that familiar, easy stride — as if she'd only just left the hollow herself. Louise slowed, then unconsciously quickened her pace, closing the distance between them as the roofs of the wagons came into view. She was still deciding whether to call Skye's name when a sharp, despairing voice cut through the air.

“Louise! Skye!”

They looked toward the source in unison and saw Sue striding toward them, her face tight with frustration. Their pace quickened as they closed the distance to the campsite, the wind tugging at clothes and hair. Sue stopped by the fence, hands on her hips, and gestured sharply toward the small courtyard.

“The water pump’s broken,” Sue said, voice tight with disbelief. “No water in the loos, the washrooms, or the taps — and soon everyone’s going to want to shower and wash up before tea!”

Louise’s stomach sank. The morning’s calm, the long walk along the shore, the freedom she’d felt — all of it vanished in a rush of responsibility. She glanced at Skye, who only raised an eyebrow, perfectly unruffled, and Louise felt the familiar tug of admiration mixed with exasperation.

Chapter Nine

Sue ran them through the situation quickly, her voice clipped but efficient. “Dave’s out with the boys, and Dana and Ellie are tied up in the store. That means you two need to handle the water situation until someone can come back.”

Louise felt her stomach tighten. Responsibility had a different weight when it was just the two of them.

Skye’s eyes met hers for a brief moment, a flash of that unspoken understanding passing between them, teasing and serious all at once. Louise blinked, caught it, then looked back at Sue. Together, they nodded, a quiet pact forming without a word.

The two of them moved wordlessly, hauling buckets of water from the storage tank behind the wagons to the small water heater by the washrooms. Each bucket was heavy, sloshing dangerously if carried too fast, forcing careful steps across the uneven sand and gravel. Louise's arms burned with effort, her shoulders tight, and she felt the grit of sand clinging to her sweaty skin.

Skye matched her pace, silent but steady, muscles taut and eyes fixed on the next load. They didn't need words; the rhythm of lifting, walking, and pouring was enough to focus on without having to come up with smalltalk. Louise could hear the water sloshing into the heater, the creak of the metal handles, and her own ragged breathing, punctuated by the occasional grunt when a bucket tipped too heavily.

For a moment, she let herself notice Skye — the way her hair stuck to the back of her neck, the focused line of her jaw, the steady power in her arms. Louise shook the thought away, leaning into the work, forcing herself to match Skye's pace.

Step by step, bucket by bucket, they refilled the heater, sweat streaking their faces, arms aching, hearts thumping. Words weren't necessary. Even in silence, there was a strange understanding between them: a shared effort, a small, unspoken connection forged in exhaustion and responsibility.

They carried the last of the buckets back to the storage tank, setting them down with a clatter that echoed faintly across the courtyard. The immediate urgency had passed, leaving a sticky, warm stillness in the air. Louise wiped her hands on her shorts and finally broke the silence.

“Why... why did you take from Sue and Dave?” Her voice was low, cautious, as if speaking too loudly might make the answer vanish.

Skye paused, leaning against the tank, fingers tracing the worn wood, eyes flicking away to the horizon. “It... it wasn’t about me,” she said quietly, almost to herself. “My mum... she drank all the money. Rent, bills, everything. I didn’t know what else to do. I just... I couldn’t let her end up on the streets.”

Louise swallowed, letting the words settle between them. She didn’t speak, didn’t judge, didn’t offer approval. She only nodded once, the single motion heavy with understanding — a quiet acknowledgment that some things weren’t so simple, even if they were hard or impossible to condone.

For a moment, neither said anything more. The breeze stirred the sand at their feet, the faint smell of salt and metal from the buckets lingering, and Louise realized that the silence no longer felt awkward — it felt like

space for something fragile and unspoken to exist between them.

Chapter Ten

Louise moved through the workday with a quiet, steady focus, her thoughts drifting back to the conversation with Skye. The memory of her revelation lingered in her chest like a small, complicated weight. She understood a little better now, the desperation, the choices made in impossible situations — though the memory of the theft still prickled at the edges of her curiosity and unease.

The store hummed with the usual rhythm of midweek visitors: a few campers picking up ingredients for dinner and supplies, the soft clink of coins, the muted thump of the register. Louise arranged tins and bottles, double-checked labels, and wiped down counters, her movements precise, almost meditative.

Then, suddenly, a cold shock jolted her skin. Louise yelped, hopping in place, hands flying to her shorts. Ellie stood a few feet away, stifling a laugh, an impish grin on her face.

“Ellie!” Louise hissed, cheeks flushing red as she grabbed at the waistband. “What — why —”

Ellie dissolved into quiet giggles, shaking her head. “Relax! Just a little ice cube prank. You’re too tense; needed to lighten the mood!”

Louise groaned, brushing the remnants of melting cubes from her legs. The tension from the morning melted a little too, replaced by an embarrassed laugh. Even with the long hours, the hard work, and the moral weight of Skye’s actions on her mind, she could still be drawn into moments of ridiculous, silly fun.

She shook her head and smiled, fleetingly grateful for the small reprieve. The workday would continue, and after it ended, the beach and the salt air awaited, as always — a reminder that, for all its complications, this summer was hers to navigate.

The four of them gathered under the canopy by the wagons, the evening air cooling as the sun dipped lower. Fairy lights twinkled around them and above their heads, casting soft, golden fingers across the table. The scent of pasta with garlic mingled with the faint salt of the sea breeze, and laughter bounced easily between them.

Louise served herself a generous portion of pasta, still feeling the warmth of the day lingering on her skin. She gave Ellie a pointed look. “Just so you know,” she said, voice low and mock-threatening, “I will get you back for the ice cube trick.”

Ellie smirked, tilting her head like a cat about to pounce. “Oh really? I don’t know, I think I saw your—” She wiggled her eyebrows and laughed. “—your girlish knickers earlier, so you might want to watch your step!”

Louise froze, cheeks flaming hotter than the pasta in front of her. She covered her face with her hands for a moment before daring a peek toward the others. Her eyes landed on Skye. The girl lounged across from her, half-smile teasing but unreadable, eyes catching the fairy lights in an enigmatic glint. Louise’s pulse quickened, a flush still lingering on her cheeks.

Skye didn’t say a word. Didn’t laugh. Didn’t even acknowledge Ellie’s teasing. But the way she held

herself, relaxed yet impossibly self-assured, made Louise suddenly aware of every movement, every glance, every heartbeat. It was dizzying, distracting, and somehow thrilling all at once.

Louise swallowed, blinking rapidly, and returned her attention to the food, muttering under her breath about revenge and ice cubes while the soft clatter of utensils and laughter continued around them.

Ellie and Dana had claimed the washroom, leaving Skye and Louise to themselves and the wagon briefly quiet. Louise turned her back to Skye and found some clean clothes. As she stepped out of her underwear, she caught a flash of the pattern. No, they weren't "big girls'" underwear. Her cheeks flushed — not from being naked in front of Skye, but from the knickers in her hand. She hurriedly shoved them beneath her other clothes on the chair and grabbed a fresh pair from the shelf: plain, white, and less childish.

Turning back, relief washed over her. Skye still had her back to Louise; she probably hadn't seen the underwear. Louise pulled on a vest, gathered her water bottle, toothpaste, and toothbrush, and headed outside to brush her teeth before bed.

Skye moved around the wagon with the same effortless confidence she carried all day, pulling her shorts off before climbing onto her bunk. Louise caught herself watching, a flicker of curiosity and something unnameable tightening in her chest. Skye didn't speak, didn't look at her — just existed in the space, a slow, calm rhythm that contrasted with Louise's restless energy.

Louise slid under the covers, hugging her knees for a moment, listening to the soft creak of the bunks, the distant crash of waves, the faint shuffle of Skye moving around. No words passed between them, yet the silence wasn't empty — it felt alive, full of possibility, as if the air itself held a quiet promise that tomorrow, the next day, could be different, or better, or simply theirs to explore.

She closed her eyes for a moment, letting her breathing settle, the tension of the day easing just a fraction. There was no forgiveness here, no resolution, not yet — only the soft comfort of being near someone she didn't yet fully understand, and the quiet, unspoken hope that the summer had room for more than just work, rules, and mistakes.

Chapter Eleven

Thursday afternoon, the sun high and warm, Louise finally had a stretch of free time. The store and campsite chores were done early, and she decided it was the perfect chance to go back to the beach. Her backpack carried the essentials: towel, water, a fizzy drink, and her phone tucked safely in her pocket.

The path down to the sand was familiar now, lined with dunes and tufts of hardy grass swaying in the breeze. Louise's heart thumped with a mix of relief and anticipation. Part of her wanted solitude, a moment to lie in the sun without distraction. But another part — a secret, fluttering part — hoped she might run into Skye again.

At the edge of the beach, she paused, letting her eyes sweep the golden stretch of sand. Their hollow was empty, quiet except for the gentle roll of the waves and the distant cries of gulls. Louise hesitated for a long

moment, debating whether to shed her top or not. Finally, after a deep breath, she eased herself down onto the sand, spreading her towel beneath her. She'd been topless here before, so that wasn't the worry. It was Skye she thought about — part of her wondered if she would show up, and another part didn't mind at all if she did. After all, the other girls clearly weren't shy in front of each other. The sun warmed her shoulders, the grains of sand clinging lightly to damp skin, and she let herself sink into the rhythm of the waves and the gentle hiss of the wind, all her worries about work, the store, and even Skye temporarily slipping away.

As Louise lay back, letting the sun warm her skin, movement caught her eye. Skye was walking along the sand toward the hollow, long strides, hair catching the sunlight like it had a life of its own. Louise sat up slightly, brushing a stray grain from her towel, heart beating a little faster, but this time there was no awkward fumbling, no scrambling to hide.

She watched Skye settle down a short distance away, arms stretched behind her, eyes half-closed against the glare. Louise's mind churned, weighing everything she knew about her. Skye was reckless — the theft at the store still fresh in her thoughts — but she had also been desperate, protecting someone she loved. That had to

count for something, didn't it? Stealing was wrong, yes, but circumstances sometimes blurred the lines.

Louise's gaze softened, tracing the casual confidence Skye carried as naturally as breathing. Did Skye even think what she'd done was wrong? Or had necessity swallowed any pangs of guilt? And if she did feel wrong about it, was that why she had acted so defiantly yet so carefully, knowing Sue's anger would be sharp?

Her thoughts spiraled between judgment and admiration, frustration and fascination, the conflicting emotions coiling tight in her chest. For all the questions she couldn't answer, for all the moral grey swirling between them, Louise felt a pull she couldn't deny — a curiosity, a desire to understand, and something deeper she wasn't ready to name.

She let the sun and the waves ground her, letting her mind move through the pros and cons like a tide. Skye might be complicated, even reckless, but there was no mistaking the spark of life she carried. And for now, that was enough to hold Louise's attention, even as she tried to untangle what it all meant.

Louise propped herself up on one elbow and called out softly, "Hey... it's fine, you can come into the hollow."

Skye looked up, a sly grin tugging at her lips as she walked closer. “So, ice cubes last night, huh?” she said, her tone teasing but easy. “I have to admit... cotton panties are much better than g-strings anyway.”

Louise blinked, a laugh slipping out before she could stop it, shaking her head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe,” Skye said, flopping down beside her, letting the sand sift between her fingers. “But at least I’m honest about it.”

They shared a quiet laugh, the waves rolling gently in the background, the hollow tucked away from the rest of the beach. Louise felt a warmth spreading through her chest — a flicker of ease and connection that hadn’t been there before. For the first time since Skye arrived, she could imagine a summer where the complicated parts of her heart might actually have room to breathe.

They lay in the hollow for a while, letting the sun soak their skin and the gentle rhythm of the waves fill the silence. No words were needed — just the sand beneath them, the warm breeze, and the quiet companionship of two girls suspended in a summer afternoon.

Skye shifted, turning onto her side, reaching for the shorts she’d discarded earlier. Her fingers rummaged through the pockets, and Louise watched, a faint pulse

of curiosity threading through her chest. After a moment, Skye produced a small, smooth stone. It had a hole worn through the middle.

“Found this yesterday,” Skye said, her voice quieter than usual. She hesitated, glancing down at it, not quite meeting Louise’s eyes. “Reminded me of the one you already have... here. Take it.”

Louise’s fingers closed around the stone, rough and warm from the sun. Her heart skipped, racing, as the weight of the gesture sank in. Skye had been thinking about her — noticing the little stone on the window sill in their wagon, remembering, connecting in a way that made her chest tighten with something new, fragile, and thrilling.

For a long moment, neither spoke, letting the gift — small, simple, and entirely meaningful — hang between them. Louise turned the stone over in her hand, feeling its smooth edges, feeling the undeniable tug of closeness, and thought that maybe, just maybe, this summer held more than work and rules. Maybe it held something just for them.

Chapter Twelve

Morning light crept through the slanted windows of the wagon, golden fingers touching the bunks and the scattered belongings. Louise stretched and yawned, hearing the familiar rustle of Dana and Ellie moving around getting dressed.

She got out of bed and joined the chaos, glancing toward Skye's bunk, expecting the usual heap of blankets or a glint of sun-warmed skin. But it was empty. No quiet sigh, no shift under the covers, not even a hint of movement.

Dana pushed the bed against the wall, a habit from before, expecting to rouse Skye, but there was nothing — no sound, no topless Skye sitting up straight. Louise's stomach twisted.

Then her eyes caught a small scrap of paper, laying on Skye's pillow. She picked it up carefully. The

handwriting was unmistakable: neat, a little slanted, familiar.

“Sorry x Skye”

The words were simple, but the weight of them pressed into Louise’s chest. Skye was gone. Gone without a word, gone without explanation, leaving only a piece of herself behind. Louise stared at the paper, her fingers tightening around it, and for the first time all summer, she felt the hollow pull of absence.

Nobody knew anything. Not Dana, not Ellie, not even Sue or Dave. The owners only discovered Skye’s absence when the girls told them, as they arrived for their morning shift, calls of concern spreading quickly across the campsite.

Louise felt a sharp stab of betrayal twist in her chest. How could she just... vanish like that? But the anger was quickly tangled with worry. Was Skye okay? Did she just have enough? Gone to steal more money somewhere? Something else?

And then frustration crept in. She could at least have woken her. A simple shake, a whisper, anything. Louise pulled the little scrap of paper out of her pocket and read it again, the neat handwriting burning into her

mind, and for the first time all summer she wished she could understand exactly what Skye was thinking — why she had gone, and why she'd left only a note.

Louise tracked down Dave near the store, her stomach knotting as she approached. “Do you... have Skye’s number?” she asked, trying to keep her voice steady.

Dave pulled his phone out and put on his reading glasses, giving Louise a look that seemed to say she shouldn’t worry — or maybe that this was just Skye. She definitely didn’t feel judged. He read out the number so she could add it to her own phone. “Calls and texts aren’t going through,” he said gently. “I’ve tried. Must be the signal out here... or something else. Just don’t worry too much. She’s resourceful.”

Louise added the number to her phone and dialed, waited, listened to the ringing but it went instantly to the voicemail beep. She tried again. And again. Each attempt ended the same way — no answer, no message.

Her fingers ached from scrolling, redialing, typing texts she deleted before sending. The silence in return was oppressive, filled only with the faint hum of the campsite waking around her. Louise’s chest tightened, the scrap of paper from Skye still clutched in her other hand, a reminder that the girl she had grown used to seeing was suddenly... unreachable.

The morning dragged on in the store, the usual rhythm of restocking, bagging, and checking off orders. Louise tried to focus, but her hands seemed to have a mind of their own, placing packets of biscuits on the wrong shelf, stacking tins haphazardly.

“Earth to Louise!” Ellie called from across the aisle, a faint laugh in her voice. Louise looked up, cheeks warming, and offered a sheepish smile.

Ellie shook her head, a half-smile tugging at her lips as she continued, “Don’t worry. Skye’s... she isn’t like the others. You can’t really count on her for anything, and that’s just the way she is.”

Louise’s chest tightened. The words sounded familiar — a memory flickered back to the first day Skye arrived. Ellie had said almost exactly the same thing then, a warning wrapped in amusement. And yet, here she was, still thinking about the girl, still caught between frustration, curiosity, and something warmer that she didn’t fully understand.

She glanced down at the mis-shelved goods, realizing she’d been distracted, her mind wandering between the empty hollow, the scrap of paper, and the impossibly enigmatic Skye. For all her mistakes today, none of it mattered as much as the quiet, stubborn pull of

wondering where Skye was, and why she had left without a word.

Dinner came and went, though Louise barely touched her plate. Dana had been bustling around, tossing a simple pasta dish with tomato sauce and flecks of herbs, the warm aroma filling the wagon. Louise poked at the noodles with her fork, occasionally lifting one to her mouth, chewing slowly as if the act of eating itself could fill the emptiness pressing at her chest.

The others chatted around her, laughter and teasing floating in the air, but Louise felt distant, her mind circling the same thoughts: the empty hollow on the beach, Skye's disappearance, the scrap of paper still tucked in her pocket. She swallowed a few more bites, trying to anchor herself in the mundane, but the taste of the pasta barely registered.

She didn't even feel like brushing her teeth, letting the day slip past with quiet resignation. Instead, she crawled under the covers early, curling up on her bunk. Outside the wagon, Ellie and Dana's voices carried faintly through the closed door, mingling with Cody and Ryder's laughter and chatter. The sound was distant, almost comforting in its normalcy, yet it only reminded Louise of the hollow quiet Skye had left behind.

She lay there, staring at the slanted ceiling, the warmth of the day lingering on her skin, feeling the tug of absence and curiosity that refused to fade. Sleep came slowly, if at all, and her thoughts once again turned to the scrap of paper on the window sill where it was secured by the stone from Skye.

She felt the urge to cry and let it come, quietly, her chest rising and falling with soft heaves as silent tears traced down her cheeks. Eventually, exhaustion took over, and she drifted into sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Friday morning arrived soft and golden through the slanted windows. Louise woke slowly, glancing at the top bunk that had been Skye's. It was empty, she had made the bed yesterday and now the neatly made bed suddenly felt strangely hollow.

Her fingers found the small pebble Skye had given her, rough and smooth all at once, and she rolled it gently between her palms. The gesture was meditative, grounding, and strangely comforting, a quiet tether to the girl who was nowhere in sight. She stayed in bed for a while, listening to Dana and Ellie moving about in the wagon, rustling clothes and laughing softly as they got dressed.

Louise let herself linger, chest tight with the ache of absence and the unfamiliar pull of something more — a fluttering, stubborn awareness that she was in love with

Skye, tangled up with worry, frustration, and that raw, piercing sense of betrayal.

Louise finally swung her legs over the side of the bunk, the pebble still warm in her palm. For the first time there, for the first time in many weeks, she was alone in the wagon while getting up in the morning — no one pressing, no one teasing, no one to watch her. She could move at her own pace, slip out of her underwear, and pull on fresh clothes without a second thought.

As she dressed, her mind wandered to Skye, the missing presence that still seemed to hum in the air. The sorrow from last night lingered, but in the warm morning light it felt quieter somehow, more manageable — a soft ache rather than a hollow pain. She folded each item of clothing with care, letting her thoughts trace memories of Skye, the pebble, the hollow on the beach, the laugh they had shared.

By the time she was ready, Louise felt steadier, anchored by the sunlight, the solitude, and the small, tangible piece of Skye she carried in her pocket. The day was beginning, and though the ache of absence hadn't gone, it was tempered by hope — and by the unspoken certainty that this summer still had more to give.

By mid-morning, Louise found herself at the counter, the steady rhythm of the store grounding her. Ellie was outside, tidying up the grounds and rearranging supplies, leaving Louise in charge of the small shop. Not for the first time, she felt the familiar flutter of nerves — but today it was tempered by a quiet relief.

With customers trickling in to pick up forgotten groceries, charcoal, or bottled gas, Louise had to focus. Scanning items, bagging purchases, checking stock lists — the tasks required enough attention to give her mind a break from Skye, from the hollow, from the worry that had gripped her since yesterday.

She felt a small, satisfying sense of control as she rang up a family of campers, their chatter floating through the open doorway. For the first time that morning, she breathed a little easier, letting the work anchor her in the present. The pebble in her pocket warmed against her fingers, a quiet reminder of Skye, but one she could carry without being pulled under by it.

Sue stepped through the door, her presence calm but purposeful. “You slept in this morning,” she said, her voice gentle, carrying no scolding. She paused, looking at Louise with a soft, knowing tilt of her head. “I think you needed it. You’ve grown fond of Skye, haven’t you, love?”

Louise's throat tightened, and for a moment the dam broke — tears pricked her eyes. She blinked rapidly, swiping at them before they fell, and pressed a hand to her chest. She forced herself to take a steadying breath and nodded, unable to speak.

Sue's gaze softened, but her voice carried a note of caution. "You're bright, Louise. I think you already know this, deep down — but Skye isn't one to trust with your heart."

The words hung in the air, part warning, part gentle care. Louise swallowed hard, holding back another wave of emotion, the pebble in her pocket pressing against her palm like a quiet lifeline.

That evening, Louise offered to cook the meal for everyone. Mostly, she told herself, it was to keep busy — to feel useful and distract from the swirl of thoughts about Skye — but a small, fluttering part of her knew it was also about proving she could do something grown-up.

She pulled out the ingredients she knew best and, for all her bravado, realised she didn't know very many dishes at all. Tonight would be her go-to: a simple vegetable stir-fry with rice, seasoned with soy sauce and a pinch of garlic. She chopped the vegetables carefully, fumbling a little with the knife, and stirred the sizzling pan, inhaling the aroma that reminded her of home.

As she worked, Louise caught herself thinking about Skye, about the hollow and the pebble, about the impossible tug between worry and fascination. The stir-fry was hardly gourmet, but it was hers, and somehow preparing it grounded her. It also made her realise, with a quiet, slightly embarrassed honesty, that maybe she wasn't as grown-up as she thought — not yet, anyway.

Chapter Fourteen

Saturday arrived with the kind of early bustle that made the air hum with energy. Louise was tucked in the back of the store, crouched between crates and shelves, restocking cans of beans, packets of crisps, and bottled drinks. The smell of warm coffee from the counter mingled with the faint scent of sun and sea drifting in through the open door.

Ellie stood at the counter, greeting the first campers arriving for the day and scanning items with practised efficiency. Her calm, steady presence gave Louise something to anchor herself to as she moved along the narrow aisles, carefully arranging goods and checking the inventory list.

The rhythm of the store — the clink of bottles, the crinkle of packaging, the low hum of conversation — offered Louise a welcome distraction. Her mind still flickered briefly to Skye, but the work demanded

enough attention to keep her thoughts tethered to the present, to the small, exacting tasks of stocking shelves and keeping the aisles tidy.

Louise was stacking cans near the back when movement at the doorway caught her eye. Skye was there, suddenly framed in the entrance, but Louise froze — she couldn't get a proper look from where she stood.

Ellie glanced up from the counter, a flicker of concern crossing her face. "Skye?" she asked, voice cautious.

Skye didn't answer her directly at first. She fixed Ellie with a sharp, anxious glance. "Where's Sue?" she asked, her tone clipped. "She's cleaning out your bed in the wagon, I think." Then, on the spot, Skye turned and, as quickly as she had appeared, vanished out the door before anyone could move toward her.

From the back of the store, Louise's stomach twisted. Something was wrong. The way Skye's head dipped slightly, the hint of swelling around her eye and the shadowed bruise across her nose — all of it registered, even from a distance. The air felt suddenly heavier, the hum of the store fading into a distant background as worry clawed at her chest.

Louise bolted from the store, heart hammering, eyes scanning for the direction Skye had gone. She caught

sight of her slipping around the corner toward the wagons.

Behind her, she thought she heard Ellie call something — “Wait!” — but she didn’t stop. Couldn’t stop. Not now. She pushed past the worry, the doubt, the scolding voice in her head, and ran after Skye.

Louise rounded the corner and froze. A bit ahead, Skye had found Sue. The older woman’s hands were on her hips, body angled toward Skye, but there was no anger in her stance — only a mix of disappointment and relief.

Skye’s head was bowed, one foot scraping the ground nervously. Sue’s voice carried, firm but tempered with care. Louise hung back, hands loose at her sides, staying just within earshot.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Sue said, the words measured, a gentle scolding woven through them. “But I’m glad you’re safe. We need to talk about this, properly.”

Skye’s voice was small, almost muffled. “Can... can I come back?” she asked, eyes fixed on the sand at her feet. Louise felt a knot in her chest tighten. She stayed silent, watching, listening, heart hammering, unsure

whether to step forward or remain hidden in the quiet shadow of the corner.

Sue tilted her head, letting the pause stretch for a moment before answering. “Well... we’re short-staffed now, and it is Saturday.”

Even from behind, Louise could sense Skye’s smirk curling at the corner of her mouth, that familiar, infuriating grin that somehow made her heart skip.

Sue’s tone sharpened slightly, pulling the girl back to reality. “You’d better get started on the loos and washrooms, young lady. And you have to put new bedding on — I *just* pulled the old off.”

Skye’s shoulders slumped only slightly, but the smirk lingered as she nodded and headed off, Louise quietly following, her own chest tight with a mix of worry, admiration, and something she wasn’t ready to name.

Inside the wagon, the air felt tighter somehow, heavier than it had that morning. Sue’s footsteps faded quickly, swallowed by the noise of the campsite, leaving Louise and Skye alone.

Skye hadn’t touched the bedding. The fresh sheets lay folded on the lower bunk, untouched. She stood near

the door instead, shoulders slightly hunched, hands shoved into the pockets of her shorts. When Louise stepped inside, Skye looked up at her.

Her face was bruised, properly visible now — the darkening eye, the swollen bridge of her nose — but it was the guilt that struck Louise hardest. It sat there, bare and unguarded, making Skye look younger somehow.

Louise didn't say anything. She didn't move to help, didn't reach for the sheets, didn't offer the comfort Skye seemed to be waiting for. She just stood there, meeting Skye's gaze, letting the silence do the talking.

For a moment, neither of them moved. The wagon creaked softly in the breeze, the smell of fresh linen and old wood mingling in the air. Whatever Skye was going to say, whatever explanation she had rehearsed, it was clear it wouldn't come easily.

The words came reluctantly, as if dragged through molasses. It wasn't an excuse, and it wasn't really an apology — barely even an explanation. Skye lifted her head at last, meeting Louise's eyes, her expression stripped of its usual bravado.

“I suppose I’m just someone who runs away a lot,” she said quietly. “From everything.” She swallowed, her jaw tightening. “Doesn’t really matter anyway. I’m not any good anywhere.”

Louise was battling all of it at once — betrayal, anger, sadness, sorrow, confusion. The feelings spun through her head, almost dizzying her. Whatever this was, it wasn’t rehearsed, and it definitely wasn’t an excuse. That much was clear.

She wanted to say something. To tell Skye that it hurt *because* she mattered, that her leaving had left a real, aching gap. But the words tangled in her mind, refusing to line up properly, and all Louise could do was stand there, heart thudding, silent in the face of it.

Louise took a breath, then another. The words still wouldn’t come out the way she wanted, but she couldn’t leave everything hanging in the air either.

“You’re... not nothing,” she said at last, quietly. “And this—” she gestured vaguely between them, the wagon, the campsite, the moment “—it’s not all ruined. Not yet.”

Skye searched her face, as if trying to work out what Louise meant, or how much she was allowed to hope for. Louise didn’t add anything more. She couldn’t.

The silence settled again, softer this time. Unfinished.
Uncertain. But not empty.

Chapter Fifteen

The rain came hard and sudden, a heavy summer downpour that turned the air thick and metallic. By midday, the campsite had gone quiet in a strange, uneasy way — tents zipped tight, caravans shuttered, campers huddled inside with mugs and card games, waiting it out. Water pooled where paths had been only dust that morning, and the familiar sounds of Windward were muffled beneath the relentless drumming of rain on canvas and tin.

Inside the store, only Louise remained. The bell above the door barely chimed now; no one was shopping, only watching the weather with anxious eyes. The windows fogged with humidity, the smell of damp earth and wet wood seeping inside. Louise wiped the counter for the third time without really noticing she was doing it, her thoughts pulled taut by the weather — and by Skye, somewhere out there in the rain.

Ellie burst in, rain-soaked and breathless, hair plastered to her face. “Right,” she said, pushing water from her eyes, “this is one of *those* days.”

Louise looked up. “That bad?”

Ellie nodded, already pulling off her wet hoodie. “We had a storm like this the year before I started. Flooded half the lower ground. Nearly shut the whole place down.” She paused, letting that sink in. “Sue still talks about it like a bad dream.”

The weight of it settled in Louise’s chest. Windward wasn’t just soggy tents and ruined holidays — it was jobs, livelihoods, a place that had already begun to feel like something she belonged to.

Sue appeared in the doorway moments later, soaked through, her expression tight but focused. “Right,” she said briskly, scanning the room. “Ellie, take over the counter. Louise, you’re with me — we need extra hands uphill.”

Her gaze flicked back to Louise, lingering just a fraction longer. “Skye’s already out back. We’re moving sandbags to the higher ground behind the site — if we don’t hold it, the water’ll run straight through the centre. Come on. Fast.”

Sue's eyes softened just a fraction. "I know it's not ideal," she said quietly. "If you'd rather not—"

Louise shook her head before the sentence could finish. "It's fine." The word surprised her with how steady it sounded.

Sue nodded, relief crossing her face. "Good. I feel safer knowing it's you two handling it — after the water heater mess the other day." She gave Louise's shoulder a brief squeeze. "You did good then. You'll do good now."

Outside, the rain hammered down harder than ever. Louise grabbed a jacket and stepped into it, heart pounding — not just from the weather, but from the knowledge that whatever waited uphill wasn't only about holding back water. It was about standing beside Skye again, with something real at stake, and no easy way to keep distance anymore.

Louise trudged through the rain-soaked paths, her boots squelching in the mud, water dripping from the hood of her jacket. The wind whipped across the open field, carrying the scent of wet grass and the salt from the nearby dunes. Each step toward the higher ground felt heavier than the last, but it wasn't just the weight of the sandbags in her arms.

She let herself think, really think, as the grey sky pressed down around her. This — the storms, the mud, the endless tasks that no one could do alone — this was Windward. Not just a campsite. Not just a job. A place that depended on every single person, on every single pair of hands.

Her chest tightened as her thoughts drifted to Skye. The betrayal, the fear, the missing pieces of last week — they were there, gnawing at her. But then Louise felt the tug of something larger, stronger. This place, these people, the work that had to be done — it mattered more than her hurt. More than her confusion, more than the ache in her chest when she thought of Skye's disappearance.

She was part of it now. She had responsibilities, and she would not let the site down. Not for rain, not for mud, not even for the complicated mess of her feelings.

For the first time that morning, Louise felt something like clarity. Skye could wait. The campers could wait. Right now, it was her turn to stand up, to act, to be useful.

With a deep breath, she tightened her grip on the sandbag and squelched forward through the mud, the storm roaring around her but not inside her. Whatever happened next — with the water, with Skye, with

everything else — she would face it. Together with Windward.

Louise reached the back of the store, the rain plastering her hair to her forehead, dripping down her neck. Crates sat haphazardly on the wooden platform, their corners soaked, some half-covered with a dark tarp flapping in the wind.

And there, crouched over the crates, tying down the corners with rope, was Skye. Her jacket clung to her body, streaked with mud and rain, hair plastered across her face. The motion of her hands was sharp, precise, almost mechanical, but she looked up the moment Louise stepped closer.

Louise froze. The storm and the weight of the sandbag in her hands faded to a dull roar in the back of her mind as she studied Skye's face.

She couldn't read it. Not the anger, not the guilt, not the vulnerability. Just a storm of wet hair, focused eyes, and the faintest trace of that familiar, infuriating smirk — or was it just the way the rain caught the light?

Louise swallowed, letting herself take a careful step forward, unsure whether she should speak, move, or simply stand in the pouring rain, sharing this chaotic space with Skye without knowing what it meant.

Louise took a deep breath, forcing her mind away from the swirl of hurt and confusion that Skye still carried, and from her own. Right now, there was something that needed doing — something bigger than either of them.

“We need to get these up the hill,” she said, nodding toward the stack of sandbags. Her voice was calm, measured, even as her heart thumped in her chest. “If we don’t, the lower grounds will flood, and all the campers... the store... everything we’ve worked for...” She let the words hang, letting the weight of responsibility settle between them.

Skye’s gaze flicked to the hill in the distance, rain streaking her face, mud smudging her cheek. She gave a small, tight nod, no words, just acknowledgment.

Louise bent down and grabbed the first sandbag, feeling its weight dig into her shoulders. She glanced at Skye, who mirrored her motion, and for the first time in days, the air between them wasn’t tangled with guilt or anger. It was focused, disciplined. The storm raged around them, but in that small, drenched corner of Windward, they moved together — hands, muscles, and minds aligned with a single purpose.

Nothing else existed for the moment. Not Skye’s past mistakes, not the ache in Louise’s chest, not the complicated feelings neither of them were ready to

name. Just the hill, the bags, and the knowledge that if they failed, it wouldn't be about their hearts — it would be about Windward.

Chapter Sixteen

By the time Louise and Skye reached the first stretch of the hill, their clothes were soaked through, mud streaking their arms and legs, clinging to skin and fabric alike. The sandbags were heavy — more than she'd expected — and every lift sent a jolt of strain through her shoulders, arms trembling as she balanced the weight.

The rain had turned the ground slick, each step uphill a battle against the sucking mud, each step downhill a careful braking to keep from slipping entirely. Louise's boots squelched and slipped, her legs burning from the constant effort, and her gloves chafed against her palms as she gripped the rough burlap of each bag.

Skye was right there, moving with sharp, fluid efficiency, muscles taut beneath the wet fabric of her jacket, hands sure and steady. Louise noticed the way Skye's brow furrowed slightly as she pulled a

particularly heavy bag up a slope, the rope digging into her knuckles. Despite everything, the sight made Louise's chest ache — a mixture of admiration, concern, and something unnameable.

They repeated the motions over and over, up and down the hill, each bag carried, stacked, and arranged with the precision of people who knew what failure would mean. The rain soaked through their layers, plastered hair to their foreheads, ran into their eyes, but they didn't stop. Every breath came ragged, hot against the chill of the storm, every movement a reminder of the stakes.

Louise felt her body screaming in every joint and muscle, sweat mixing with rain and mud, but her mind was strangely clear. The ache, the weight, the exhaustion — it all sharpened her focus. Skye beside her wasn't just a person she had complicated feelings for; she was a partner in this fight, and for now, that was all that mattered.

For a few moments, even in the chaos, Louise could let go of her doubts. Let go of the betrayal, the heartache, the uncertainty. There was only the hill, the sandbags, and the unspoken understanding that they couldn't fail — together.

Finally, the last sandbag felt lighter only because the hill had been climbed one more time, sweat streaking Louise's face, mud caked in streaks along her arms. She heaved it onto the flat patch at the top, where Dave and the boys were busy lining up the rows of bags to form a makeshift dam.

"Here," Louise gasped, letting the bag slide into place, "that's the last one."

Dave looked up, wiping rain from his forehead, eyes scanning the work they'd done. "Brilliant," he said, voice carrying above the storm. "You two have been absolute troopers. Couldn't have asked for better hands."

Skye dropped her bag beside Louise, chest heaving, hair plastered to her face, mud streaked across her cheeks. She offered a small, tight smile to Dave, and he nodded in acknowledgment.

"Keep it steady," he said, his tone firm but warm. "The water's tricky, but this — this will hold. Thanks to you kids, it will hold. Couldn't have done it without you."

Louise let herself breathe for a moment, chest rising and falling, muscles screaming in protest but a strange weight lifting from her mind. The hill, the rain, the mud — it all melted into a single, sharp point of pride. She

glanced at Skye, who was wiping her hands on her jacket, and for the first time that day, there was no awkwardness between them. Only work done, and the knowledge that together, they'd kept Windward standing.

The last walk back down the hill was slower, each step careful on the slick mud. Louise gripped her jacket tight, boots slipping as she navigated the muddy slope. Skye was ahead of her, arms out to the sides as a kid balancing a rope, her focus intense.

Then, without warning, Skye's foot caught on a hidden rut. She pitched forward, and with a startled yelp, ended up sliding on her bum all the way down a short slope, arms flailing, mud spraying in every direction.

Louise froze for a moment, then couldn't help it — a laugh burst out of her, bright and shaky against the rain. Skye sat at the bottom, soaked and streaked with mud from head to boots, looking almost comical despite the chaos. For a second, she just stared at Louise, then let out a breathless laugh herself.

"You're... ridiculous!" Skye managed between chuckles, wiping mud from her hands and cheeks.

"*You're* ridiculous... and covered in mud," Louise teased back, a grin breaking across her own muddy

face. She shook her head, feeling the tension of the morning loosen just a fraction.

Louise looked down at herself and realised she was just as muddy and soaked as Skye. Without hesitation, she bent her knees, planted her hands behind her, and let herself slide down the same slick path Skye had just conquered. Mud splashed up around her as she skidded, laughter bubbling out despite the ache in her arms and legs, until she landed in a squelching heap right next to Skye.

They both lay there for a moment, breathing hard, rain plastering hair to their faces, clothes heavy with mud and water. The storm raged around them, but in that small, ridiculous moment, the weight of everything else — the anger, the betrayal, the guilt — seemed to loosen just a little.

Louise stared down at the mud, her voice barely audible above the steady drumming of rain. “Why did you leave?”

Skye didn’t answer immediately. The pause stretched long, filled only by the hiss of rain and the occasional thunder over the water. Finally, Skye craned her neck toward Louise, her eyes meeting nothing, fixed somewhere over her shoulder. “My mum got into

trouble again. I had to go fix it. But that was the last time. She's on her own now."

Louise's gaze lifted slowly. Skye's expression was defiant, almost stubborn, though the bruise darkening her cheek and the black eye made the defiance fragile. Questions buzzed in Louise's mind — why would a mum need her daughter to come home and fix things? Why did Skye return with bruises and a black eye? But none of them felt safe enough to voice aloud. She simply nodded, letting her understanding take the place of words.

For a few seconds, neither of them moved. The rain pelted down, soaking them through, the mud clinging to their clothes and skin, and yet all Louise could feel was the warmth where their hands brushed together.

Their eyes met, wide and searching, before both of them looked down at the contact, as if seeing it for the first time.

Then Skye squeezed Louise's hand, firm and deliberate, and tugged gently. "Come on," she said, voice low but steady. "We've got to get back."

Louise let herself be pulled to her feet, the mud and rain forgotten for a heartbeat. Their fingers stayed entwined, a small tether of trust and something more, binding

them together as they stood side by side, ready to face the rest of the day.

Hand in hand, Louise and Skye trudged back toward the campsite, mud squelching under their boots, rain dripping from their hair and jackets. The storm had slowed to a steady drizzle now, but the world still smelled of wet earth and sea. Every step was heavy, yet somehow lighter than the climb up the hill — as if the shared effort, the shared mess, had shifted something unspoken between them.

When they reached the store, Ellie looked up from stacking crates and paused mid-motion. Her gaze flicked down to the girls' clasped hands, then back to their faces, but she said nothing. Instead, her eyes softened as she appraised the two of them, noticing the mud-streaked clothes, the fatigue etched into their expressions.

"Well," she said finally, a small smile tugging at her lips, "you look like professional mud wrestlers! Go on, take a shower — you both need it."

Louise let out a breath she hadn't realised she'd been holding. Skye gave a faint, mischievous grin, and together, still holding hands, they headed toward the wagons to grab their towels and toiletries, the storm

fading behind them but the warmth of the moment lingering.

By the time they reached the wagons, the rain had slowed to a drizzle, and the mud had begun to crust in streaks across their soaked jackets and boots. They slipped inside, still holding hands loosely, the quiet warmth of the small space contrasting with the wild storm outside. They walked side by side to the wash rooms as the afternoon sun broke through the clouds.

Skye headed for the tiny shower cubicle first, shrugging off her jacket and letting the warm water wash the mud and rain from her skin. Louise followed, the scent of damp wood and faint soap filling the room. The hot water was a small luxury, the ache in her arms and legs melting away under the spray. She closed her eyes, letting herself relax, thinking of the hill, the bags, and the small, surprising tether of Skye's hand.

When they emerged, towels wrapped around their shoulders, hair damp and clinging, they paused in the narrow space. No words were exchanged at first; the mud-slicked chaos of the day had left them both quiet, content in the simple presence of the other. Louise noticed the faint trace of a smile on Skye's lips, and the small, unspoken understanding that they had faced the storm together.

Finally, Louise let go of the towel around her neck and offered a tentative grin. Skye mirrored it, their hands brushing once more, lingering, not needing anything more than that for now.

Outside, the clouds had broken up even more and the sky's weird yellow hue shone through, and for the first time all day, Louise felt the summer air inside the wagon, warm and steady, carrying a fragile hope that maybe, just maybe, not everything had to hurt.

Chapter Seventeen

The sun had returned in full force, bright and warm, turning the damp earth of the campsite into a faintly steaming patchwork of gravel and grass. Dave and the boys were out early, mending fences and pouring gravel along the paths, their voices carrying across the site as they worked.

Louise, Dana, Ellie, and Skye sat together at the worn wooden table outside the wagon, the late summer heat resting on their shoulders. Fizzy drinks clinked in their hands, cold and sweet, and they even carried a few over to the boys, teasing them as they passed.

“Last day tomorrow,” Ellie said, popping the top off another can, the hiss of carbonation loud in the quiet morning. “Can you believe it?”

Louise let herself lean back in the chair, feeling the sun warm her tanned arms and the weight of the season

pressing gently against her. The four of them moved to and fro, packing up their small belongings inside the wagon, folding laundry, and making sure everything was in order.

Sue had the store today, and for once the girls could just sit, laugh, and bicker over which cans to take with them or which postcards to save as mementos. There was a sweetness to it — a mixture of freedom, sun, and the exhaustion of months of hard work — that made Louise's chest tighten a little. Tomorrow, it would all end, and they would go back to their own worlds.

For now, though, the summer lingered in the sunlight, in the clatter of fizzy cans, in the hum of the camp settling into the rhythm of the last day.

By mid-afternoon, the campsite was buzzing with a different kind of energy. Sue had arranged a little celebration for all the summer helpers — the last Saturday of the season, a chance to relax, eat well, and toast the weeks they had spent running the site.

Dana was busy helping Dave get the barbecue going, the smell of sizzling meat and charcoal drifting over the wagons, while Ellie and Louise helped Sue sticking garden torches into the ground and hang more strings of fairy lights around the outdoor table, their twinkle

promising a warm evening once the sun dipped below the dunes.

“I’ll take first shower!” Dana called, sprinting toward the tiny cubicles, and soon Ellie followed. Louise and Skye lingered, pretending to argue over who should go first, but both knew they were saving themselves for last.

Finally, they stepped into the shower together, laughing at the sheer silliness of it. The hot water hit their backs, washing away the sweat, sand, and the remnants of mud from the week. They splashed at each other, careful not to slip, teasing and ducking under the spray, shrieking when the water hit in unexpected bursts. Louise found herself grinning, the stress of the season and the lingering tension of past days washing away along with the suds.

For a moment, it was just the two of them, side by side, soaked and laughing, carefree under the warm spray. The campsite beyond the doors could wait — tonight was theirs, a final slice of summer freedom before the season ended.

By the time Louise and Skye stepped out of the shower, the wash room smelled of warm wood and faint soap, the small space steamy and bright from the late afternoon sun streaming through the slanted windows.

Towels wrapped around their bodies they headed back to their wagon and began the slow, familiar ritual of getting dressed, each movement punctuated by laughter or teasing nudges.

Louise pulled on a simple summer dress, soft cotton clinging to her damp skin, while Skye opted for a loose shirt and shorts, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. The two of them shared a few quiet moments, brushing hair out of their faces, slipping on sandals, adjusting straps — ordinary actions made special by the knowledge that it was the final evening of their summer.

Dana and Ellie flitted in and out, fussing over accessories, teasing each other over hairdos and which necklace went best with which dress, the sound of their voices echoing off the narrow walls. Louise caught Skye's eye in the little mirror and smiled faintly. Skye's expression was half mischievous, half reflective, and for the first time all week, Louise felt a warmth that wasn't just from the hot water or the sun outside.

They paused at the small table, checking themselves one last time, and Skye leaned over, brushing some damp hair off Louise's forehead. "Ready?" she asked, voice low, teasing but not forced. Louise nodded, letting herself feel the comfort of Skye's presence beside her.

Together, they stepped out of the wagon, the laughter of the others carrying through the campsite, the smell of grilling food and the faint scent of sea salt in the air. Barefoot, dressed for a summer evening, the four of them — Louise, Skye, Dana, and Ellie — walked toward the gathering, a small band of friends at the edge of the season, carrying with them the muddy, sun-soaked memories of weeks past.

Chapter Eighteen

Morning came soft and misty, the dunes and paths blurred in a pale haze, though the air promised another warm day. The campsite was quieter than it had been all summer, the usual bustle replaced with a gentle, tired rhythm.

Louise moved through the wagon, folding her clothes, tucking away toiletries, and checking that her small pile of keepsakes — postcards, stones, and a few stickers — were safely in her bag. Skye was nearby, methodical but silent, packing her own things with a careful, almost reluctant efficiency.

Dana and Ellie flitted between the wagons and the store, sweeping floors, stacking supplies, wiping counters. The smell of damp wood mingled with the faint salt from the sea, and the scattered sounds of birds and distant waves made everything feel delicate, suspended between endings and beginnings.

The girls carried bags outside, stacked supplies neatly, and helped wherever they could, the four of them working in an unspoken rhythm that had formed over weeks of shared effort and laughter. There were no words about the finality of it, but the quiet made the thought unavoidable — today, the campers would leave, and so would they.

Louise lingered for a moment by the door, looking out over the misted paths and the beach beyond. She felt a mixture of exhaustion, relief, and a quiet ache in her chest. Skye passed by, brushing lightly against her shoulder, and Louise allowed herself a small smile. No promises, no words — just the shared warmth of the final morning, a season folded into memory.

Skye's bags were stacked neatly in the back of the car, damp from the morning mist and packed with the few essentials she needed for the journey. Dave moved with practiced ease, checking the straps and making sure nothing would shift on the drive to the station.

Louise walked slowly over, each step heavy in the soft grass, unsure of what she was meant to say — or if she should say anything at all. Skye glanced up as she approached, her expression unreadable, eyes shadowed

with fatigue and something quieter, more vulnerable than Louise had seen before.

“Hey,” Louise said finally, her voice low, almost swallowed by the mist. Skye offered a small, crooked smile, the kind that carried a thousand unspoken words.

They stood like that for a long moment, neither moving closer, neither stepping back, the hush of the morning holding them in a fragile bubble. Around them, the other girls finished their final chores, laughter and shouted reminders fading in and out, but here it was only the soft click of the car door and the quiet between two people who had grown too close too quickly.

Louise felt the familiar tug in her chest, the ache she had tried to name all summer. She didn’t reach out, didn’t speak again, but she let her hand hover for a fraction longer than necessary near Skye’s, as if that alone could somehow anchor the weeks they had shared.

Finally, Dave called from the driver’s seat, and Skye exhaled, a sharp, steadying breath. She turned to Louise one last time, eyes searching, and then leaned in. Louise, without hesitation, wrapped her arms around Skye and pulled her close. The kiss was brief but full — a tether between them, a wordless promise that lingered even as the car door shut with a soft click.

With the engine starting, Skye began to move away, but Louise held onto that moment, the warmth of her in her arms, the weight of the summer pressed into memory. Everything else — the misted paths, the empty wagons, the echo of the season — could wait. For now, there was only this.

Chapter Nineteen

Louise heard the crunch of tyres on the gravel before she saw her dad's car. She stepped forward as it pulled up, and the familiar sight of him made her heart lift, even as the weight of the morning pressed in. The summer of her life was over — Skye was gone, the campsite already fading behind her, yet here was her dad, coming to pick her up.

“Louise!” he called, stepping out and opening the passenger door with a small, bright smile. She ran the last few steps, flung herself into his arms, and buried her face against his chest, relief and longing spilling out — she had missed her family like crazy, being away from home for the first time in her life. Even amidst the ache of leaving, the comforting warmth of home surrounded her.

A song drifted from the radio, one that had played countless times over the summer — bright, simple, and

achingly familiar. Her throat tightened, and she blinked quickly to keep her tears at bay. Her dad didn't notice, lost in the joy of seeing her again, chattering lightly about small things, the drive, the roads ahead.

As they passed the campsite gate, Sue came out to open the little gate, her eyes twinkling. "I hope we see you next year," she said warmly, glancing at Louise with quiet pride. Louise smiled, grateful, and her dad gave an approving nod, oblivious to the bittersweet tangle of her emotions.

The car rolled onward, the gravel crunching behind them, and her dad asked with gentle teasing, "Was it everything you hoped for? And... are you all grown up now?"

Louise rubbed the small stone Skye had given her, smooth and worn from weeks of handling it. Her lips curved into a soft, contented smile. "It was all I wanted," she whispered, voice barely audible over the hum of the engine, "and maybe more."

The sun climbed higher, casting warm light across the road ahead. For the first time in weeks, she felt the full breadth of the summer — its work, its laughter, its chaos, and its quiet, stolen moments — settling into her memory, bright and unshakeable.

~ The End ~

This summer, everything changes.

Louise leaves Cambridge for a summer job at Windward, a lively Norfolk beach campsite. Between long days in the store, sandy afternoons by the sea, and chores that never end, she meets Skye — bold, free, and impossible to ignore.

As the sun warms the sand and the tide rolls in, Louise discovers friendship, first love, and the thrill of finding a place to belong. Full of laughter, secrets, and quiet moments that take your breath away, Windward is a summer you'll never forget.

She lay back, the slope of the dune cradling her, half closing her eyes, the sun warm on her face. Her earbuds were tucked safely back in her bag, leaving only the natural soundtrack of the beach: waves rolling and crashing onto the shore, seagulls crying overhead, and the occasional rustle of the wind through the dunes. Time seemed to stretch and soften, and for the first time in days, Louise let herself simply be.