What We Leave Below



Nemi

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Chapter One

The first thing I noticed was the smell.

Salt, mostly, and something damp and rotten underneath it. Like wet leaves left in a bin for a month. It came through the car's heating vents even though Mum had the windows shut, which was probably impossible, but I was too busy being miserable to investigate the physics of it.

"Well," Mum said, peering through the windscreen. "Charming."

Dad laughed from the driver's seat. "It's the coast, Tori."

"Yes, Julian. I've been to the coast before. I don't remember it smelling like a dead aquarium."

I pulled my coat tighter around myself and looked out at the car park.

It wasn't really a car park. It was a patch of uneven tarmac between the road and the sea, with a few battered wooden posts marking out spaces and a sign that had lost most of its paint. Beyond it, the beach sloped down towards a stretch of grey water that looked as welcoming as a bathtub full of cold gravy.

There were maybe twenty cars parked here. Some looked like they'd been abandoned in the nineties and

simply never collected. Others were newer, clean enough to look almost out of place against the salt-stained windscreens and muddy tyres.

Several had the same logo on their doors.

CAIRN ECO-SOLUTIONS.

I counted six without even trying.

Same green lettering, same little circular symbol that I assumed was meant to look like a leaf. One was a white van, two were dark blue cars, and the rest were a mixture of things I couldn't identify through the mist. All parked in a neat little cluster near the far end of the lot.

"That's a lot of company cars," I said.

Dad followed my gaze. "Looks like it."

"Are they the people you're here to study birds around?"

"Not exactly. They're one of the reasons I'm here."

Which was a very Dad way of answering a question without actually answering it.

He turned off the engine, and the sudden silence made the weather seem louder. Wind scraped at the car, rattling something loose underneath it. Somewhere beyond the mist, a gull screamed like it had just

received some personally devastating news.

Mum twisted round in her seat to look at me.

"Ready, darling?"

No.

Obviously no.

I'd spent most of the last week trying not to think about the fact that we were moving to an island off the Norfolk coast for two whole years. Two years of online school, patchy internet, and absolutely no chance of meeting anyone who wasn't either retired or interested in birds.

I was sixteen. I was supposed to be worrying about GCSEs, what to wear on Friday nights, and whether the girl in my English class had been flirting with me or just being nice. Not whether my new home would be cut off from the rest of civilisation twice a day by the North Sea.

But apparently Dad's research opportunity was too good to turn down.

And apparently two years wasn't that long.

Apparently, a lot of things.

"Define ready," I said.

Mum gave me a sympathetic smile. "Emotionally? No. In terms of having put on a coat? Almost."

I smiled despite myself, which was annoying because I was trying quite hard not to enjoy anything about this.

Dad opened his door. The wind caught it immediately, and he had to grab the edge before it banged into the car beside us.

"Mind the door," Mum called.

"Got it."

"That car's probably worth more than our house."

"Our house is currently worth nothing to us because we're not living in it."

"Don't be clever, Julian. It's unbecoming."

I watched them for another moment, Mum shaking her head as she climbed out, Dad wrestling with the boot. They were both taking this remarkably well. Or pretending to. I wasn't sure which was worse.

Then I opened my own door.

The cold hit me straight in the face.

Not the sort of cold you got in London, where it crept between buildings and disappeared when you stepped into a shop. This was open, unbothered cold. It came

straight off the sea and went wherever it pleased, slipping under my scarf and through the gap between my jumper and jeans. The wind smelled of salt and mud, and the mist had left everything faintly wet.

I got out and slammed the door shut.

For a moment I just stood there, staring.

The island was visible across the water. A long, low strip of land, barely distinguishable from the sea behind it. There were patches of dark grass and uneven dunes, and what might have been a line of trees further inland. Everything looked washed out, as though someone had turned the saturation down on the entire landscape.

I couldn't see the village.

I knew it was there, obviously. Houses, a shop, whatever passed for the centre of civilisation. Dad had shown me photographs. Little stone cottages, narrow lanes, a church with a squat tower. It had looked quite pretty in the pictures, in the way places look pretty when you know you don't have to live in them.

From here, though, there was nothing. No rooftops. No chimneys. No welcoming lights in windows.

Just the land and the mist and the water between us.

"That's it, then," Dad said, coming to stand beside me.

I glanced at him. "That's it?"

"The Mudpack."

He said it like he was introducing me to an old friend.

"The Mudpack," I repeated.

"Local nickname. You'll see why when the tide goes out."

"Can't wait."

He slipped an arm around my shoulders, squeezing briefly before letting go. His coat was already speckled with moisture.

"It's not going to be like London, Maya."

"I'd gathered."

"Give it a chance."

I looked at the island again. Somewhere over there was a house that would be ours for the next two years. A bedroom that wasn't mine yet. A school I would attend through a laptop. A whole community of people who'd known each other since birth and would probably continue knowing each other until death, without ever needing to learn my name.

"And if I don't like it?"

Dad paused.

"Then we'll work something out."

It was a nice thing to say. A reassuring thing. But it was also the sort of thing adults said when they didn't have an actual solution.

Mum appeared beside us carrying her handbag and a flask she'd apparently packed without telling anyone.

"Right. Before we all freeze to death, does anyone need the loo? Because I'm not going all the way back to the car once we're on the other side."

"There's a public toilet," Dad said, pointing towards a squat little brick building near the road.

Mum looked at it.

"Is there?"

"Well, there's a building with a sign saying toilets."

"That isn't necessarily the same thing."

I followed her gaze. The sign hung crookedly above a door that looked as though it hadn't been painted since the war.

"Maybe it adds to the charm," I said.

"Darling, if this is charm, I dread to think what the alternatives are."

Dad laughed, and for a second the three of us were just standing in a car park, making stupid jokes in the cold. Almost normal.

Then the wind picked up again.

I shoved my hands into my pockets and looked back at the water. The surface was restless, little white lines appearing and disappearing in the grey. The causeway wasn't visible from where we stood, hidden by the shape of the shore and the mist, but I knew it was out there somewhere. A narrow strip of land that would disappear under the sea twice a day.

A road with opening hours.

I'd looked it up the night before, because of course I had. I'd read about the tides, the warning signs, the stranded tourists who ignored them and had to be rescued. I'd checked the weather forecast, the bus routes, the nearest hospital, the distance to Norwich. I'd even looked at the historical tide tables, as though a sufficiently thorough understanding of the problem might somehow make it less of a problem.

It hadn't.

"Come on, love," Mum said gently. "Let's get you home."

Home.

I stared at the island for another second, trying to make

the word fit.

Then I picked up my bag and followed my parents towards the water.

Chapter Two

By the time we reached the house, I was seriously considering whether I could swim back to the mainland.

Not that I could actually swim that far. Especially not in October, in water that probably contained several species of bacteria and at least one abandoned fishing boat. But the thought had a certain appeal. I could picture myself arriving on the beach, soaked to the skin, teeth chattering, and announcing to some random person that I'd changed my mind and would be needing a train ticket to London.

It was a stupid idea, obviously. But at least it was an idea.

Our new house stood at the end of a narrow lane, a little way from the centre of the village. It was made of grey stone, with small windows and a dark slate roof. There was a low wall around the front garden, although calling it a garden was being generous. Mostly it was muddy grass and a few sad-looking bushes.

The front door stuck when Dad tried to open it.

"Ah. That's encouraging," Mum said.

"It's probably just swollen with the damp."

"Lovely. So the house is already having a bit of a

reaction to us."

Dad gave her a look over his shoulder. "You'll get used to it."

"I wasn't talking about me, love."

I stood behind them with my bag, watching Dad put his shoulder against the door. It finally gave way with a groan, and he stumbled forwards into the hall.

"Graceful," Mum said.

"Do you want to open it next time?"

"No, I think you made a lovely job of it."

I might have laughed if I hadn't been so busy looking inside.

The hall was narrow and dark. There was a smell of dust and cold stone, with something faintly musty underneath. The floor was tiled, the walls were painted a dull cream, and a small wooden staircase led up to the first floor. Someone had left a pair of old wellington boots beside the radiator, which looked as though it hadn't been used in years.

I stepped inside.

The cold seemed to follow me through the door.

"Well," Mum said, putting her handbag down on a little

table. "It's got potential."

I looked at her.

"What?"

"Potential, Maya. It's a very useful word. It means you can say something nice about a place when you can't think of anything else."

"Right."

"Now, where's the kitchen? I'm dying for a cup of tea."

Dad had already disappeared into the sitting room, muttering something about the windows. Mum went off in the other direction, and I was left standing in the hall, wondering how a house could make me feel so unwelcome when nobody was even living in it.

I knew it was ours. We'd signed the paperwork, we'd paid the rent, and we'd brought all our things. But it didn't feel like ours. It felt like a place we'd been sent to, a place we were expected to accept without complaint.

I went upstairs.

My bedroom was at the back of the house, with a window overlooking a stretch of rough grass and, beyond that, the marshes. The walls were bare, the floorboards scratched, and the bed was pushed against one wall beneath a sloping ceiling. There was a small

desk by the window and a wardrobe that looked older than my grandparents.

I put my bag down and sat on the edge of the bed.

The mattress was hard.

Of course it was.

I looked out of the window. The mist was thinning a little, but everything beyond the garden was still grey and blurry. I could just make out the dark shapes of grass and water, with no clear line between them. Somewhere out there was the sea. Somewhere beyond that was the mainland, and beyond that, London.

My London.

My room. My friends. The coffee shop near the bus stop where I'd sometimes meet people after school. The noise outside my window at night. The buses, the cars, the voices coming up from the street. Even the man who shouted at pigeons outside the station.

I'd never thought I'd miss that man.

Now I'd probably have given quite a lot to hear him yelling about pigeons.

My throat tightened, and I pressed my lips together.

It was ridiculous. I'd known this was happening for months. I'd spent hours reading about the island,

looking at maps, checking the weather, and trying to work out what life here would be like. I'd even made lists of things I'd need to do to settle in.

None of those lists had included sitting on a strange bed trying not to cry.

I rubbed my eyes, annoyed with myself.

Two years. It was only two years. People moved abroad for longer than that. People went to boarding school. People survived much worse things than having to live somewhere boring.

I could do two years.

I just couldn't quite work out how.

The next few hours passed in a blur of boxes, cold rooms and Dad saying things like, "Has anyone seen the screwdriver?"

Apparently, moving house meant spending most of the day looking for objects you'd packed yourself.

Mum found the kettle, which she treated as a major achievement, and made tea in the kitchen. Dad managed to get the heating working, although one of the radiators started making a noise like an old man coughing.

"That's normal," he said when Mum pointed it out.

"Does it have to be?"

"Probably just air in the system."

"Well, I hope it feels better soon."

I was in my room, unpacking clothes and trying to decide where everything should go. My posters lay in a messy pile on the bed. I'd brought them all from home, carefully rolled up and secured with elastic bands, and now they looked a bit pathetic against the bare walls.

I held one up above the desk, then moved it to the wall beside the wardrobe.

No.

I tried the opposite wall.

Also no.

I stood in the middle of the room, holding the poster by its corners, trying to work out why none of it looked right.

It wasn't that the posters were wrong. They were the same ones I'd had in London. The same pictures, the same colours, the same little bits of paper that had made my bedroom feel like mine.

Here, they looked like decorations in a holiday cottage.

I lowered the poster.

"Brilliant," I muttered. "Even my walls hate me."

There was a knock on the open door.

Dad stood in the doorway, holding a small toolbox.

"Everything all right?"

"Yeah."

He looked at the poster in my hands, then at the walls.

"Need a hand?"

"I'm just deciding where to put them."

"Ah. Important business."

"Very."

He came in and studied the wall above the bed as though I was asking him to assess a complicated scientific diagram.

"What about there?"

"Maybe."

"And the others?"

"I don't know yet."

He nodded seriously. "Take your time. No point rushing these things."

I looked at him.

He looked back.

Then he grinned.

"Although if you keep holding that one up much longer, your arms are going to fall off."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Any time."

He set the toolbox down and gave my shoulder a squeeze before leaving me to it.

I watched him go, feeling a little guilty. He was trying. I knew he was. This whole move was because of his work, but he'd never acted as though my feelings about it were unimportant. He'd offered to help with anything I needed, and he'd spent half the afternoon trying to make the house more comfortable.

It wasn't his fault I was miserable.

That didn't make me any less miserable, though.

I put the poster down and started making my bed instead. At least that was something I knew how to do. I found my duvet in one of the boxes, dragged the cover over it, and smoothed out the creases. Then I unpacked my clothes, hanging what I could in the wardrobe and stuffing the rest into the drawers.

By the time I finished, the room looked a little less like somewhere I'd been dumped.

Not much. But a little.

I went back to the posters and chose the wall above my bed. It seemed as good a place as any. I laid them out on the floor first, moving them around until I was happy with the arrangement, then stacked them neatly on the desk for Dad to put up later.

When I finally left my room, I could smell something cooking.

It was a proper smell, too. Warm and savoury, with onions and garlic and something rich bubbling away on the hob. I followed it downstairs.

The kitchen was lit up, and the difference was almost ridiculous.

The overhead light cast a warm yellow glow over the wooden worktops. The radiator was working properly now, and the window had fogged up around the edges. A saucepan was simmering on the hob, and Mum stood beside it in her socks, stirring with one hand and holding her phone in the other.

Dad was outside, visible through the kitchen window, bending over one of the boxes he'd left near the back door. He appeared to be trying to fix something, although with Dad it was difficult to tell whether he was fixing something or simply investigating it until it

gave up.

Mum glanced round as I came in.

"Ah, there you are, love. I was beginning to think you'd decided to live upstairs."

"Considered it."

"Fair enough. There's a nice view of the marshes, isn't there? Very exclusive. No neighbours to complain about your music."

"There's no one to listen to it either."

"Well, you can't have everything."

I went to the hob and peered into the saucepan.

"What are you making?"

"Stew. Your father bought enough vegetables to feed a small village, so I'm doing my best to save them from going off."

"Sounds nice."

"It will be. Unless I've forgotten something vital, in which case we'll be having a very interesting dinner."

She said it so seriously that I laughed.

It wasn't a big laugh. Barely more than a snort, really. But Mum looked pleased with herself.

"There she is," she said. "I was wondering where my girl had gone."

I felt my cheeks warm.

"I'm still here."

"Good. I'd hate to have to explain to the estate agent that we'd misplaced you."

I rolled my eyes, but I was smiling now.

Mum reached into the cupboard and took down a mug. "Tea?"

"Please."

"Milk?"

"Yeah."

"Sugar?"

"No, thanks."

She filled the kettle, then leaned against the worktop while it boiled.

"How's your room looking?"

"Better. I've made the bed and unpacked most of my clothes."

"Excellent. And the posters?"

"I've decided where they go. Dad said he'd put them up."

"Your father loves a practical job. Give him a hammer and he'll be happy for hours."

"He's been outside for ages."

"Exactly. He's probably dismantling something that was perfectly fine when he started."

Through the window, Dad straightened up and looked towards the house, as if he'd heard her. Mum gave him a little wave. He waved back, then returned to whatever he was doing.

I watched him for a moment.

It was strange seeing him out there, in the cold, looking so completely at home. He'd been excited about coming here for months. He'd told me about the birds he'd be studying, the changes in the marshes, and all the things he might discover. He'd shown me photographs of the island and talked about the opportunities his research would give him.

I'd tried to be happy for him.

I really had.

But watching him now, I wondered if he'd ever thought about what it meant for me. Not in a cruel way. I knew he cared. I just wasn't sure he'd ever had to imagine

what it would feel like to be sixteen and leave everything behind.

Mum put a mug of tea in front of me.

"Careful, it's hot."

I wrapped both hands around it, letting the warmth seep into my fingers.

"Thanks."

She gave my arm a little squeeze as she passed.

"You don't have to love it straight away, you know."

I looked up.

"What?"

"The house. The island. All of it." She turned back to the hob, giving the stew a stir. "It's a lot to take in. You can be miserable about it for a bit if you need to."

I stared down into my tea.

"I don't want to be miserable."

"I know, love."

"I just don't see how I'm going to like it here."

Mum was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Well, I don't suppose the island's going to roll out a red carpet

for us. We'll have to make our own fun."

I smiled faintly.

"And if we can't?"

"Then we'll complain about it together. I'm very good at complaining."

"You are."

"Thank you. I've worked hard at it."

I laughed again, and this time it felt a little more natural.

Mum pulled out a chair and sat opposite me, wrapping her hands around her own mug.

"Look, Maya. Two years sounds like forever when you're thinking about it all at once. So don't think about all of it. Think about tomorrow. We'll get you settled in, work out the internet, find out where the shop is, and see what there is to do."

"There's probably nothing."

"Then we'll have the world's most thorough investigation into nothing."

I shook my head, smiling into my tea.

"You make everything sound stupid."

"That's one of my many talents."

I took another sip. The tea was hot enough to burn my tongue, but I didn't mind. Outside, the mist was thickening again, turning the garden into a grey blur. Dad came in through the back door, stamping his boots on the mat and rubbing his hands together.

"Cold out there," he announced.

"Really?" Mum said. "I thought you were enjoying a nice afternoon in the Bahamas."

Dad ignored her and came over to kiss the top of my head.

"How are you doing, sweetheart?"

"All right."

He looked at me for a moment, as if he knew that wasn't the whole truth, but he didn't push.

"Good. I've got your posters ready to put up whenever you are."

"Thanks, Dad."

He gave me a smile and went to wash his hands.

Mum got up to check the stew, and I shifted in my chair, tucking one foot underneath me. The radiator hummed beside the table. The window glowed with

reflected light, and the kitchen smelled of dinner and tea and something warm I couldn't quite name.

It still wasn't home.

Not really.

But sitting there with my hands wrapped around my mug, listening to my parents bicker about whether Dad had broken the back door while trying to fix it, I could almost imagine it might be one day.

And for the first time since we'd arrived, I didn't feel quite so desperate to leave.

Chapter Three

The first time I went into the village on my own, I got lost.

Not properly lost, obviously. I wasn't wandering around the marshes with a stick, trying to work out which way was north. I could still see the church tower from most places, and the village itself was small enough that you couldn't really go very far without ending up somewhere you'd already been.

But I'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, and the lane I'd ended up on was lined with stone walls and hedges that looked exactly like every other stone wall and hedge on the island.

I'd been walking for about fifteen minutes when I finally found a sign pointing towards the village centre.

The village centre turned out to be three streets, a church, a pub and a small shop.

I stood outside the shop for a moment, looking at the sign above the door.

THE MUDPACK STORE & POST OFFICE

It wasn't much to look at. A narrow stone building with a green-painted door, two windows and a hand-painted sign advertising fresh bread. Someone had put a couple

of pots of flowers beside the entrance, although the flowers looked as though they were having second thoughts about being alive.

Still, it was something.

The shop was probably the most useful place on the island, considering there didn't seem to be much else. We'd driven past the pub earlier, but it had been shut, and I hadn't seen a single café. There was a church, a village hall and a few little businesses that might or might not have been open. Most of the houses looked as though they'd been standing for hundreds of years, with uneven roofs and small windows that probably rattled whenever the wind picked up.

I pushed open the shop door.

A little bell rang above my head.

Warm air hit my face, carrying the smell of bread, coffee and something fried. The shop was much bigger inside than I'd expected, although that wasn't saying much. Shelves ran along the walls, packed with tins, cereal, biscuits and household stuff. There was a small fridge near the back, a counter with a till, and a narrow aisle leading to what looked like a post office desk.

A woman behind the counter was talking to an older man in a woolly hat. Two other people stood near the bread, discussing something that seemed to involve a delivery van and a broken freezer.

Nobody paid me much attention.

Which was fine. I wasn't looking for attention. I just wanted to see what they sold and, if possible, find something chocolatey.

I was halfway down an aisle when I heard the woman behind the counter say, "Honestly, I don't know what we'd do without them now."

"The same as we always did," the man in the woolly hat replied.

"Yes, and look how well that worked out for us."

He chuckled.

I slowed down, pretending to study a row of tins.

"They've done wonders for the place," said one of the people near the bread. "Can't deny that. Half the island was looking for work before Cairn came along."

"More than half," the woman said. "My nephew's got a proper job there now. Regular wages, paid holidays. Never thought I'd see the day."

"Mine too. And he's bought himself a car."

"Well, that'll be the day, won't it? Young people actually being able to afford things."

They all laughed.

I picked up a packet of biscuits and turned it over, although I had no idea what I was looking for on the back.

Cairn Eco-Solutions. The company whose cars I'd seen in the car park. The company Dad had mentioned when we'd arrived. I hadn't realised they employed so many people.

"They've put money into the shop as well," the woman continued. "More deliveries, more customers. Can't keep the fresh stuff on the shelves some days."

"Never used to be worth bringing it over," said the man in the hat. "Not enough people to buy it. Now look at us. Practically a thriving metropolis."

"Don't get carried away, Arthur. We've still only got one shop."

"And a very fine shop it is."

"Flattery won't get you a discount."

I smiled to myself and put the biscuits back.

It was strange, listening to them. I'd expected the island to be full of people who resented having a big company arrive and take over part of their home. That was the sort of thing you heard about in documentaries. Big business comes in, makes promises, changes everything, and leaves the locals to deal with the mess.

But nobody here seemed to resent Cairn. Quite the opposite. They talked about the company as though it had rescued them.

Maybe it had.

There couldn't be many jobs on an island like this. If Cairn had brought steady work and decent wages, I could see why people would be grateful. Especially if their children had a chance to stay instead of moving away to find something better.

I wandered towards the back of the shop, where a small display of postcards stood beside a rack of batteries. There were pictures of the island in summer, with blue skies and golden sand. One showed the causeway at low tide, a long strip of pale sand stretching towards the mainland.

It looked completely different from the grey, misty place I'd seen from the car park.

"Course, the bridge would change everything," the woman said.

I looked up.

"What bridge?" Arthur asked, although he sounded as if he already knew the answer.

"The one they're talking about building. You haven't heard?"

"Only about twelve times this week."

"Well, it can't come soon enough. Imagine being able to drive straight over to the mainland whenever you like. No more watching the tide tables like your life depends on it."

"Your life does depend on it, if you're daft enough to ignore them."

"Don't be a misery. You know what I mean."

Arthur scratched his chin. "Would be handy, mind. Especially in winter. Last year I got stuck over there for nearly six hours waiting for the water to go down."

"Six hours? You were in the pub."

"Still stuck, weren't I?"

They laughed again.

I put the postcards down and wandered closer to the counter, curious despite myself.

"Are they actually building a bridge?" I asked.

All three adults turned to look at me.

For a second, I felt like I'd interrupted something private, even though they'd been talking loudly enough for half the shop to hear.

The woman behind the counter smiled.

"That's the plan, love. Nothing's certain yet, but there's been talk of it for months. Would make life a lot easier for everyone."

"Especially when the weather's bad," said the woman near the bread. "You can be cut off for hours if the tide turns and the weather's against you. And if the cable goes down as well, you're properly stuck."

"The cable?" I asked.

"The internet, dear. Runs under the sea. Storms knock it about sometimes, and then we're back in the dark ages until someone comes out to fix it."

"Oh."

I thought about my laptop sitting on the desk in my bedroom, waiting for me to start online school. I'd already had trouble getting a reliable connection at the house, and the thought of the whole island losing internet for days wasn't exactly comforting.

"Still," the woman continued, "we've managed all right so far. And a bridge would be lovely, wouldn't it? Pop over to the mainland for a bit of shopping, come home whenever you like. No worrying about missing the last crossing."

"Or having to carry all your shopping through the mud," Arthur added.

I glanced at the biscuits again.

Maybe I should have bought them after all.

The woman behind the counter gave me another smile. "You're new here, aren't you?"

I nodded. "We arrived a couple of days ago. My dad's working here."

"Oh? What does he do?"

"He's studying the birds. Their numbers and where they go and stuff."

"Ah, yes. We've seen him about, I expect. Out with his binoculars."

"That's him."

"Well, welcome to the Mudpack, love. You'll soon get used to us."

I wasn't sure about that, but I smiled politely.

"Thanks."

She returned to her conversation with Arthur, and I moved towards the till with a packet of biscuits and a chocolate bar. I paid, thanked her, and tucked the change into my pocket.

I was just putting the chocolate into my bag when I

noticed her.

She was standing near the window, half turned towards the street, with a bottle of milk tucked under one arm and a loaf of bread in her hand. She looked about my age, maybe a year older. She wore a dark green coat that was too big for her, faded jeans and muddy boots. Her hair was brown, cut just above her shoulders, and stuck out in odd directions as though she'd been running her hands through it.

She was looking out of the window, apparently bored by everything happening inside the shop.

Then she turned her head.

Our eyes met.

I froze for half a second.

She had a pale, narrow face, with dark eyebrows and eyes that seemed to take in quite a lot without giving much away. There was nothing particularly unusual about her, not at first glance. She wasn't dressed up or wearing much make-up, and she didn't have the sort of polished look some of the girls at my old school spent ages trying to achieve.

But she looked my age.

Actually my age.

Not someone's little sister or a child being dragged

round by their parents. Not an adult who'd tell me I was lovely and ask whether I was enjoying the countryside.

A girl who might have to do homework and worry about exams and get bored on a Saturday afternoon.

I hadn't realised how much I'd wanted to see someone like that until I did.

She looked at me for another moment, then glanced down at the chocolate bar in my hand.

"Good choice," she said.

I blinked.

"What?"

She nodded towards the bar. "That one. The others taste like sweetened cardboard."

"Oh." I looked at it, as though I'd never seen chocolate before. "Right. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. I'm practically a public service."

I wasn't sure what to say to that.

She shifted the milk under her arm and turned towards the counter.

I watched her go, trying not to make it obvious that I was watching her.

The woman behind the till greeted her by name.

"All right, Clem? Your dad working late again?"

"Course he is. Wouldn't want him getting too much of a life, would we?"

The woman laughed. "Give him my best, love."

"Will do."

Clem paid for her shopping, stuffed the change into her coat pocket and picked up a reusable bag from beneath the counter. She didn't seem to be in any hurry. She exchanged a few words with Arthur, who asked her something about the weather, and she gave him an answer that made him laugh.

She seemed to know everyone.

Of course she did. There were probably about twelve people on the entire island under the age of seventy, and she looked as though she'd lived here long enough to know all of them.

I stood near the door, pretending to check my phone. There was no signal, but it gave me something to do with my hands.

Clem pulled on her gloves and pushed the door open.

The bell rang.

She stepped outside into the grey afternoon and disappeared down the lane.

I watched through the window until she was gone.

Then I looked around the shop again.

Arthur was still talking about the bridge. The woman behind the counter was rearranging a display of biscuits. Someone had come in to collect a parcel, and another person was asking whether the bread delivery had arrived.

Everyone seemed to belong here.

I was the only person in the room who didn't.

I put my phone back into my pocket and pulled my coat tighter around myself.

At least there was one other teenager on the island.

That was something, wasn't it?

I just had no idea what to do with it.

Chapter Four

On Monday morning, I went to school in my socks.

There were some advantages to living on the Mudpack, apparently. Not having to put on a uniform was one of them.

I sat at my desk with my laptop open, a mug of tea beside me and a notebook I'd bought before we moved. Outside, the sky was the same miserable grey it had been since we'd arrived. I was beginning to wonder if the sun was something they only got on the mainland.

My first lesson started at nine.

At eight fifty-eight, I clicked the link the school had sent me and waited for Microsoft Teams to do whatever it was supposed to do.

A little circle spun on the screen.

Then it spun some more.

"Oh, come on."

Finally, the classroom appeared.

I could see the teacher standing beside a whiteboard, with rows of desks behind her. There were about fifteen students in the room, most of them talking to each

other. Someone was laughing. A boy near the front was eating something out of a paper bag.

Nobody seemed particularly interested in the fact that I'd just arrived.

"Ah, Maya!" the teacher said eventually, looking towards the camera. "Lovely. Can you hear us?"

"Yeah. Morning."

"Excellent. Everyone, this is Maya. She'll be joining us remotely for the time being."

A few people looked towards the screen. Someone waved. I waved back, although I wasn't sure anyone could actually see me.

"And Maya, I'm Mrs Bennett. Welcome."

"Thanks."

"Right, shall we get started?"

And that was that. My grand entrance.

I'd been nervous about starting at a new school, even one I wasn't physically attending. In London, I'd known everyone. Or at least I'd known who they were, which was nearly the same thing. Here, I was just a face on a screen at the front of a classroom full of people who already knew each other.

Mrs Bennett started explaining something we'd covered at my old school before the summer.

I wrote down the heading, then the first example, then stopped.

I already knew this.

She worked through another example on the board. A girl in the second row asked a question, and Mrs Bennett explained it again.

I looked at the clock.

Nine twelve.

Brilliant.

By nine twenty, I'd finished the worksheet she'd uploaded. I checked my answers twice, found a mistake in the last question, corrected it and sat back.

The rest of the class was still on question four.

I wasn't trying to show off. I just liked getting things done. Give me a problem and I'd keep at it until I worked out the answer. That was the interesting bit. Once I understood how something worked, doing another twenty examples of it seemed rather pointless.

"Maya, how are you getting on?" Mrs Bennett asked.

"Fine, thanks."

"Any questions?"

"No, I'm good."

"Lovely. Just carry on, then."

I looked down at my completed worksheet.

Right.

I opened another tab and started reading ahead.

By the time the lesson ended, I'd worked through most of the next topic as well.

"See you all on Wednesday," Mrs Bennett said.

Chairs scraped across the floor. Everyone started talking at once, and the boy with the paper bag threw something at his friend.

"Oi, we're going to the canteen, yeah?"

"Wait for me!"

Someone walked in front of the camera, blocking my view with a navy jumper.

Then the meeting ended.

My bedroom went quiet.

I could hear a gull somewhere outside and Mum moving about downstairs.

I checked the time.

Ten fifteen.

One lesson down. An entire day to go.

My next lesson was a bit better.

The teacher was younger, wore enormous glasses and seemed to understand that having a student on a screen required occasionally remembering the screen existed.

He asked me questions. He waited for me to answer. Once, when two boys started talking over me, he actually told them to be quiet.

I quite liked him.

Unfortunately, he also believed in group work.

"Right, I'm going to put you into groups of three," he announced. "You've got half an hour to work through the material together."

A list of names appeared on my screen.

I was with Ellie and two boys called Josh and Ryan. They were sitting together in the classroom, so the teacher had them use one laptop to talk to me.

"Hi," I said when they connected.

"Hiya," said a girl with blonde hair tied in a messy bun.

"I'm Ellie."

"Maya."

"Yeah, we know. You're the island girl."

I blinked.

"The what?"

"The island girl." She grinned. "Sorry. That's what everyone calls you."

"Fantastic. I've been here two hours and I've already got a nickname."

She laughed.

"Could be worse. Josh was called Bogey for most of Year Nine."

"Thanks, Ellie," said one of the boys.

"You're welcome."

For a few minutes, it was actually quite nice.

We worked through the first question together. Ellie seemed friendly, Josh had a habit of making jokes that weren't particularly funny, and Ryan mostly agreed with whatever anyone else said.

Then they started discussing something that had happened on Friday.

Apparently, someone had fallen over outside the school gates. Someone else had filmed it. There'd been an argument, and now two people weren't speaking to each other.

I had no idea who any of these people were.

"Honestly, you should've seen her face," Josh said.

Ellie started laughing.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just something at school."

"Right."

They carried on.

I looked at the worksheet and started doing the next question myself.

By the time they remembered I was there, I'd finished the whole thing.

"Okay," Ellie said, leaning towards the laptop. "So, Maya, what do you think about question three?"

"I've done it."

"Already?"

"Yeah."

"And four?"

"That too."

Josh made a noise somewhere behind her.

"Bloody hell."

I felt my face getting warm.

"It's not that hard."

Ellie looked at my answers in the shared document.

"She's right, you know. I think she's got it."

"Well, that's sorted, then," Josh said. "We can go to lunch."

"We've still got twenty minutes," Ellie told him.

"Exactly. Twenty minutes of freedom."

They started discussing what they were getting from the canteen.

I watched Ellie pull her bag onto her lap.

"We can finish the presentation at lunch," she said. "We'll get a table somewhere."

"Um," I said.

She looked at the screen.

"Oh. Sorry. Forgot."

"It's fine."

"We can message you what we've done?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Sorry, Maya."

"Really, it's fine."

And it was. Sort of.

They weren't being horrible. They just had a whole world happening around them, and I was a little rectangle on a laptop that they occasionally remembered to look at.

When the lesson ended, Ellie gave me a quick wave.

"See you tomorrow!"

"See you."

The screen went black.

I sat there for a moment, looking at my reflection.

Then I closed the laptop.

At lunchtime, I went downstairs.

Mum was at the kitchen table, surrounded by papers

and empty mugs. She was staring at her laptop with the expression she usually wore when one of her characters had done something inconvenient.

"How's school, love?" she asked.

"Thrilling."

"That good?"

"I've learnt that a girl called Sophie fell over outside the school gates on Friday and apparently it's the funniest thing that's ever happened."

Mum looked up.

"Poor Sophie."

"Also, someone called Josh was once known as Bogey."

"Well, that's unfortunate."

"And I've been named the island girl."

Mum considered this.

"Could be worse."

"That's what Ellie said."

"Ellie sounds sensible."

"She is, actually. I think."

I opened the fridge and stared inside.

There was cheese, milk, half a cucumber and a tub of something Mum had made yesterday.

I took out the cheese.

"Are you managing the lessons all right?" Mum asked.

"Yeah. They're easy."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

She watched me for a moment.

"You're bored."

"A bit."

"Already?"

"Mum, I finished the first worksheet in twenty minutes. They spent the rest of the lesson explaining question four."

"Well, give them a chance, love. It's only your first day."

"I know."

I made a sandwich and sat opposite her.

"Do you think they'll ever let me actually go to school?"

"Of course. We can arrange days on the mainland. We'll just have to work around the tides and your dad's schedule."

"Great. So I can go to school when the sea says I'm allowed."

Mum smiled.

"Something like that."

She turned back to her laptop, then stopped.

"You're doing all right, though?"

I looked at her.

"Yeah."

She didn't look entirely convinced.

"I'm just getting used to it," I added.

"All right, love."

For a while, we sat together in silence. Mum typed a few sentences, deleted them, then typed something else. I ate my sandwich and watched a small bird hopping about on the wall outside.

Dad was somewhere out on the marsh, counting birds or watching them or whatever it was he did all day.

Mum had her book.

I had another three lessons to sit through, followed by an afternoon with absolutely nothing planned.

In London, I would've been looking forward to meeting my friends after school. We might've gone for chips, wandered around the shops or just sat somewhere talking rubbish until one of our mums rang to ask where we were.

Here, I didn't even know where I'd go if I wanted to meet someone.

There was the shop. The pub. The church.

And probably quite a lot of mud.

I thought about the girl in the green coat. Clem, they'd called her.

She'd looked about my age. Maybe a bit younger.

I wondered what she did all day. Whether she went to school on the mainland or sat at home staring at a laptop like me.

I wondered if she had friends here.

I wondered if she'd remember me.

"You're miles away," Mum said.

"Sorry."

"Thinking about school?"

"Not really."

She raised an eyebrow but didn't ask.

I finished my sandwich, rinsed my plate and went back upstairs.

By half past three, I'd finished everything.

All my lessons, all my homework, and an extra assignment one teacher had given me after I'd asked if there was anything more challenging I could try.

I'd got ninety-eight per cent on a test, too.

Two marks lost because I'd misread a question.

I was more annoyed about those two marks than pleased about the other ninety-eight.

My phone buzzed.

It was a message from Ellie.

Sorry we sort of forgot you earlier lol

I smiled.

It's fine. I'm getting used to being a ghost.

At least ghosts get to haunt people.

True. I'll work on that.

A few seconds later, another message appeared.

You coming in at some point? Like actually coming to school?

Hopefully. Depends on the tides.

That's so weird.

Tell me about it.

Anyway see you tomorrow x

See you x

I put my phone down.

It was nice that she'd messaged. Really nice, actually.

But then I looked around my room.

The walls were still mostly bare. My posters were leaning against the wardrobe, waiting for Dad to put them up. My notebook lay open on the desk, filled with work I'd already finished.

Outside, the marsh stretched away towards the sea. The tide was out, leaving long strips of wet sand and dark water between the grasses.

Somewhere over there, people were getting on with their lives.

I could hear a distant engine, then nothing.

I looked at the clock.

Three thirty-seven.

I had hours until dinner.

I could read. I could watch something. I could message my friends in London, although they'd probably still be on their way home from school.

Or I could go outside.

I stood up and pulled on my jumper.

I'd only been on the Mudpack a few days, and already I was running out of things to do.

That was probably some kind of record.

Chapter Five

By Thursday, I'd decided that getting out of the house was probably necessary for my mental health.

Not that anything was actually wrong with me. I was just beginning to understand how people could go a bit strange if they spent too much time in one place.

I'd finished my schoolwork early again. Mum was busy writing, Dad was out with his birds, and I'd already watched two episodes of a programme I didn't particularly like.

So I decided to go to the mainland.

It sounded like a proper outing when I put it like that. An adventure, almost.

In reality, I was going to walk across a strip of road surrounded by mud and look at some shops.

Still. Better than sitting in my bedroom.

I'd checked the tide times that morning. The causeway would be clear for several hours, which gave me plenty of time to get across, have a look around and come back before the sea decided I'd had enough freedom.

Mum was in the kitchen when I told her.

"Going to the mainland?" she repeated.

"Yeah. Just for a wander."

"On your own?"

"I'm sixteen, Mum."

"I'm aware, love. I was there."

I gave her a look.

She smiled and reached for her mug.

"Have you checked the tides?"

"Yes."

"Phone charged?"

"Yes."

"Got your coat?"

I looked down at the coat I was already wearing.

"Thought I'd try going without it."

"Cheeky."

She took a sip of tea.

"All right. Just keep an eye on the time, and give me a ring if there's a problem."

"Will do."

"And don't go buying half the shops."

"With what money?"

"Exactly."

I grabbed my bag and headed out before she could think of anything else to worry about.

The causeway looked different when you were walking.

From the car, it had seemed like a fairly ordinary road, apart from the fact that there was sea on either side of it. On foot, you noticed things.

The mud, for one.

There was an incredible amount of it.

It stretched away on both sides, flat and shiny, broken up by shallow pools of water and little channels that twisted towards the sea. Here and there, clumps of grass stuck out of the ground, looking as though they'd been planted by mistake.

The air smelt of salt and wet earth. Every so often, a gust of wind came across the marsh and went straight through my coat.

I pulled my scarf higher.

There were no pavements, just the road and a narrow strip along the edge where I could walk. I kept well away from the mud. It looked solid in places, but Dad had already warned me that looking solid and being solid were two very different things out here.

About halfway across, I stopped and looked back.

The island seemed smaller from this distance. A low patch of land with a few rooftops and trees sticking up above the mist. I could just about make out the church tower.

It was strange to think that was where I lived now.

Not visited. Not stayed for a holiday.

Lived.

I turned towards the mainland and kept walking.

A few minutes later, I noticed someone coming the other way.

A girl.

She was quite a distance ahead, walking with her hands in the pockets of a dark green coat. Her head was down against the wind, and her brown hair kept blowing across her face.

I slowed a little.

Was that Clem?

It certainly looked like her. Same sort of coat, same messy hair, same muddy boots.

Then again, I'd only seen her for about two minutes in the shop, and there were probably plenty of girls in Norfolk who owned green coats.

As we got closer, she looked up briefly.

Our eyes met.

I almost smiled, but she looked away before I could decide whether I knew her.

We passed each other without speaking.

I glanced back after a few steps.

She was already heading towards the island, walking quickly with her shoulders hunched against the wind.

Well, that had gone brilliantly.

I wasn't even sure it was her.

And if it was, perhaps she hadn't recognised me either.

Or perhaps she had and just didn't fancy talking.

I decided not to think about it.

Naturally, I spent the next five minutes thinking about

nothing else.

The first thing I noticed when I reached the mainland car park was how empty it was.

On the day we'd arrived, it had been full of cars. Most of them had the Cairn Eco-Solutions logo on the doors, that green-and-blue symbol I'd started seeing everywhere since moving here.

Now there weren't any.

Not one.

There were a few ordinary cars scattered around the lot, and a battered white van parked near the far end, but all the CES vehicles had disappeared.

I stood for a moment, looking across the empty spaces.

Perhaps everyone was at work.

That would make sense, wouldn't it? It was a Thursday, after all.

Although I wasn't sure why so many of their cars had been parked here on the day we arrived.

I shrugged and carried on towards town.

It wasn't exactly busy.

There were a few people walking along the pavement,

most of them wrapped up in coats and scarves. A man was standing outside a shop, smoking a cigarette and looking thoroughly fed up with the weather. Somewhere nearby, a dog was barking.

The town itself was quite pretty, in a slightly old-fashioned sort of way.

There were narrow streets, brick buildings and little shops with painted signs. A few houses had flowerpots outside, although most of the flowers had given up for the year.

I found a street with a café, a restaurant and several shops selling things that looked suspiciously like they'd been bought in bulk for tourists.

Nearly all of them were closed.

The café had its chairs stacked upside down on the tables. A handwritten sign in the window said:

THANK YOU FOR A LOVELY SUMMER! SEE YOU NEXT SEASON!

I went closer and looked inside.

There were colourful pictures of cakes on the walls and a large chalkboard advertising cream teas.

A cream tea would've been nice.

Apparently, I was several months too late.

Next door, a little restaurant had its curtains drawn. Further along, a shop selling seaside gifts had a display of plastic crabs, postcards and mugs with Norfolk written on them.

A sign on the door said it would reopen in spring.

I looked at the plastic crabs through the window.

They looked about as disappointed as I felt.

It was strange. In London, shops were just shops. They opened in the morning, closed at night, and generally carried on doing that all year.

Here, it seemed as though half the town had decided winter wasn't worth bothering with.

I wandered down another street and found a place advertising boat trips.

Closed.

A little ice cream shop.

Very closed.

A shop selling buckets, spades, beach towels and inflatable dolphins.

Closed, obviously.

I wondered what happened to everyone who worked in

these places during the winter. Did they find other jobs? Go somewhere else? Sit at home waiting for the tourists to come back?

At least I wasn't the only person with too much time on my hands.

Eventually, I found a supermarket that was actually open.

It wasn't huge, but it had proper aisles, a bakery section and a fridge full of sandwiches. Compared with the little shop on the island, it felt enormous.

There were people inside, too.

Actual people.

I spent far longer than necessary wandering around, mostly because it was warm and I didn't particularly want to go back outside.

I looked at magazines, checked the prices of things I didn't need and spent several minutes deciding whether I wanted crisps or chocolate.

In the end, I bought both.

I also bought a bottle of orange juice, which made the whole thing feel slightly healthier.

At the till, the woman serving me glanced at my bag.

"Not from round here, are you?"

I looked up.

"Um. Not originally."

"Thought not. Haven't seen you before."

"We've just moved over to the island."

"The Mudpack?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, you poor thing."

I laughed.

She grinned.

"Only joking, love. Lovely place in the summer."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me."

"Bit quiet this time of year, though."

"I'd noticed."

She scanned my chocolate.

"Still, you'll get used to it. Most people do."

That was becoming a popular thing to tell me.

I wasn't sure I found it particularly comforting.

Outside, I stood under the supermarket awning and opened my crisps.

The wind had picked up, and the sky was getting darker. Not because it was late, but because the clouds seemed determined to make the afternoon as miserable as possible.

I checked my phone.

Still plenty of time before the tide came in.

I could explore a bit more.

But what was the point?

I'd seen most of the shops, and the ones I wanted to go into were closed. I didn't know anyone here, and there wasn't anywhere I particularly wanted to sit.

For a moment, I thought about getting a bus somewhere. Norwich, perhaps. Somewhere with actual shops and people and things to do.

Then I remembered the causeway.

Even if I found a bus, I'd have to get back in time to cross before the tide came in. And I didn't fancy explaining to Mum that I'd accidentally stranded myself on the mainland because I'd wanted to look at clothes.

So I finished my crisps, put the empty packet in a bin and started walking back towards the car park.

It was still mostly empty.

I looked around again, half expecting to see the CES cars had returned while I'd been shopping.

They hadn't.

There was something odd about seeing all those empty spaces when I remembered how full the place had been just a few days earlier.

Maybe the company had another car park somewhere. Or maybe they used the lot at weekends.

I made a mental note to ask Dad about it.

Then I headed towards the causeway.

From here, I could see the island in the distance, sitting low against the grey sky.

It didn't look any more welcoming than it had when we'd first arrived.

I thought about the supermarket, the closed cafés, the empty streets and the girl in the green coat.

If that had been Clem, she was probably home by now.

I wondered if she'd seen me looking at her.

I wondered if she'd thought I was strange.

Then I caught myself.

I'd been on the island less than a week and was already worrying about what a girl I didn't even know thought of me.

That was a bit pathetic.

I pulled my scarf tighter and started walking.

The wind was behind me now, which was something.

And at least the tide was still out.

I was beginning to appreciate small victories.

Chapter Six

By the time I got back to the car park, I was beginning to regret having come to the mainland at all.

Not because Wells-next-the-Sea was horrible. It wasn't. Even in November, with half the shops closed and the streets looking as though someone had packed away all the tourists and forgotten to put the town back together, it was still quite nice.

But my feet were freezing.

My socks had somehow managed to get damp inside my boots, and I'd bought absolutely nothing worth carrying home. Unless you counted a packet of chocolate biscuits and a magazine I'd already started reading in the supermarket café.

An excellent use of an entire afternoon.

The tide had gone out far enough for the causeway to be passable again, and a few people were already making their way towards the island. I could see them in the distance, little dark figures moving across the pale strip of road with grey water on either side.

I pulled my coat tighter and started walking.

The wind was coming in from the sea, which seemed unnecessary. It was already cold enough without the

North Sea making a personal contribution.

I'd been walking for perhaps five minutes when I noticed someone ahead of me.

A girl.

Dark green coat, jeans, muddy boots.

Messy brown hair blowing around her face.

I recognised her almost immediately.

Or thought I did.

The girl from the island shop.

The one I'd seen earlier near the mainland car park.

She was walking a little ahead of me, carrying a canvas bag over one shoulder.

I stared at the back of her head.

Not in a creepy way.

Well, hopefully not.

I was just trying to work out whether it really was the same person.

There couldn't be that many girls around my age on the island, surely.

Then again, I hadn't exactly conducted a census.

She was walking more slowly than I was.

Not dramatically. Just enough that the distance between us was gradually shrinking.

I considered slowing down.

It seemed like the polite thing to do.

Except I didn't know her, and deliberately slowing down to avoid overtaking a stranger was probably weirder than simply walking past.

Also, my feet were cold.

Really cold.

I wanted to get home, take off my boots and stand under a hot shower until Mum started complaining about the water bill.

So I kept walking.

The girl glanced back.

Only briefly.

Then faced forward again.

A minute later, she looked back once more.

I immediately became fascinated by the sea.

Very interesting sea.

Lots of water.

Grey.

Wet.

When I looked ahead again, she'd slowed down even more.

Oh, God.

Was she waiting for me?

That was somehow worse.

I could feel myself getting nervous.

Which was ridiculous.

She was just a girl.

A girl who happened to be quite pretty.

And who might possibly live on the same island as me.

Nothing remotely terrifying about that.

I caught up with her near a stretch where the causeway rose slightly above the surrounding sand.

She turned her head.

"All right?"

I nearly said no.

Because my feet were cold, my nose was running and I was beginning to suspect I'd made a terrible mistake moving to an island in November.

Instead, I smiled.

"Yeah. Hi."

She smiled back.

"You're the new girl, aren't you?"

I blinked.

Apparently, I was famous.

"Um. Yeah."

"Thought so."

She adjusted the strap of her bag.

"Saw you in the shop the other day."

I looked at her.

"Yeah! I thought that was you."

She grinned.

"Usually is."

I laughed.

A little too loudly.

Wonderful.

Already embarrassing myself.

We fell into step beside each other.

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

I wasn't entirely sure how conversations worked anymore.

Back in London, I could talk to people.

Quite successfully, actually.

But something about being on a narrow road in the middle of the sea with a girl I wanted to impress seemed to have erased every social skill I'd ever possessed.

Fortunately, she appeared to have plenty.

"I'm Clem, by the way."

I looked at her.

"Clem?"

"Short for Clementine."

"Oh."

She gave me a look.

"Go on."

"What?"

"Say it."

"Say what?"

"Something about oranges."

I laughed.

"I wasn't going to!"

"Everyone does."

"Well, I wasn't."

She smiled.

"Good."

"I'm Maya."

"Nice to meet you, Maya."

She said my name as though she was trying it out.

I rather liked the sound of it.

"Do you live on the island?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Yeah. With Dad."

"Right."

"Little white cottage, green door. Other side of the village."

I tried to picture it.

I'd barely explored the place.

There were still entire streets I hadn't walked down, which was impressive considering how few streets there were.

"What about you?" she asked.

I told her roughly where our house was.

She nodded.

"Oh, yeah. Know it."

I looked at her.

"You do?"

"Course."

"How?"

She laughed.

"It's not exactly London."

Fair point.

"Right."

"House was empty for a while, wasn't it?"

I nodded.

"Apparently."

"Thought someone had moved in. Saw the car."

I stared at her.

"Does everyone know everything that happens there?"

She considered it.

"Pretty much."

"Brilliant."

She laughed.

We walked a little further.

The road was damp beneath our feet, and shallow puddles had collected in places where the surface

dipped.

I stepped around one.

Clem walked straight through it.

Of course she did.

Her boots looked as though they'd survived considerably worse.

I glanced at her bag.

"Been shopping?"

She looked down.

"Sort of."

I waited.

She smiled.

"Had to pick some stuff up from Mum."

"Oh."

"She lives on the mainland."

"Right."

"Just outside Wells."

I nodded.

That explained it.

Mostly.

"I thought I saw you earlier," I said. "Near the car park."

"Yeah, probably did."

"You were heading towards the island then, weren't you?"

She nodded.

"Yeah. Took some stuff home for Dad."

I looked at her.

"Then you came back?"

"Had to. Mum was meeting me with some things she'd forgotten to give me."

I stared at her.

"You crossed twice?"

"Three times, if you count this one."

I looked back towards the mainland.

Then at her.

"On purpose?"

She laughed.

"Yeah."

"That's insane."

"Bit of exercise."

"Bit of exercise? I've done one crossing and I think my feet are about to fall off."

She looked down at my boots.

"Wrong boots."

I stared at her.

"They're perfectly good boots."

"For London, maybe."

I gasped.

"Rude."

She grinned.

"Just saying."

"Do you see your mum often?" I asked.

"Most weekends. Sometimes stay over."

I nodded.

"That must be nice."

"Yeah. It's all right."

She glanced towards the mainland.

"Usually I go over Friday after school and come back Sunday. Depends on the tide and what we're doing."

"Right."

"Today was just picking things up. Mum's got a car, so she met me near the car park."

I nodded.

That made sense.

Although I still thought crossing the causeway three times in one day was evidence of a serious problem.

Possibly requiring medical attention.

"Don't your parents mind?" I asked.

"What?"

"Living separately."

She shrugged.

"They're fine. Been apart for years."

"Oh."

"They get on better now, actually."

I smiled faintly.

"That's good."

"Yeah."

She looked at me.

"What about yours?"

"Still together."

"Right."

"Both moved here to ruin my life."

She laughed.

"That bad?"

I sighed.

"You have no idea."

I told her about London.

About Dad's research.

About Mum writing books.

About the move.

And the two years we were apparently supposed to spend on an island that didn't even have a proper bridge.

Clem listened without interrupting.

Which was nice.

Most people I'd known in London would've started telling me about their own problems within approximately thirty seconds.

When I finished, she looked thoughtful.

"Two years isn't that long."

I stared at her.

"Excuse me?"

She laughed.

"Well, it isn't."

"It's an eternity."

"Bit dramatic."

"I'm sixteen."

"Congratulations."

"Two years is an eighth of my entire life."

She looked at me.

"Did you just work that out?"

I hesitated.

"Maybe."

She grinned.

"Nerd."

I laughed.

"Thank you."

The wind picked up as we reached the middle of the crossing.

I tucked my hands deeper into my coat pockets.

Clem seemed completely unaffected.

Her hair was blowing across her face, and she kept pushing it away with one hand.

I wondered whether she'd always lived here.

"Have you been on the island your whole life?"

"Pretty much."

"Seriously?"

"Yeah."

"How have you survived?"

She smiled.

"Food. Water. Occasional trips to civilisation."

I laughed.

"No, I mean it."

"So do I."

I shook my head.

"You're impossible."

"Been told."

She pointed towards the island.

"You get used to it."

I followed her gaze.

The low shape of the Mudpack was getting closer.

From here, I could make out a few rooftops beyond the bank, and the dark line of trees behind the village.

It looked almost peaceful.

Which was annoying.

I wanted it to look horrible.

That would've made complaining much easier.

"Maybe," I said.

Clem glanced at me.

"You don't believe me."

"Not particularly."

She smiled.

"Fair enough."

We walked a little further.

Then she said, "There's more to do than you think."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Such as?"

"Walks. Beach. Exploring."

"Thrilling."

"There's the old shipyard."

"Even better."

"And the marshes."

I looked at the wide stretches of wet sand and mud on either side of the road.

"Yes, I've noticed the mud."

She laughed.

"Not out here. On the island."

"Right."

"Loads of paths. Some nice places if you know where to go."

I glanced at her.

"Do you?"

She nodded.

"Most of them."

I smiled.

"Handy."

The conversation became easier after that.

We talked about school.

Clem was doing lessons remotely too, although she'd been used to it for longer than I had.

She complained about a maths teacher who apparently

believed that every technical problem could be solved by restarting a laptop.

I told her about my first online lesson, how I was being introduced and then completely dismissed for half a class.

She laughed.

I pretended to be offended.

Then laughed too.

It was strange how quickly I stopped thinking about what to say.

With Clem, I didn't seem to have to work quite so hard.

She was funny.

And confident.

And didn't appear remotely bothered by awkward silences.

When I couldn't think of anything, she just waited.

Or pointed something out.

Or made a joke.

I liked that.

As we approached the island, the road rose towards the

bank.

I could see the first houses now.

A couple of cars were parked near the landing.

One had a CES logo on the door.

I recognised it from the day we'd arrived.

I nodded towards it.

"Those people seem to be everywhere."

Clem followed my gaze.

"CES?"

"Yeah."

She nodded.

"Biggest employer on the island."

"Really?"

"Pretty much. Dad works there."

"Oh."

"Maintenance."

I looked at her.

"Is that the place with all the buildings on the east side?"

"Yeah."

"Right."

She glanced at the vehicle.

"They've done loads for the island."

I raised an eyebrow.

"Such as?"

"Jobs. Better electricity. Stuff like that."

I nodded.

I'd heard some of this in the shop.

"And the bridge?"

She smiled.

"Yeah. Supposedly."

I looked at her.

"Supposedly?"

"Been talking about it for ages."

"Would be nice."

"Wouldn't it?"

I stared towards the island.

A bridge.

A proper bridge.

Something you could cross whenever you wanted.

Without consulting tide tables or risking being stranded on the wrong side.

It sounded wonderful.

"Think they'll build it?"

Clem shrugged.

"Maybe."

I sighed.

"Could they hurry up?"

She laughed.

"I'll tell them."

We reached the island landing together.

The road widened slightly, and a narrow path led up towards the village.

A couple of people passed us heading towards the mainland.

Clem greeted them.

Both greeted her back.

Of course they did.

Apparently everyone knew everyone.

I wondered how long it would take before people started recognising me.

Probably not long.

The new girl from London.

The one who complained about everything.

Lovely reputation.

At the top of the bank, Clem stopped.

"Right. I'm going this way."

She nodded towards the village.

I looked in the direction of our house.

"Yeah. Me too. Sort of."

She followed my gaze. It wasn’t the same direction at all. She smiled.

"Well, I'll see you around."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

There was a pause.

Not a horrible one.

Just one of those moments where you weren't quite sure whether to say something else.

I wanted to.

I just couldn't think of anything that wouldn't sound stupid.

Then Clem smiled.

"Nice meeting you, Maya."

I smiled back.

"You too."

She turned and started walking.

I watched her go.

For a moment, I considered calling after her.

Asking whether she wanted to meet up sometime.

Or go for a walk.

Or show me those paths she'd mentioned.

But that seemed rather forward.

We'd only just met.

Properly, anyway.

And I didn't want her thinking I was some desperate girl from London who'd attached herself to the first person under thirty she'd encountered.

Even if that was, technically, fairly accurate.

I started towards home.

My feet were still freezing.

My boots were damp.

And the wind was finding its way through every gap in my coat.

But I wasn't quite as miserable as I'd been an hour earlier.

I thought about Clem.

Her messy hair.

Her green coat.

The way she'd laughed when I complained about the island.

The fact that she'd crossed the causeway three times in one day without apparently considering it unusual.

Mad.

Completely mad.

I smiled to myself.

Perhaps there was something to be said for the Mudpack after all.

Not much.

But something.

I looked back once.

Clem was further along the path now, heading towards the village.

Just before she disappeared around the corner, she turned and saw me looking.

And lifted a hand and waved back.

Then immediately felt like an idiot.

But I was smiling all the way home.

Chapter Seven

By the time I got home, it was already getting dark.

Not properly dark, but that strange bit of the afternoon when everything turns grey and the streetlights start coming on, even though it isn't quite evening yet.

The air felt wet.

It hadn't rained, at least not while I'd been out, but there was so much moisture in the air that my hair had gone damp anyway. Even the stone walls along the road looked wet.

I was beginning to think Norfolk had invented a new kind of weather. Not raining, exactly. Just being wet all the time.

I let myself into the house and kicked off my trainers.

They made a horrible squelching noise.

"Lovely," I muttered.

"That you, love?" Mum called from the kitchen.

"No, it's a burglar."

"Well, wipe your feet before you steal anything."

I smiled and hung up my coat.

The hallway was warm.

That was still something I noticed. When we'd first arrived, the house had felt cold right through, as though nobody had lived in it for years. Now the heating had been working for a few days, and Mum had put a little lamp on the table by the stairs.

There was a rug in the hall, too. One we'd brought from London.

It didn't quite fit the space, but I liked seeing it there.

Our coats hung on the hooks by the door. Dad's enormous walking boots sat underneath them, still covered in dried mud from yesterday. A pile of letters had appeared on the little table, along with Mum's keys and a packet of tissues.

Normal things.

Our things.

The house was beginning to look less like somewhere we'd rented and more like somewhere people actually lived.

I went upstairs and changed out of my damp clothes, then stood in the shower for far longer than necessary.

Hot water had never felt so wonderful.

By the time I came downstairs again, wearing clean socks and my favourite old jumper, the kitchen smelt of something cooking.

Mum was standing at the hob, stirring a pan.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much."

"Good walk?"

"Yeah, actually."

She looked round.

"Oh?"

"I went to the mainland. Most of the shops are shut, but there's a supermarket."

"Exciting."

"Very. I bought crisps."

"Well, I'm glad you made the most of your day."

I opened a cupboard and got myself a glass.

"And I talked to someone."

Mum stopped stirring.

"Someone?"

"A girl. Clem. She lives here."

"Ah."

I knew that sound.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Mum."

"I'm just pleased you've met someone, love."

"I haven't met someone. I mean, I have, obviously, but we just talked."

"All right."

She turned back to the pan, looking far too pleased with herself.

I filled my glass with water.

"She's nice, though."

"That's good."

"She's lived here all her life."

"Then perhaps she can show you around."

"Maybe."

I took a drink.

I hadn't actually thought about that. Clem probably knew every road and path on the island. She'd certainly seemed to know how to avoid getting wet feet.

Although she'd also made fun of my shoes.

I smiled to myself.

"What?" Mum asked.

"Nothing."

"Right."

She didn't sound convinced.

Dad came home just after five.

I heard the front door open, followed by a loud sigh and the familiar thump of his boots against the floor. Two sets of boots. And letting his daughter walk around in trainers.

"Good grief, it's cold out there."

"Hello to you too," Mum called.

"I'm serious. I think I've lost feeling in several important bits."

"Well, leave them by the door. I don't want mud all over the kitchen."

I went into the hallway.

Dad was standing just inside, looking like he'd been wrapped in half a duvet.

He had on his huge dark blue puffy coat, the one that made him look about twice his normal size. A pair of thick gloves hung from one hand, and his binoculars were still around his neck.

His cheeks were bright red from the cold, and there were little drops of moisture caught in his beard.

"Hi, Dad."

"Hello, sweetheart."

He opened his arms.

I stepped forward and hugged him, carefully avoiding the binoculars.

His coat was freezing.

So was his face when he bent down to kiss the top of my head. I reached up and touched his cheek.

"Blimey, Dad. You're like ice."

"Tell me about it."

His beard scratched against my forehead as he gave me another quick hug.

"You had a good day?"

"Yeah. Went to the mainland."

"Oh, did you?"

"Walked across."

"Good girl. Checked the tides?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Just asking."

He pulled off his gloves and dropped them onto the little table.

"See anything interesting?"

"Closed shops. A supermarket. Mud."

"Sounds about right."

"And I met a girl who lives here."

"Excellent."

"Everyone's very interested in that."

"Well, it's good news, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

He grinned and started unzipping his coat.

Underneath, he was wearing a thick fleece and a jumper, both of which looked slightly damp.

He took off the binoculars and placed them carefully on the table, then wrestled himself out of the coat.

"Any birds?" I asked.

Dad looked at me.

"Any birds?"

"Yeah."

"Maya, I've spent eight hours standing in a marsh looking at birds."

"So that's a yes, then."

He laughed.

"Quite a few, actually. Although not where I expected them."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, nothing definite yet. Just some odd patterns. I'll need a few more days before I can make sense of it."

He rubbed his hands together.

"Right. I'm going to get changed before I freeze solid. Tell your mother I'll be down in ten minutes."

"She can hear you."

"Then tell her anyway."

He headed upstairs, leaving a trail of cold air and the faint smell of wet grass behind him.

I picked up his gloves and put them on the radiator.

They were enormous.

I could fit nearly two of my hands inside one.

Mum had already started setting the table when I went back into the kitchen.

"Can you grab the plates, love?"

"Yep."

I opened the cupboard.

We'd finally worked out where most things belonged, although Mum still occasionally opened the wrong drawer when she wanted a spoon.

The kitchen was small compared with our old one, but it was beginning to feel quite cosy.

Mum had put a little plant on the windowsill. There were tea towels hanging from the oven handle, and a shopping list stuck to the fridge with a magnet shaped like a London bus.

The bus magnet had been mine when I was little.

I'd nearly thrown it away during the move.

I was glad I hadn't.

I put the plates on the table, then fetched the cutlery.

Outside the kitchen window, the last of the daylight was disappearing. The garden looked dark and damp, and beyond the fence I could just make out the tops of the marsh grass moving in the wind.

Inside, the lights were on, the heating was humming, and something delicious was bubbling on the hob.

It was a strange feeling.

I still didn't particularly want to be here. I missed London. I missed my friends and the noise and the buses and being able to go somewhere without checking whether the sea was going to get in the way.

But I liked this kitchen.

I liked the smell of dinner and Mum humming to herself while she cooked.

I liked knowing Dad would be down in a minute, probably complaining about the cold again.

It wasn't the house I'd grown up in.

But it was ours, at least for now.

"What's for dinner?" I asked.

"Chicken casserole."

"Again?"

Mum turned round.

"We haven't had chicken casserole."

"We had something very similar on Tuesday."

"That was beef stew."

"Same thing, different animal."

"Would you prefer toast?"

"No, thank you."

"Then stop complaining and get the glasses."

I grinned and did as I was told.

Dad came down a few minutes later, wearing tracksuit bottoms and an old jumper.

His hair was sticking up at the back, and he'd apparently decided that shaving was something people only did when they lived somewhere civilised.

"Smells lovely," he said.

"Flattery will get you an extra potato," Mum told him.

"Then you're looking particularly beautiful this evening."

"One potato. Don't push it."

I laughed.

We sat down together, and for a while everything felt almost normal.

Dad told us about his day, mostly involving birds with names I couldn't remember and a pair of binoculars that had nearly ended up in a ditch.

Mum told us she'd spent most of the afternoon arguing with a chapter of her book.

"Did you win?" I asked.

"Not yet. But I'm wearing it down."

I told them about the shops on the mainland, the empty car park and the woman in the supermarket who'd called me a poor thing for living on the Mudpack.

Dad laughed.

"She's not entirely wrong."

"Julian," Mum said.

"What?"

"You're supposed to be encouraging her."

"I am. I'm encouraging her to appreciate the local honesty."

I shook my head.

Sometimes I wondered how either of them had managed to become responsible adults.

After dinner, we decided to watch a film.

It was something we used to do quite a lot in London, especially on Friday nights when nobody had plans.

Mum made tea. Dad found a packet of biscuits. I claimed the corner of the sofa with the best blanket, which was only fair because I'd been the one to unpack it.

The living room was much nicer now.

We'd put our books on the shelves, and Dad had finally connected the television. Mum had found a pair of old lamps in one of the cupboards, and their warm yellow light made the room feel smaller in a good way.

There were still boxes stacked behind the sofa, and one wall was completely bare because we hadn't decided where to hang the pictures.

But the sofa was ours.

The blanket was ours.

And when Dad sat down beside me and immediately stole half of it, that was very much ours too.

"Oi."

"What?"

"Your own blanket."

"This is a family blanket."

"No, it's my blanket."

"Community property."

"Mum!"

"Sort it out yourselves, you two."

Dad grinned and pulled the blanket over his knees.

I gave up and let him have a bit.

The film started.

It was some sort of action thriller Dad had picked, involving a man who seemed to spend most of his time running away from explosions.

Normally, I would've enjoyed it.

Tonight, though, I couldn't seem to concentrate.

I watched the first twenty minutes, then found myself looking towards the window.

The curtains were drawn, but I could hear the wind outside. Every now and then, it made a low whistling sound around the corner of the house.

On the television, someone was shouting about a missing briefcase.

I had no idea why the briefcase mattered.

I tried paying attention again.

A car chase started.

Dad made an approving noise.

"That's a nice motor."

"It's being shot at," Mum pointed out.

"Still a nice motor."

I smiled, but my mind wandered again.

I thought about the causeway, and how strange it had been to walk across it with Clem beside me.

I thought about school tomorrow, another morning of watching people on a screen.

And I thought about London, where my friends were probably doing something without me.

Not deliberately. They'd messaged, of course. They still sent me pictures and stupid videos and asked how I was getting on.

But they were there, and I was here.

That was the difference.

On the screen, the man with the briefcase had apparently escaped another explosion.

I sighed.

Mum looked over.

"You all right, love?"

"Yeah. Just tired."

"Long day?"

"Sort of."

She studied me for a moment, then smiled.

"Why don't you get an early night?"

I glanced at the clock.

It wasn't even nine.

"I'm not five."

"Didn't say you were."

"Just saying."

Dad reached over and ruffled my hair.

"Nothing wrong with an early night, sweetheart."

"Easy for you to say. You'll be asleep in ten minutes anyway."

"Five, if the film doesn't improve."

Mum laughed.

I stood up and folded my bit of the blanket over Dad's knees.

"Night, then."

"Night, love," Mum said. "Sleep well."

"Night, sweetheart."

I bent down and gave them both a quick kiss, then headed upstairs.

The landing was quiet and warm.

From downstairs, I could hear the film continuing, followed by Dad making another comment about the car.

Mum told him to be quiet.

I smiled.

In my room, I switched on the little lamp beside the bed and pulled the curtains.

The house creaked softly around me.

It was still a strange house, on a strange island, surrounded by far too much mud and sea.

But downstairs were my parents, arguing over a film and sharing a blanket.

And for tonight, that was enough.

Chapter Eight

My room was finally starting to look like my room.

Dad had put the posters up yesterday, although it had taken considerably longer than it should have.

I'd stood in the middle of the room giving instructions while he moved things around, holding each poster against the wall until I was happy.

"A bit higher."

He moved it up.

"No, that's too high."

He moved it down.

"Maybe a little to the left."

Dad had looked at me over his shoulder.

"Would you like to do this yourself?"

"No, you're doing brilliantly."

"Glad to hear it."

In the end, we'd got them all where I wanted them. My favourite film poster was above the bed, the others

arranged along the wall beside the wardrobe. Dad had even managed to get them straight, which was more than I could've done.

I'd thanked him with a hug and promised not to make him move them again.

He'd said he wanted that in writing.

Now, lying in bed, I could see them in the soft light from my bedside lamp.

They made a difference.

The walls didn't look so empty anymore. My clothes were in the wardrobe, my books were on the shelves, and I'd finally cleared the last of the boxes from under my desk.

Even the desk looked right.

My notebooks were stacked neatly on one side, pens in a little pot beside them. The lamp stood in the corner, and my laptop was closed in the middle, exactly where I liked it.

I was quite particular about my desk.

Mum said it was the only place in the house where I was naturally tidy.

She wasn't entirely wrong.

I liked knowing where everything was. It made things easier, especially when I had a lot of schoolwork to get through.

Not that I had much of that at the moment.

I rolled onto my back and stared at the ceiling.

School.

I'd been here less than a week, and already I was getting tired of it.

Not the lessons themselves. I didn't mind studying. I actually quite liked it when there was something interesting to work out.

It was everything around the lessons that bothered me.

Watching other people have conversations I couldn't join. Hearing someone laugh at a joke I hadn't heard. Sitting alone in my bedroom while everyone else got to be together.

Ellie had messaged me again that afternoon, which was nice.

She'd sent a picture of Josh asleep at his desk with a pen balanced across his nose.

Apparently, he'd stayed up half the night playing games.

I'd laughed and sent back a message asking whether the

teacher had noticed.

But then Ellie had gone off to meet someone, and I'd gone downstairs to make a cup of tea.

That was becoming a bit of a pattern.

I sighed and turned onto my side.

At least the island wasn't quite as awful as I'd first thought.

The house was warmer now. I knew where the shop was, and I could get to the mainland without Mum or Dad driving me.

I'd even managed to find my way home without getting lost.

Progress.

And there was Clem.

I smiled a little at the thought.

She was funny. Not in the way some people were, where they tried really hard to make everyone laugh. Clem just said things, usually with a completely straight face, and left you to work out whether she was joking.

I liked that.

She also seemed quite comfortable being quiet.

I'd noticed it when we walked across the causeway together. There'd been little gaps in the conversation, but she hadn't rushed to fill them.

In London, silence with someone you didn't know could feel awkward. Like you were supposed to think of something clever to say before they decided you were boring.

Clem didn't seem to care.

I wondered if she'd be at the shop tomorrow.

Or perhaps I'd see her around the village.

It wasn't a big place. Surely we'd bump into each other again.

I thought about asking her if she wanted to hang out sometime.

Then I imagined actually saying it.

Hi, Clem. We've spoken twice, and I don't know anything about you, but would you like to be my friend?

Yeah.

Probably not.

I pulled the duvet up to my chin.

Maybe I'd just wait and see.

I don't know how long I lay there before I gave up trying to sleep.

The house was quiet now.

Mum and Dad had gone to bed, and the heating had settled into its usual little clicks and hums. Somewhere outside, the wind was moving around the house, making a faint whistling sound near the window.

I checked my phone.

11:43.

Brilliant.

I'd gone to bed early and somehow managed to stay awake later than usual.

I turned over.

Then turned back.

Pulled the duvet up.

Pushed it down.

My pillow was too warm, so I flipped it over.

That helped for about thirty seconds.

Eventually, I sat up.

"Oh, for God's sake."

I climbed out of bed, taking the duvet with me, and shuffled over to the window.

The floor was cold against my bare feet.

I wrapped the duvet around my shoulders and pulled the curtain aside.

Outside, everything was dark.

Not London dark, where there were always streetlights and car headlights and the orange glow of the city somewhere in the distance.

Proper dark.

The kind where you could barely tell where the garden ended and the marsh began.

There was a thin layer of mist hanging over the ground, making the little bits I could see look pale and blurry.

Beyond the garden, the marsh stretched away into the darkness.

I could just make out some patches of water reflecting the sky.

It was strangely peaceful.

I stood there for a while, watching nothing in particular.

Then I saw a light.

At first, I thought it was a reflection on the glass.

A small, pale glow, far away across the marsh.

I moved my head.

It was still there.

I leaned closer to the window.

The light moved slowly to one side, then disappeared.

I frowned.

What was that?

A car?

It seemed too far out for a car, and there weren't any roads that way as far as I knew. My window faced the marsh, not the village. The houses and the shop were in the other direction.

I waited.

A few seconds later, another light appeared.

Or perhaps it was the same one.

It moved across the darkness, stopped for a moment, then carried on.

It wasn't particularly bright. More like a torch seen from a long way off.

I pressed my hand against the glass to block the reflection from my bedroom lamp.

There.

Definitely moving.

I watched it disappear again.

Perhaps someone was out walking.

Although why anyone would want to go wandering around a muddy marsh in the middle of the night was beyond me.

Birdwatching, maybe.

Dad went out at all sorts of ridiculous hours.

But I couldn't imagine him being out there without mentioning it, and I was fairly sure he'd gone to bed.

I looked towards the distant patch of darkness where the light had vanished.

Nothing.

Then, just as I was about to close the curtain, I heard something.

A faint, low sound.

Almost a thud.

It was so quiet that I wasn't even sure I'd heard it properly.

I held still.

The house was silent.

I waited for it to happen again.

Nothing.

Maybe it had come from downstairs. A pipe, perhaps, or something settling in the walls.

Old houses made noises. Mum had already said this one seemed to enjoy doing it at night.

I waited another minute.

Still nothing.

Outside, the mist drifted slowly across the marsh.

The lights had gone.

I let the curtain fall back into place.

"Probably nothing," I whispered.

Which was a stupid thing to say, really, because I had no idea what it was.

I climbed back into bed and pulled the duvet around me.

For a while, I lay there thinking about the lights.

Someone working out on the marsh, perhaps.

Or a boat.

Could boats go through the channels at night?

I didn't know.

There were probably perfectly ordinary explanations for all sorts of things on the island that seemed strange to me.

I'd only just got here, after all.

Eventually, my eyes started to feel heavy.

I switched off the lamp.

The room went dark.

And this time, I fell asleep.

I dreamt about the marsh.

At least, I think it was the marsh.

Everything was covered in mist, so thick that I couldn't see the ground beneath my feet.

There were lights in the distance.

Small, pale lights moving slowly through the grey.

Every time I tried to look directly at one, it faded, only to appear somewhere else.

They weren't bright enough to show me what was around them. They just floated in the mist, soft and blurry, like little pieces of the moon.

I tried walking towards them.

But the closer I got, the further away they seemed.

I couldn't hear anything.

Not the wind.

Not the sea.

Not even my own footsteps.

Just silence.

One of the lights stopped moving.

Then another.

For a moment, they hung there in front of me, faint and almost beautiful.

I reached out.

And they disappeared.

When I woke up, the room was still dark.

I lay there for a moment, trying to remember what I'd been dreaming about.

Something about lights.

Something about the marsh.

Then I pulled the duvet over my shoulder, closed my eyes and went back to sleep.

Chapter Nine

By the time my last lesson finished, I was ready to get out of the house.

I'd spent most of the afternoon staring at my laptop, listening to people discuss things I'd already read about, and trying not to look too bored whenever a teacher asked if everyone was keeping up.

I'd finished my homework, too.

All of it.

It was barely half past three.

I closed the laptop and pushed my chair back.

Outside, the sky was grey again, although there was a little patch of blue somewhere beyond the rooftops. It looked as though the weather might actually be considering something other than damp and miserable for a change.

I went downstairs.

Mum was in the kitchen, making tea.

"Finished already, love?"

"Yep."

"Everything?"

"Everything."

She looked impressed.

"Well done."

"Thanks. I'm going out for a bit."

"Anywhere exciting?"

"Just a walk."

"Ah. The famous Mudpack nightlife."

"It's half three, Mum."

"Best get started early, then. Everything shuts at four."

I laughed and grabbed my coat.

"Back before dinner."

"All right, love. Take your phone."

"Got it."

"And don't go wandering off into the marsh."

"I won't."

That last bit was unnecessary. I'd seen enough of the marsh to know I wasn't going anywhere near it without

someone who knew what they were doing.

Dad had already warned me about the mud. Some parts were firm enough to walk on, apparently, while others could swallow your boots before you realised you'd stepped in the wrong place.

I quite liked my boots.

Well, my new boots. Mum had insisted we buy some after I'd come home with freezing feet from the mainland.

They weren't particularly fashionable, but at least they were waterproof.

I didn't go straight into the village.

Instead, I followed the road past our house, towards the edge of the marsh.

There was a low stone wall running along part of the road, and beyond it the ground dropped away into a wide stretch of grass, mud and shallow water.

I stopped beside the wall.

From here, I could see quite a long way.

The marsh was flatter than I'd realised. There were little rises here and there, patches of taller grass, and narrow channels of water winding between them, but nothing that looked like a proper hill.

In the distance, everything disappeared into a pale grey haze.

I looked back towards our house.

My bedroom window was on the upper floor, facing out across this part of the island.

I'd seen the lights somewhere out there.

At least, I thought I had.

I tried to picture exactly where I'd been standing when I saw them. The angle of the window, the direction I'd been looking, how far across the glass they'd appeared.

If I could work that out, I might be able to figure out roughly where they'd come from.

It was a bit like one of those maths problems where you had to work out the position of something from different angles.

Except I only had one angle.

And I wasn't entirely sure about that one.

I moved a little further along the wall and looked out again.

There was a cluster of trees in the distance, and beyond them something that might have been a fence.

Or possibly just more trees.

I squinted.

No use.

I wished I'd brought Dad's binoculars.

Although I wasn't sure they'd help much. Everything was so far away, and the mist made it difficult to see anything clearly.

I looked back towards the house once more.

Maybe the lights had been further to the left.

Or further away.

It was impossible to tell in daylight.

I considered walking a little closer, but the road ended not far ahead, turning into a narrow path that disappeared between the grass.

There was a small warning sign beside it.

I couldn't read all of it from where I stood, but the words UNSTABLE GROUND were quite clear.

That settled that.

I wasn't going to get myself stuck in a muddy hole just because I'd seen a couple of lights out of my bedroom window.

They were probably nothing anyway.

Someone working late.

A boat.

A farmer.

Did people farm marshes?

I had no idea.

I stood there for another minute, trying to make sense of the view, then gave up.

Perhaps I'd ask Dad about it sometime.

The village was quiet.

Not completely deserted, but close enough.

A woman was walking a little dog along the pavement, and two men stood outside the pub talking. Someone had left a bicycle leaning against a wall near the church.

I wandered past the shop, then down one of the little streets behind it.

There wasn't much to see.

A row of houses with small front gardens. A few parked cars. A cat sitting on a windowsill, watching me as though I had no business being there.

I smiled at it.

"Hello."

The cat blinked.

That was the entire conversation.

I carried on walking.

I told myself I was just stretching my legs.

Which was true, technically.

I'd been sitting down all day, and it was nice to get some fresh air, even if the fresh air did smell faintly of mud and seaweed.

But every time I saw someone coming towards me, I looked up to see who it was.

And every time I turned a corner, I found myself checking the street ahead.

I wasn't looking for anyone in particular.

Obviously.

It was just that I knew Clem lived somewhere around here, and it would've been nice to bump into her again.

That was all.

I'd enjoyed talking to her on the causeway. She'd been

funny, and easy to talk to, and she hadn't seemed to mind that I was new.

So perhaps we'd run into each other.

Perhaps she'd ask how I was settling in.

Perhaps we could go for a walk or something.

I passed the shop again.

No green coat.

I walked down another street.

No Clem.

I even went past the little road where she'd turned off after we'd walked home together.

There were three houses, a parked van and a man taking his bins out.

I felt a bit silly.

What was I doing?

I didn't even know where she lived.

And if I did, I wasn't going to turn up at her door like some sort of lost puppy.

I turned around and headed back towards the centre of the village.

At least I'd got some exercise.

And I'd discovered that the Mudpack had rather more bins than interesting things to look at.

I spotted Dad outside the shop.

He was standing by the door with a small paper bag in one hand, looking down at something on his phone.

I recognised his coat immediately.

It was hard not to. The enormous blue thing made him look like he'd been inflated.

"Dad!"

He looked up.

"Hello, sweetheart."

I walked over.

"What are you doing?"

"Buying batteries."

He held up the bag.

"Very exciting."

"For what?"

"My torch. The rechargeable one's playing up, and I

don't fancy being out on the marsh after dark without a spare."

"Fair enough."

He put his phone away.

"What about you? Out exploring?"

"Sort of."

"Find anything interesting?"

"A cat."

"Excellent."

"It didn't seem very friendly."

"Well, you can't win them all."

He smiled and nodded towards the road.

"Heading home?"

"Yeah."

"Come on, then. I'll walk with you."

We set off together.

Dad walked with his hands in his pockets, the little paper bag tucked under one arm. He seemed in a good mood, despite having spent most of the day outside in

weather that made me want to stay under a blanket.

"How was school?" he asked.

"Fine."

"Just fine?"

"Got full marks on a test."

"Well done!"

"It wasn't very difficult."

"Still counts."

"I suppose."

He looked at me.

"You're not enjoying it much, are you?"

I shrugged.

"It's all right. Just a bit boring."

"Give it time. They'll get to more challenging things."

"That's what everyone keeps saying."

Dad chuckled.

"All right, all right. I'll stop."

We walked a little further.

A gull flew over the rooftops, making a horrible screeching noise.

Dad looked up automatically.

I smiled.

"Do you ever stop looking at birds?"

"Not really."

"Even when you're not working?"

"Especially then."

"That's a bit sad."

"Passion, Maya. It's called passion."

"Obsession, more like."

"There's a fine line."

I laughed.

"So how's it going, anyway? Your bird study?"

Dad took a breath.

"Oh, it's interesting."

That was a dangerous answer.

When Dad said something was interesting, it usually meant I was about to hear a great deal more about it than I'd asked for.

But I didn't mind.

Not today.

"Interesting how?"

"Well, the island's got a fairly good history of bird surveys. Records going back years, in some cases. So we've got a decent idea of what species ought to be here, and roughly where we'd expect to find them."

"Right."

"Only some of them aren't where they should be."

"Like what?"

He thought for a moment.

"Redshanks, for example. They're common enough around these saltmarshes. You'd normally expect to see them feeding along the muddy edges and shallow pools. But I'm finding far fewer than I'd expect in certain areas."

"Maybe they've gone somewhere else."

"Exactly. That's one possibility."

He sounded pleased.

"Or maybe there just aren't as many of them this year."

"Also possible."

"So what's the problem?"

"Well, it's not just the redshanks. There are other species showing odd patterns too. And some of the birds I am finding seem to be staying in very particular parts of the island."

"Isn't that normal? Birds have territories and stuff."

"Some do. But we're talking about species that normally move around quite a bit while feeding. They follow the tide, look for food, spread out across suitable ground."

He gestured vaguely towards the marsh.

"There's plenty of habitat here that ought to be attractive to them. Mudflats, shallow channels, saltmarsh. Yet they're concentrating in a few areas rather than using all of it."

"Maybe the food's better there."

"Could be."

"Or there's something wrong with the other places."

Dad glanced at me.

"That's another possibility."

I smiled.

"See? I can do birds."

"Never doubted it."

We turned onto the road leading towards our house.

"So what are you going to do?" I asked.

"Keep watching. Count the birds, record where they are, compare it with the older surveys. See if there's a pattern."

"Sounds thrilling."

"It is, actually."

"To you."

"To me," he agreed.

He adjusted the bag under his arm.

"There's one part of the island that's particularly odd."

"Oh?"

"The eastern end. Very little activity there at all, from what I've seen so far."

"Bird activity?"

"Wildlife generally, as far as I can tell. Though birds are what I'm here to study, of course."

"Maybe it's just not a very nice place to live."

Dad laughed.

"Well, birds can be surprisingly fussy. But the habitat looks suitable enough. I would've expected to see more."

"Have you been out there?"

"Not properly. Some of the paths aren't very good, and I don't fancy getting myself stuck. I've been working from the safer routes and observation points."

"So you don't know what's there?"

"Not in detail, no. But that's part of the job. I'll get a better picture as the study goes on."

I thought about that.

It was strange to imagine parts of such a small island being difficult to reach.

Then again, I'd seen the marsh.

There was a lot of ground out there that looked perfectly harmless until you remembered it might

swallow your feet.

"Do you think something's happened to the birds?" I asked.

"Possibly. Or it could be a perfectly natural change in their behaviour. Weather, food availability, disturbance, any number of things."

He smiled.

"That's why we do research, sweetheart. If we already knew the answers, there wouldn't be much point."

"Fair enough."

"Besides, I've only been here a few days. Bit early to start making grand announcements."

"Shame. I was hoping you'd discovered a new species."

"Ah, yes. The Greater Mudpack Pigeon."

"Known for its ability to survive absolutely miserable weather."

"And its fondness for chips."

I laughed.

"Sounds familiar."

"Remarkable bird. Very intelligent. Occasionally sarcastic."

"Oi."

Dad grinned.

By the time we reached the house, the light was beginning to fade.

The windows were glowing warmly, and I could see Mum moving about in the kitchen.

Dad opened the front door and stepped aside to let me in.

"After you."

"Thank you."

The warm air hit my face as soon as I entered.

I pulled off my coat and hung it on the hook beside Dad's.

"Good walk?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Find your way around a bit more?"

"Mostly."

"Good. You'll know the place like the back of your hand before long."

I wasn't so sure about that.

I still didn't know half the little streets, and the marsh seemed to go on forever.

But at least I was beginning to recognise things.

The church. The shop. The road to the causeway.

And somewhere among all those houses, Clem lived with her dad.

I wondered what she was doing.

Probably something more interesting than standing in a hallway thinking about birds.

"Come on," Dad said, taking off his coat. "Let's see what your mother's got for dinner."

I followed him into the kitchen.

For now, the lights on the marsh could wait.

So could the birds.

And Clem, I supposed.

Although I rather hoped I wouldn't have to wait too long to see her again.

Chapter Ten

Saturday.

I woke up to the sound of gulls arguing somewhere outside my window.

At least, I assumed they were arguing. They certainly didn't sound happy about anything.

I rolled over and checked my phone.

Nine seventeen.

Not bad.

For a moment, I lay there enjoying the fact that I didn't have to get up for school. No laptop, no Teams meetings, no teachers asking whether I could hear them.

Just a whole weekend ahead of me.

Then I remembered.

I had absolutely nothing to do.

In London, Saturdays were usually the best part of the week. I'd meet up with friends, go shopping, see a film or just wander around until we found something interesting. Sometimes we'd make plans days in advance. Other times someone would send a message in

the morning, and half an hour later we'd all be on our way somewhere.

Here, there wasn't really anyone to message.

Well, there was Ellie, but she lived on the mainland and had her own friends. And my friends in London were still there, getting on with their lives without me.

I opened our group chat.

There were seventeen new messages.

Apparently, they were meeting at Westfield later.

Of course they were.

I scrolled through the conversation, smiling at a picture someone had sent of a truly awful pair of shoes.

I could've replied. Told them how ugly the shoes were, or asked what they were planning to do afterwards.

But I didn't particularly fancy spending the morning talking about plans I couldn't be part of.

I put my phone down.

Right.

I wasn't going to spend another Saturday feeling sorry for myself.

There had to be something I could do.

I could go for a walk.

Again.

Perhaps explore a few more of the little streets around the village. Maybe take some pictures. I hadn't actually taken many since we'd arrived, apart from a few miserable-looking ones of the sea.

I could go to the shop and buy something.

Not that I needed anything.

Or perhaps I'd run into Clem.

That would be nice.

I wondered if she had plans for the weekend. She'd mentioned visiting her mum on the mainland, but I didn't know whether she went every weekend or just sometimes.

I hadn't seen her since we'd walked across the causeway together.

Which wasn't that long ago, really.

It just felt like it.

I thought about how easy it had been to make friends in London. Not always, obviously, but at least you were surrounded by people your own age. You could talk to someone in class, sit with them at lunch, and before you

knew it you were meeting up after school.

Here, I had to hope I happened to bump into the same girl twice. Or actually thrice. Well, considering I saw her on causeway that one time, actually… the fourth time. Quadrice? Fries? Four times!

I pulled the duvet over my head.

This was ridiculous.

I was sixteen. I could make plans.

I just needed someone to make them with.

I finally got up at half past nine.

The floor was cold, so I pulled on my socks before going to the window.

It was another grey morning, but at least it wasn't raining. There was a thin mist hanging over the marsh, and the grass looked wet enough to have been rained on anyway.

I stood there for a moment, looking out.

No strange lights, obviously.

I'd thought about them a few times since that night, but I still had no idea what they were. I hadn't seen them again, although I hadn't exactly been standing at the window more than one time looking for them.

Perhaps they'd been workmen.

Or someone with a torch.

Maybe just a boat passing by. That could look like a car I suppose.

It was probably something perfectly ordinary.

I closed the curtains halfway and went to get dressed.

By the time I came downstairs, I could smell toast.

That was promising.

Mum was sitting at the kitchen table in her dressing gown, reading something on her laptop. Dad was standing by the counter, making tea.

"Morning, sleepyhead," he said.

"Morning."

"Sleep well?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Toast?"

"Please."

He dropped two slices into the toaster.

Mum looked up.

"Morning, love."

"Hi, Mum."

She smiled and went back to her screen.

I peered over her shoulder.

"Working already?"

"Just looking at something."

"That sounds suspiciously like working."

"It probably is."

"On a Saturday?"

"Books don't write themselves, unfortunately."

"Have you tried asking nicely?"

"Several times. They're very uncooperative."

I laughed and sat down.

Dad put a mug of tea in front of me.

"Any plans today?" he asked.

I looked at him.

"Loads."

"Oh?"

"Absolutely packed schedule."

"Really?"

"Thinking of going for a walk. Then perhaps another walk. Might finish off with a walk."

Dad nodded seriously.

"Ambitious."

"I know."

"Don't overdo it."

Mum smiled into her mug.

"I thought you might go and see that girl you met," she said.

"Clem?"

"That's the one."

"I don't know where she lives."

"Well, you could always ask around."

"Mum."

"What?"

"I'm not going to wander around the village asking people where a random girl lives."

"She's not random. You've met her."

"Fries."

“What’s that, love?”

“Twice.”

"That's a start."

I reached for the butter.

"Maybe I'll bump into her."

"Perhaps you will, love."

She said it casually, which was nice. I didn't want her making a big thing out of it. I just wanted a friend.

Someone I could talk to who wasn't a parent, a teacher or a face on a screen. That wasn't too much to ask, surely.

The toaster popped.

Dad put the toast on a plate and brought it over.

"Here you go."

"Thanks."

He sat down opposite me with his own breakfast.

"Actually," he said, "I'm heading into Norwich today."

I looked up.

"Norwich?"

"Yep. Need to pick up a few things for work. Some replacement equipment and batteries for it, a couple of bits I couldn't get locally."

"Can't you order them?"

"I could, but I'd rather get them today. Make a trip out of it. And your mother's given me a shopping list long enough to qualify as a short novel."

Mum didn't look up.

"We need food, Julian."

"We've got food."

"We've got half a packet of pasta, three potatoes and a jar of mustard."

"Exactly. The essentials."

"Unless you're planning to make mustard pasta for dinner, I suggest you go shopping."

Dad grinned.

"See what I have to put up with?"

I smiled.

"Terrible."

He took a sip of tea.

"Anyway, I thought I'd go into the city, get what I need, do the weekly shop and come back this afternoon."

"Sounds exciting."

"More exciting than three walks around the village."

I considered that.

He had a point.

"Do you want to come?" he asked.

I looked at him.

"Really?"

"Of course. Could use some company."

"Won't I be in the way?"

"Not unless you insist on carrying everything."

"Definitely not doing that."

"Then we'll be fine."

I glanced at Mum.

"Are you coming?"

She shook her head.

"No, love. I've got some writing to catch up on. And I might actually manage it if you two aren't here arguing about who's eaten the last biscuit."

"That was Dad."

"It was one biscuit," Dad protested.

"It was the last biscuit."

"Exactly. Someone had to eat it."

Mum gave him a look.

He smiled innocently.

I laughed.

"So it's just us, then?"

"Just us," Dad said. "Bit of a father-daughter outing."

I looked down at my toast.

Norwich.

Actual shops. Actual people. Somewhere I could walk around without seeing the same three buildings over

and over again.

And I wouldn't have to worry about getting stranded by the tide, because Dad would be driving and knew how to plan around it.

"Yeah," I said. "I'd like that."

"Excellent."

"What time are we leaving?"

"About half ten, if we get ourselves organised."

I glanced at the clock.

Ten past ten.

"Dad, that's twenty minutes."

"Plenty of time."

"For you, maybe."

"What's wrong with you? You're already dressed."

"I need to do my hair."

He looked at my hair.

"Looks fine to me."

"Exactly why you're not allowed to give fashion advice."

Mum laughed.

"Go on, love. I'll finish your toast if you don't want it."

I immediately picked up the second slice.

"Nice try."

I went upstairs to get ready.

It felt surprisingly good to have somewhere to go.

Not that Norwich was exactly the most exciting destination in the world. I'd been to plenty of cities bigger than that, and I doubted it would have anything I hadn't seen before.

But it was somewhere different.

Somewhere with shops that were actually open.

I brushed my hair, changed my jumper and found a clean pair of jeans.

Then I checked my phone again.

My friends were still discussing Westfield.

I typed a quick message.

Going to Norwich with Dad today. Apparently there is civilisation beyond the mud.

A few seconds later, someone replied.

OMG finally escaping the island prison

I laughed.

Day release. Have to be back before dark.

Another message appeared.

Bring us back a sheep.

Wrong county, idiot.

I put the phone in my pocket, smiling.

It was nice to talk to them, even if it was only for a minute.

Downstairs, I could hear Dad looking for his car keys.

"Where did I put them?"

"On the table, Julian," Mum called.

"Which table?"

"The one you're standing next to."

A pause.

"Ah."

I shook my head.

Some things never changed.

I grabbed my coat and headed downstairs.

For once, I was actually looking forward to the day.

And I hadn't even had to plan it myself.

Chapter Eleven

Dad was singing before we'd even left the car park.

Not particularly well, either.

He'd put on a playlist of songs he used to listen to when he was younger, and apparently knew every single word. Or at least he thought he did.

"That's not how it goes," I told him.

"Of course it is."

"Dad, you've just made up half that verse."

"Artistic interpretation."

"You're literally singing about a washing machine."

"Very important part of the song."

I laughed and turned up the volume.

The causeway was clear when we crossed, with the tide well out and the marsh stretching away on both sides. There was a little mist hanging over the water, but the road was dry, and Dad seemed pleased that we wouldn't have to wait around.

Once we reached the mainland, he glanced at me.

"Right. First one to spot a yellow car wins."

"Wins what?"

"Glory."

"Brilliant."

"And the right to choose the next song."

I sat up a little straighter.

"You're on."

We'd played that game when I was little.

Yellow cars, red lorries, horses in fields, even license plates ending in the letter your name starts with. Sometimes we'd make up our own rules, which usually ended with Dad accusing me of cheating and me pointing out that he'd invented the game in the first place.

I hadn't thought about it in years.

"Yellow car!" I shouted.

Dad looked around.

"Where?"

"Back there. Little Fiat."

"That was cream."

"It was yellow."

"Very pale cream."

"You're just annoyed because I won."

"Disputed victory."

"Still counts."

I reached for his phone, which was connected to the car stereo.

"Right. My music."

"Nothing dreadful, please."

"That depends on your definition of dreadful."

"Anything made after 1995."

I grinned and put on something he'd never heard of.

The first few seconds were all synthesizers and a heavy beat.

Dad made a face.

"Good grief."

"It's music, Dad."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Sounds like someone's dropped a washing machine down the stairs."

I burst out laughing.

"You're obsessed with washing machines today."

"Apparently they're very musical."

He tapped his fingers against the steering wheel anyway.

By the time the chorus came round for the second time, he was humming along.

I looked at him.

"Thought you hated it?"

"I never said that."

"You compared it to a washing machine falling down stairs."

"Could be a very talented washing machine."

I shook my head.

He smiled and turned the music up a little.

The drive was actually quite nice and once we'd left the coast behind, the roads became wider, and the

landscape changed from flat marshes to fields, little villages and stretches of trees.

There were proper roads here. Roads that didn't disappear underwater twice a day.

I was beginning to appreciate those.

Dad told me about some of the places we passed. A village where he'd once stayed during a bird survey. A pub he'd visited years ago. A stretch of woodland where he'd spent an entire morning looking for a bird that turned out to be sitting almost directly above his head.

"How long were you looking for it?" I asked.

"Three hours."

"Three hours?"

"Beautiful bird, though."

"Did it laugh at you?"

"Probably."

"Wouldn't blame it."

We played another game, this time trying to find words on road signs beginning with each letter of the alphabet.

It was surprisingly difficult.

Dad got stuck on Q.

"There's got to be a Queen Street somewhere," he said.

"Not on this road."

"Could be coming up."

"You can't just invent roads."

"I'm not inventing it. I'm anticipating it."

"That's cheating."

"Strategic thinking."

I laughed so hard I nearly missed the sign for a village beginning with R.

"R!" I shouted.

"You're still on Q."

"I've moved on."

"You can't move on until you've finished Q."

"Your rules are rubbish."

"My car, my rules."

"That's not how games work!"

He grinned.

For a while, it felt like being little again.

Not in a bad way.

I didn't want to be eight years old, obviously. I liked being sixteen. Mostly.

But there was something nice about sitting in the passenger seat, arguing with Dad about silly things and not having to think about school or the island or how much I missed my friends.

When I was younger, we'd done things like this all the time. Long drives, stupid games, stopping somewhere for lunch. Dad would make up ridiculous stories about the people in the cars around us, and I'd try to make them even more ridiculous.

I hadn't realised how much I missed it.

I looked over at him.

He was concentrating on the road, still humming along to my music.

His beard was getting a bit greyer around the chin.

That was new.

Or perhaps I just hadn't noticed before.

"What's that look for?" he asked.

"Nothing."

"You're staring."

"Just checking you're still awake."

"Very funny."

I smiled and looked out of the window. It was nice. Just being with him.

By the time we reached Norwich, the roads were getting busier. There were traffic lights, roundabouts, buses and people everywhere. Actual traffic.

I'd never thought I'd be so pleased to see a queue of cars.

Dad found a car park not far from the centre, and we walked towards the shops.

The first thing I noticed was the noise.

People talking. Cars going past. A bus pulling away from a stop. Someone laughing loudly outside a shop.

It was wonderful. I hadn't realised how quiet the island was until I was somewhere that wasn't.

There were shops with their doors open, music playing inside, people carrying shopping bags and groups of teenagers wandering around together.

I saw a girl about my age standing outside a clothes shop with two friends. They were looking at something

on her phone and laughing.

For a second, I felt a little twist in my stomach.

That could've been me.

Not here, obviously. Back home.

Meeting friends on a Saturday, looking at clothes we probably couldn't afford, deciding where to go for lunch.

Instead, I was walking through Norwich with my dad.

Which was lovely.

It just wasn't quite the same.

"Coffee first?" Dad asked.

I looked up.

"Definitely."

"Thought so. Can't be expected to shop without proper preparation."

"You're the one who wanted to come." I reminded him.

"Exactly. And I'm already exhausted."

"You've been driving for an hour."

"Very demanding work."

I laughed.

We found a café on a side street, just off one of the busier shopping areas. It had big windows, little wooden tables and a counter full of cakes that looked far too good to ignore.

There were people sitting everywhere. A couple with a pushchair near the window. Two older women talking over enormous mugs of coffee. A man with a laptop and headphones. A group of students sharing a table at the back.

The place was warm, and it smelt of coffee and fresh bread. I loved it immediately.

Dad looked at the menu above the counter.

"Right. What are we having?"

"Hot chocolate."

"Not coffee?"

"I don't like coffee."

"Still?"

"Dad, I'm sixteen."

"Never too early to develop good taste."

"I'll stick with chocolate."

He ordered a cappuccino for himself and a hot chocolate for me, along with two slices of cake.

I hadn't asked for cake. But I wasn't complaining.

We found a little table near the window and sat down.

Outside, people hurried past carrying shopping bags. A bus went by, followed by a cyclist who looked as though he was having a serious disagreement with the traffic.

I watched them for a moment. It felt so normal. That was the strange thing.

I'd lived in London all my life, surrounded by noise and people and things happening. I'd never really thought about it. It was just what life was like.

Now, sitting in a café in Norwich, I realised how much I missed it.

Not London specifically, perhaps. Just being somewhere alive. Somewhere you could walk out of your front door and find something to do without checking tide tables or wondering whether the one shop in the village was still open.

I looked around the café again. A girl at the next table was telling her friend about a party. Someone near the counter was arguing about whether a sandwich had been made with the wrong bread.

Little ordinary things. Things I used to hear every day.

I missed them.

Dad was stirring sugar into his coffee when he noticed me looking out of the window.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

I smiled.

"Just thinking."

"Dangerous habit."

"Very."

He took a sip.

"Missing London?"

I looked at him.

He knew me far too well.

"A bit."

He nodded.

"Thought you might."

"It's not that I hate the island."

"I know."

"It's just so quiet. And there's nothing to do. And everyone at school gets to see each other every day while I'm sitting in my bedroom talking to a screen."

Dad listened without interrupting.

"And here," I said, gesturing towards the window, "there are people everywhere. Shops. Cafés. Actual things happening."

"Norwich is a lovely city."

"Yeah."

I picked up my spoon and poked at the cream on my hot chocolate.

"I didn't think I'd miss all this so much."

Dad leaned back in his chair.

"Well, you've had a pretty big change, sweetheart."

"I know."

"From the big city to a tiny island in Norfolk. That's quite a jump."

"More like falling off a cliff."

He chuckled.

"Feels like it sometimes, does it?"

"Sometimes."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Look, I know this isn't easy for you. And I know you didn't exactly choose it."

I shrugged.

"It's your job."

"Still. That doesn't mean you have to love every minute of it."

I looked down at my drink.

"I don't want you to think I'm being ungrateful."

"I don't."

"Really?"

"Really."

He smiled.

"You're allowed to miss your old life, Maya. I'd be surprised if you didn't."

I nodded.

That was nice to hear.

Mum had said something similar when we first arrived,

but somehow it helped hearing Dad say it too.

"And remember," he added, "it's only two years."

"Only."

"All right, two years is a long time when you're sixteen."

"It's twelve point five percent of my life."

Dad laughed.

"Trust you to calculate it."

"Approximately."

"Of course."

I smiled.

He reached across the table and gave my hand a quick squeeze.

"But it won't be forever. And in the meantime, we can still do things like this. Norwich isn't going anywhere."

"Unless the sea gets ambitious."

"Then we've got bigger problems."

I laughed.

He let go of my hand and picked up his fork.

"Besides, who knows? You might find things you like about the island."

"I've already found one."

"Oh?"

"The heating works."

Dad laughed so loudly that the woman at the next table glanced over.

"Well, that's a start. Though you're not exactly setting the bar high."

"And the shop has decent chocolate."

"Two things."

"And there's a girl called Clem who's quite nice."

"Three things. We're making progress."

I grinned.

"Don't get carried away."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

We stayed in the café longer than we'd planned.

Dad told me stories about when he was younger, including one about a camping trip where he'd forgotten the tent poles and spent an entire night sleeping under

something that looked more like a collapsed washing line.

I laughed until my stomach hurt. Probably more because I was enjoying being away from the Mudpack than because the story was actually funny.

He claimed the experience had made him a better outdoorsman. I said it had probably just made him better at remembering tent poles.

Eventually, we finished our drinks and got up.

Outside, the city was just as busy as before.

Dad checked his phone.

"Right. Equipment shop first, then groceries."

"And perhaps a few shops that don't sell bird things?"

He pretended to think about it.

"Hmm. Not sure we've got time."

"Dad!"

"All right, all right. We can have a look around."

I smiled and slipped my arm through his.

He looked down at me, surprised for a second, then smiled back and we started walking.

I still missed London. I still wished I could see my friends whenever I wanted, and I still wasn't particularly excited about spending the next two years on the Mudpack.

But I was here now. And there was something nice about that, too. A new place. A different sort of life. Things I probably never would've seen or done if we'd stayed in London.

I wasn't ready to say I was glad we'd moved. Not even close. But I was glad we'd come to Norwich. And I was glad Dad had asked me along.

For the moment, that was enough.

Chapter Twelve

By the time we'd finished shopping, the boot of the car was full. Not just with groceries, either.

Dad had bought batteries, a replacement charger, two waterproof notebooks, something that looked like a complicated metal clamp, and a small black box he insisted was absolutely essential to his work.

"What does it do?" I'd asked.

"Records environmental conditions."

"That sounds exciting."

"It is."

"Does it make a noise?"

"No."

"Light up?"

"Not really."

"So it just sits there?"

"Very accurately."

I'd decided not to ask any more questions.

We'd also managed to visit a few proper shops, and Dad had bought me a new jumper after I'd spent about ten minutes looking at it and pretending I wasn't particularly interested.

He said it was an early Christmas present. I pointed out that Christmas was still ages away. He said he'd probably forget by then and buy me something else anyway.

I wasn't going to argue with that.

Now we were driving back towards the coast, with the heating on and the radio playing quietly.

The sky had turned a pale grey-blue, and the sun was already getting low behind the fields. It wasn't even particularly late, but autumn seemed determined to make every afternoon feel like evening.

Dad was telling me about a bird he'd once seen in Scotland. Or possibly Wales. I'd lost track.

"And there it was," he said, "sitting right on the fence post."

"Wow."

"After we'd spent nearly four hours looking for it."

"Tragic."

"It was, actually."

"Did you take a picture?"

"Of course."

"Then it was worth it."

"Exactly."

I smiled and looked out of the window. It had been a good day. I'd bought a few things, eaten far too much cake and spent several hours in a city where nobody seemed particularly interested in the fact that I lived on an island. Which was lovely.

I'd also had fun with Dad. Proper fun, not just sitting together at dinner or watching television. I hadn't realised how much I'd missed doing things like that with him.

"Thanks for today," I said.

He glanced over.

"You're welcome, sweetheart."

"It was nice."

"Yeah. It was."

He smiled.

"We'll do it again."

"Even if I make you listen to my music?"

"Within reason."

"That's not a no."

"Not a yes either. Depends how many washing machines are involved."

We reached the mainland car park a little before five. Dad slowed down as we turned off the road, and I looked through the windscreen at the rows of parked cars.

There were loads of them. More than I'd expected. And most had the same green-and-blue logo on their doors.

Cairn Eco-Solutions.

"That's weird," I said.

Dad looked over.

"What is?"

"The cars."

"What about them?"

"There weren't any here the other day."

He pulled into an empty space near the far end of the lot.

"Which day?"

"Thursday. When I went to the mainland."

"Ah."

"There was maybe one. Or none. I can't remember exactly. But definitely not all these."

I looked around.

There must've been twenty or thirty CES cars parked in neat rows, along with a handful of ordinary ones. It reminded me of the day we'd first arrived.

"Why are they all here now?"

Dad switched off the engine.

"Probably the weekend."

I looked at him.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, a lot of the people working for CES aren't actually from the island. Some aren't even from Norfolk, as far as I understand it."

"So?"

"So they stay over here while they're working, then go home to their families at weekends."

I looked at the cars again.

"Why leave these here?"

"Company vehicles, I imagine. They use them for work, but drive their own cars home."

"Oh."

That made sense.

"So during the week they're all on the island?"

"Most likely."

"And at weekends they leave the company cars here and go home?"

"That's my guess."

I thought about it.

"That's a lot of people."

"It is. CES is a fairly big operation."

He opened his door.

"Come on. Let's get the shopping sorted before the tide changes its mind."

We couldn't take the car across. Not yet, anyway.

The causeway was still covered by the last of the retreating tide, and Dad had planned to leave the car in the mainland lot until the road was properly clear. We

took the shopping we could carry, leaving the rest safely in the boot for a second trip later.

I wasn't thrilled about that.

"Couldn't we have bought fewer potatoes?" I asked, shifting one of the bags in my hand.

Dad looked at me.

"Your mother specifically requested potatoes."

"Did she request enough to feed the entire island?"

"Possibly. You know how she is."

I laughed.

We walked towards the causeway and stopped near the warning sign. The road was beginning to appear, but there was still a shallow sheet of water across part of it.

A couple of other people were waiting nearby, including a man with a bicycle and an older woman carrying a shopping bag. Dad checked his watch.

"Shouldn't be too long."

I looked at the water.

"How do you always know when it's going to be clear?"

"Tide tables."

"I know that bit. But how come it's later today than it was when I walked over on Thursday?"

"Ah."

Dad smiled.

"Good question."

I immediately regretted asking.

That was his “I'm about to explain something” smile.

"Well," he said, "the tides don't happen at exactly the same time every day."

"Obviously."

"Roughly speaking, high tide comes about fifty minutes later each day."

"Why?"

"Because the Moon's moving around the Earth. The Earth rotates once in about twenty-four hours, but the Moon's moved a little further along in its orbit by then, so it takes a bit longer for the same place to line up with it again."

I frowned.

"So the sea's following the Moon?"

"In a way. The Moon's gravity is the main reason we

have tides. The Sun plays a part too."

"Right."

"And because we generally get two high tides and two low tides in a lunar day, the times shift forward a bit each day."

I thought about that.

"So if the causeway's clear at lunchtime today, it won't be clear until later tomorrow?"

"Exactly. Although it's a bit more complicated than that. The actual times and heights depend on the shape of the coast, the weather and a few other things."

"Of course they do."

He grinned.

"Nothing's ever quite as simple as you'd like."

"Apparently not."

I was kind of fascinated by this. A new world to me. I looked at the water again. It was strange to think that the road we'd driven across earlier was now hidden beneath the sea.

Back in London, roads stayed where you put them.

Generally.

"So how do people manage if they have jobs on the mainland?" I asked.

"Plan around the tides, mostly. Some stay over when they need to. Others have arrangements with their employers."

"Sounds annoying."

"I’m sure it can be. That's why everyone's so keen on the idea of a bridge."

"I heard people talking about that in the shop."

"Yes. Would make a big difference."

"Then why haven't they built one?"

"Money, planning permission, environmental concerns. Building a bridge across a tidal marsh isn't exactly straightforward."

"Nothing on this island is straightforward."

Dad laughed.

"You're learning."

We started walking once the water had dropped enough for the road to be safe. Dad had checked the tide information before we left Norwich, and he seemed perfectly happy with the timing. I trusted him, although I still kept an eye on the water.

It was strange how quickly the causeway changed. The road was wet and shiny, with little streams running off the edges into the mud. Every few minutes, more of the tarmac appeared.

I stepped around a puddle. Dad didn't bother. His boots were enormous and waterproof, so he just walked straight through it.

"Show-off," I muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

He smiled.

For a while, we walked in silence. The air was cold, but not unpleasant. The wind had dropped, and the marsh was almost completely still. A few birds were feeding in the shallow water beside the road.

Dad noticed them, obviously.

He always noticed birds.

I looked back towards the car park. From here, I could still see the rows of CES vehicles.

"So what does that company actually do?" I asked.

"CES?"

"Yeah. Cairn Eco-Solutions."

Dad adjusted the shopping bag in his hand.

"Environmental technology, mostly. At least that's how they describe themselves."

"What sort of technology?"

"Clean energy systems, waste processing, industrial recycling. That sort of thing."

"Sounds very exciting."

"It can be, actually."

"Everything's exciting to you."

"Only the interesting things."

I smiled.

"They've been getting quite a lot of attention over the last few years," he continued. "There was a fair bit of press coverage when they set up here."

"Good or bad?"

"Mostly very positive, from what I've seen."

"Why?"

"Well, they took over the old shipyard, which had been sitting unused for years, and turned it into a modern

facility. Brought investment to the island, created jobs, improved some of the infrastructure."

"Like the electricity?"

"Exactly. Better power connections, some improvements to the roads, that sort of thing."

I thought about the people in the shop talking about CES.

They'd certainly seemed pleased with the company.

"Everyone seems to love them."

"Understandably. Imagine living somewhere this small, with limited work and not much money coming in. Then a company arrives and starts offering decent jobs and proper wages."

"Fair point."

"And they've made quite a thing of being environmentally responsible. Green technology, sustainable development, protecting the future. All the usual phrases."

"Sounds like an advert."

Dad laughed.

"It does a bit, doesn't it?"

"So are they actually any good?"

"Couldn't tell you. I haven't looked into the details of their operations. But they've certainly got a good reputation."

I looked out across the marsh.

"Bit of a strange place to build a big company, though."

"Perhaps. But the old shipyard gave them somewhere to start, and land's a lot cheaper out here than in most places."

"True."

"Besides, they rather put the Mudpack on the map."

I looked at him.

"How?"

"Before CES arrived, hardly anyone outside the local area had heard of the place. Then suddenly there were articles about this little island becoming a centre for green technology. Jobs, investment, all that."

"Like a success story?"

"Exactly."

He paused to shift the bag into his other hand.

"And that's indirectly why I'm here."

I looked up.

"Because of CES?"

"Well, not directly. My work isn't about the company."

"Then what?"

"The island started getting more attention. More development, more people, more activity. And around the same time, some of the wildlife records began showing changes."

"The birds?"

"Among other things."

He nodded towards the marsh.

"Some species were being seen less often. Others seemed to be moving into different areas. There were reports of certain feeding grounds being used much less than they used to be."

"Like you were telling me the other day."

"Exactly."

"So someone decided to investigate?"

"Yes. There was enough concern to justify a proper study. That's where the funding came in."

I thought about that.

"So if CES hadn't come here, you might not have got the job?"

"Possibly not. But it's the changes in the wildlife that I'm here to study, not CES itself."

"Right."

"And I wouldn't want to suggest the company's responsible for anything without evidence. Wildlife populations change for all sorts of reasons."

"Weather, food, disturbance," I said.

Dad looked pleased.

"You were listening."

"Occasionally."

He laughed.

"That's my girl."

We walked a little further. The island was getting closer now, its low buildings beginning to stand out against the darkening sky.

"So what happens if you find something wrong?" I asked.

"Depends what it is."

"Like if the birds are disappearing because of the noise

or something?"

"Then we'd need to establish what was happening, where it was coming from, and whether there was a connection. There are people whose job it is to investigate those things."

"Not you?"

"My job is to collect reliable data. Find out what's changed, and hopefully why."

"Sounds like detective work."

"In a way, it is."

I smiled.

"Bird detective."

Dad groaned.

"Oh, don't start."

"Inspector Sparrow."

"Maya."

"Chief Superintendent Pigeon."

He laughed despite himself.

"You're impossible."

"Thank you."

By the time we reached the island, the sky had started turning pink behind the clouds.

It was actually quite pretty.

I wasn't sure I'd ever admit that publicly.

Dad and I followed the road towards the village, our shopping bags swinging between us.

I thought about what he'd said.

CES had arrived, brought jobs, improved things, and made the island famous in its own small way.

And now Dad was here because the birds were behaving strangely.

It was probably just a coincidence. A problem that might have existed for decades or centuries. Rhythm of life and nature or something like that. Or perhaps all the extra people and buildings had disturbed them.

That would make sense. After all, if someone built a factory next to my house, I'd probably want to move too.

We reached our street, and I could see the lights on in the kitchen. Mum was probably waiting for us. Or waiting for the groceries, which was nearly the same thing.

"Ready to face your mother?" Dad asked.

"Depends. Did you get everything on the list?"

He stopped walking.

I looked at him.

"Dad?"

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper.

Unfolded it.

Looked at it.

Then looked at me.

"Oh, dear."

I started laughing.

"What did you forget?"

He sighed.

"Milk."

I stared at him.

"You bought about six bags of shopping."

"I know."

"And you forgot milk?"

"Apparently."

Dad shook his head. "Well, that's me in trouble."

"Definitely."

"Think she'll notice?"

"Dad, she puts milk in her tea."

"Right." He looked towards the house.

"Perhaps we could pretend the shop was out."

"She's going to ask why you didn't go somewhere else."

"You're not helping."

"I'm not trying to." I felt like a faint echo of Clem right then.

He sighed dramatically.

"Right. Come on, then. Let's get it over with."

I followed him towards the front door, still laughing. It had been a good day. A really good day. And for once, I wasn't thinking about how much I wanted to be somewhere else.

Chapter Thirteen

By the time we'd finished dinner, Dad had been forgiven for forgetting the milk.

Mostly.

Mum had made a great show of drinking her tea without any, pulling a face after every sip and sighing loudly whenever Dad looked at her.

"I've said I'm sorry," he told her.

"I know, love."

"I'll get some tomorrow."

"Of course you will."

She took another sip and winced.

Dad looked at me.

"She's enjoying this."

"Absolutely," I said.

Mum smiled into her mug.

"Right," she said, putting it down. "Who's choosing the film?"

That settled it. Saturday night was film night.

It had been a tradition in our family for as long as I could remember. Not every Saturday, obviously. Sometimes someone had plans - mostly me in recent years, or Dad was working, or Mum had a deadline and couldn't be dragged away from her laptop.

But when we were all home, we usually ended up on the sofa together with a film and far too many snacks.

And tonight, for the first time since we'd moved, it felt like we were doing it properly.

By half past eight, we were all in our pyjamas.

Dad had put on his old checked bottoms and a T-shirt that had probably been washed about a thousand times. Mum was wearing a pair of fluffy socks and the enormous cardigan she always claimed wasn't a dressing gown, even though it might as well have been.

I'd changed into my favourite pyjama shorts and a soft top, then brought my duvet downstairs.

"What's that for?" Dad asked when he saw me.

"Keeping warm."

"We've got blankets."

"I like my duvet."

"Planning to move in down here?"

"Mayhaps I will."

He grinned.

The living room looked lovely.

Dad had got the fireplace working earlier in the week, after spending most of an afternoon cleaning it out and checking that everything was safe. Now there was a proper fire burning behind the little glass doors, making the room glow orange.

I could hear the wood crackling softly.

The lamps were on, the curtains were drawn, and the television was showing the menu for some streaming service Dad had finally managed to get working without swearing at it.

There were bowls of crisps on the coffee table, a packet of chocolate biscuits, some popcorn and a plate of little sausage rolls Mum had heated in the oven.

It was probably enough food for six people.

There were three of us.

"Are we expecting guests?" I asked.

Mum looked at the table.

"No. Why?"

"Just wondering if you've invited the entire island."

"Don't be cheeky. You know you'll eat half of it."

She was probably right. I truly appreciated my fast metabolism.

I climbed onto the sofa and tucked my legs beneath me, pulling the duvet around my shoulders. Dad sat down beside me, while Mum claimed the other end.

"Right," Dad said, picking up the remote. "What are we watching?"

"Something good," I said.

"Very helpful."

"Something without explosions," Mum added.

Dad looked offended.

"What's wrong with explosions?"

"Nothing, Julian. But we've watched three films this month where someone spends the entire time being shot at."

"Two."

"Three."

"One of them was a car chase."

"With explosions."

He sighed.

"Nobody appreciates good cinema anymore."

We spent the next fifteen minutes looking through films, arguing about which ones we'd already seen and whether Dad's suggestions counted as proper films or just excuses to watch things blow up.

Eventually, Mum found a comedy we all liked the look of.

"That one," I said.

Dad read the description.

"Hmm."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing."

"Then put it on."

"Just checking."

"Dad."

"All right, all right."

He pressed play.

It was a good film.

Not brilliant, but funny enough that Mum kept laughing so hard she had to pause it, and Dad spent half the time predicting what was going to happen next. He was usually wrong.

"She's going to fall in the pool," he announced at one point.

On the screen, a woman walked past a swimming pool carrying a tray of drinks.

"Obviously," I said.

She didn't fall in.

Instead, the man behind her slipped, knocked over a table and sent a bowl of fruit flying across the garden.

Dad frowned.

"Well, that was unexpected."

"Almost like you haven't seen it before."

Mum laughed.

"Shush, you two."

We settled down again. I ate far too many biscuits. Dad stole some of my popcorn. Mum complained that

nobody was eating the sausage rolls, so we all had another one to make her happy.

At some point, I ended up leaning against Dad's shoulder with my feet tucked under Mum's blanket.

It was warm. Really warm.

The fire was still burning, and the room smelt faintly of woodsmoke and the cinnamon candle Mum had lit on the mantelpiece.

I looked around.

Our books were on the shelves now. The pictures we'd brought from London were hanging on the walls, and the last of the moving boxes had finally disappeared from behind the sofa.

There were little things everywhere that I recognised. The old clock Mum had inherited from her grandmother. Dad's ridiculous wooden duck, which he'd bought at a charity shop years ago and refused to get rid of. The photograph of the three of us on holiday in Cornwall, all sunburnt and laughing at something I couldn't remember.

It looked like our living room. Not the one we'd had in London, obviously. That had been bigger, with different windows and a sofa that hadn't quite fitted through the front door when we'd bought it. But this one was ours now.

And sitting there with my parents, watching a silly film and eating biccies, I almost forgot where we were.

Almost.

Because every now and then, I'd hear the wind outside. Or the faint cry of a bird somewhere beyond the garden. And I'd remember that we were on a little island in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by marshes and water, with a road that disappeared twice a day.

It still felt strange. But not quite as strange as it had a week ago. I wasn't sure when that had happened. Perhaps it was the posters in my bedroom. Or the fact that I knew where the plates went without having to ask. Or maybe it was just that we'd been here long enough for the house to start smelling like us.

Whatever it was, I liked it.

The film finished a little after eleven. Mum stretched her arms above her head and yawned.

"Well, that was lovely."

"Not bad," Dad admitted.

"High praise," I said.

"Could've used a car chase."

Mum threw a cushion at him.

He caught it.

"Violence. In my own home."

I laughed.

We sat around for another half hour, talking about the film and picking at the last of the snacks.

Dad put another small log on the fire, even though Mum pointed out that we were all going to bed soon.

"Just letting it burn down properly," he said.

"Of course you are."

I was getting sleepy by then, but I didn't particularly want to move. It was comfortable. And nice. I liked being there with them. Eventually, though, Mum stood up.

"Right. I'm off to bed."

Dad checked the time.

"Blimey. Nearly midnight."

"Some of us need our beauty sleep," Mum said.

"Speak for yourself."

"I am."

She kissed the top of his head as she passed.

I laughed and started gathering up the empty bowls.

"Leave those, sweetheart," Dad said. "I'll sort them out."

"You sure?"

"Go on. You've done enough hard work eating everything."

"I left you two biscuits."

"Very generous."

I gave him a hug.

"Night, Dad."

"Night, sweetheart. Sleep well."

I picked up my duvet and headed upstairs.

My bedroom was cold compared with the living room.

Not freezing, just cooler without the fire and all three of us sitting together.

I dropped my duvet onto the bed and switched on the little lamp.

The posters looked nice in the warm light.

I'd got used to seeing them now. They belonged there, just like my books and my laptop and the little

collection of things on my shelves.

I brushed my teeth, had a wee and got ready for bed. By the time I came back into the bedroom, it was almost half past midnight.

I took off my pyjamas and put them on the chair, then went over to the window to close the curtains.

It was a habit.

I'd always closed them before bed in London, where there were streetlights and houses opposite and people who could look straight into your room if they wanted to.

Here, nobody could see in. It felt kind of liberating to stand naked in the window and looking out at the landscape. Unless there was someone standing out in the marsh with a pair of binoculars, which seemed unlikely.

Still, I reached for the curtains. Then stopped. There was a light outside. I leaned closer to the glass. Far out across the marsh, a small pale glow was moving slowly through the darkness.

I stared.

It was the same sort of light I'd seen the other night. Or at least it looked like it. It moved a little to the left, disappeared for a moment, then appeared again further away. I let go of the curtain.

"You're joking."

I watched it for another few seconds. There was definitely something out there. I couldn't tell how far away it was. In the darkness, with nothing to judge the distance by, it could've been a few hundred metres or much further.

Another light appeared. This one was a little brighter. It moved in the opposite direction, then stopped. I frowned. What were they doing? I wished I had Dad's binoculars. Although I doubted they'd help much at night. I moved closer and pressed my forehead against the cold glass. The lights were still there. Moving. Stopping. Disappearing. Then coming back.

I wanted to know what they were. And more than that, I wanted to know whether they were making the strange noise I'd heard before. I reached for the window handle.

Then hesitated. It was freezing outside. And I'd already taken my pyjamas off. I looked at the lights again.

Oh, for goodness' sake. I opened the window. Cold air rushed into the room. I immediately regretted it.

"Bloody hell."

I pulled the window open a little further and leaned towards the gap, keeping most of myself safely inside. The cold air brushed against my skin, making my nipples tighten.

The air smelt of salt and wet grass.

I could hear the wind moving through the marsh, and somewhere in the distance a bird gave a short, sharp cry.

I held still.

Listened.

Nothing unusual.

Just the wind.

I looked towards the lights. One had disappeared, but the other was still moving slowly across the darkness. Then I heard it.

Or thought I did. A low, dull sound.

Thud.

I froze. There was a pause. Then something else.

Not quite a thud this time. More like a faint rumble, so quiet that I couldn't tell whether it was coming from outside or somewhere in the house.

I leaned closer to the open window. The cold was making my skin prickle. I waited.

Nothing.

A gust of wind caught the window, making it shift

slightly against my hand. I held it steady.

Come on. Just once more.

I wanted to hear it properly. But the sound didn't come again. I wasn't even sure I'd heard it in the first place. Perhaps it was the wind. Or something in the house. Or a car somewhere far away.

I looked towards the lights again. They were still moving, faint and distant. There was no way to tell whether the noise had come from the same direction. For all I knew, someone could've dropped something in a shed three streets away.

I waited another minute.

Then another.

My feet were freezing, and I was starting to shiver. Eventually, I gave up. I closed the window and pulled the curtains together. The room seemed much warmer without the cold air blowing in.

I climbed into bed and pulled the duvet up around me. For a while, I lay there thinking. The lights had been there twice now. That was the strange part.

Once could've been anything. Someone walking with a torch, perhaps. A boat passing in the distance. But twice? At almost the same time of night? There had to be a reason.

I thought about asking Dad in the morning. He knew the island better than I did, or at least he knew more about the marshes. Maybe he'd know what was out there. Then again, he'd probably tell me it was someone counting birds.

I smiled a little at the thought. I turned onto my side and closed my eyes. The house was quiet. Downstairs, the last of the fire would be dying away. Mum and Dad were asleep, and outside the wind was moving across the marsh.

I tried to picture the lights again. Two little pale spots, moving through the darkness. And somewhere, perhaps, a faint thud. I couldn't make sense of it.

Not yet.

But I was beginning to think I wanted to.

Chapter Fourteen

By Sunday afternoon, I was getting restless again.

I'd spent most of the morning doing very little. Mum was working on her book, Dad was sorting through photographs and notes from his bird surveys, and I'd already checked my phone about fifty times.

My friends in London were having lunch somewhere.

Ellie had sent me a picture of her cat.

And Clem, as far as I knew, didn't even have my number.

I considered watching something, but I'd spent enough time staring at screens all week. So I decided to go for a walk. Again.

At this rate, I was going to know every street on the Mudpack before Christmas.

I pulled on my new boots, and went downstairs to grab my coat. Mum was at the kitchen table with her laptop open and a half-eaten biscuit beside it.

"Off out, love?"

"Yeah. Just going for a wander."

"Anywhere in particular?"

"Not really."

She looked at me.

"You're not planning to walk to the mainland, are you?"

"No. Just around the island."

"All right. Be careful."

"I will." I groaned.

She laughed and gave me a quick nudge. "Love you too."

I grinned and headed outside.

The village was even quieter on a Sunday.

I hadn't thought that was possible.

The shop was open, but there were hardly any people about. A couple of cars stood outside the pub, and somewhere behind the church a dog was barking. I wondered for a moment why people would drive such a short distance if they were from here then dismissed it.

I walked past the little row of houses where I'd last seen Clem disappear, but there was no sign of her.

Not that I was looking.

Well, not really.

I was getting a bit tired of hoping to bump into someone every time I left the house. Perhaps I should just ask her if she wanted to do something next time I saw her. That would be normal, wouldn't it?

People did that. I could do that. Probably.

I carried on through the village, taking a road I hadn't explored before. It led past the last few houses and towards the eastern side of the island.

The buildings became more spread out here. There were fewer gardens and more stretches of rough grass, with little ditches running beside the road.

The pavement ended, but a narrow gravel path continued along the edge of the marsh. I stopped for a moment. This was roughly the direction I'd been looking when I saw the lights. At least, I thought so.

From my bedroom window, everything was just darkness and mist. It was difficult to tell exactly where anything was. But the lights had appeared somewhere out this way. I looked back towards the village.

There wasn't a direct path from our house to this part of the island. I'd have had to cross the marsh itself, which I definitely wasn't going to do. Coming through the village, though, there were proper paths. That was interesting. I followed the gravel track.

After about ten minutes, I saw the buildings. They were enormous compared with anything else on the island. Big industrial sheds with grey metal sides and flat roofs, surrounded by smaller buildings and tall fences. A few lights were on outside, even though it was still afternoon. There was a large sign beside the entrance.

CAIRN ECO-SOLUTIONS

Underneath, in smaller letters, it said something about sustainable technology and a cleaner future.

I stopped and looked. So this was CES.

I'd seen the logo on all those cars, and I'd heard people talking about the company, but I hadn't actually seen the place itself.

It looked rather ordinary.

Well, ordinary for a factory.

There were loading bays, metal containers and several large vehicles parked between the buildings. A couple of cars stood near what looked like an office entrance, but most of the vehicles were much bigger.

Lorries, mostly. Some had covered backs, while others looked like the sort of thing you'd see on a building site. There was one with a large tank behind the cab. I wondered what that was for. Transporting waste, perhaps. Assuming they had to drive the waste from the old docks to the plant.

Dad had said CES did recycling and waste processing, so I supposed they'd need vehicles to move things around. I walked a little closer.

The gravel path curved towards the main entrance, but before I reached it, I came to a tall metal fence. There was a gate across the access road, with a security camera mounted above it. A yellow sign was fixed to the fence.

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Well, that was clear enough. I wasn't planning to go in anyway. I stood beside the fence and looked through. There was quite a lot going on inside.

A man in a high-visibility jacket was walking between two buildings, carrying something under his arm. Further away, a large vehicle was reversing slowly towards a loading bay. It made a faint beeping noise.

Another man stood beside it, waving his arms to guide the driver. I watched for a moment. Nothing particularly mysterious. Just people working. I tried to imagine what the place had looked like before CES arrived.

Dad had said it used to be a shipyard. I could sort of see that. Some of the buildings looked older than the others, and there were bits of heavy equipment scattered

around that might once have been used for building or repairing boats.

But most of it looked quite modern now. New fences. Freshly painted signs. Proper roads between the buildings. It was strange seeing something so big on such a small island.

I wondered how many people worked here. Judging by all the cars in the mainland car park, quite a few.

A lorry moved slowly across the yard, disappearing behind one of the larger buildings. I looked beyond it. The marsh stretched away into the distance. Somewhere out there, I'd seen the lights.

I tried to work out whether they could've come from the factory. There were plenty of outdoor lamps, and I could imagine them looking strange through the mist at night.

But the lights I'd seen had been moving. Not just flickering or shining through fog. Actually moving from one place to another. Perhaps they were vehicle headlights. That would make sense. I looked at the lorries again. They certainly had enough vehicles to be driving around at night.

Still, something didn't quite fit.

From my bedroom window, the lights had seemed further away. And a little to the right. I frowned. Maybe I was remembering it wrong.

I walked back along the gravel path until I reached a fork I'd passed earlier. One path led towards the village, the other continued further east, following the edge of the marsh. I hadn't noticed it properly on the way here.

It was narrower than the path I'd been using, but it looked well worn, with gravel and packed earth underfoot. And there was no warning sign.

So I followed it. The factory buildings slowly disappeared behind a low rise in the ground. I could still see the tops of the roofs, but the fences and vehicles were mostly hidden now. The path curved around a patch of rough grass, then continued towards a small group of trees. Beyond them was more marsh. Lots more marsh.

I stopped beside a wooden post that looked as though it had once held a sign. The sign itself was gone. From here, I could see quite a long way to the south and east. The land was almost completely flat, with narrow strips of water reflecting the grey sky. There were patches of tall grass, little muddy banks and the occasional clump of bushes.

No houses. No roads that I could see. No buildings at all. I turned and looked back towards the village.

If I imagined a straight line from my bedroom window, across the marsh and towards where I'd seen the lights, it would probably pass somewhere near here.

Or perhaps a little further south. I tried to picture it. Our

house was over there, behind the village. The factory was to my left. The lights had been somewhere beyond it. I moved a few steps along the path and looked again.

This was harder than I'd expected.

In maths, you could work out where something was if you knew the angles and distances. Here, I didn't know either. I only had a rough idea of the direction from my bedroom window, and even that was based on something I'd seen in the dark.

Not exactly brilliant evidence.

Still, I was fairly sure of one thing. The lights hadn't come from the main CES buildings. They'd been further out. Somewhere to the southeast of the factory. I looked across the marsh again.

There was nothing there. At least, nothing I could see. Just grass, mud and water, stretching away into the haze. I wondered if there were roads hidden somewhere among the reeds. Perhaps tracks used by the company.

But from here, I couldn't see any.

I considered following the path further. It continued for another little way before disappearing around a bend, but beyond that the ground looked much rougher.

There were patches of mud close to the edge, and I couldn't tell whether the path continued or simply stopped. I remembered Mum's warning.

And Dad's.

And Clem making fun of my shoes.

I looked down at my new boots. Waterproof or not, I wasn't about to test how far they could sink. So I stayed where I was.

I stood there for several minutes, looking out across the marsh. The wind was cold, and there was this faint but now familiar smell of salt and wet grass that encompassed the entire Mudpack. Somewhere behind me, I could hear the distant sound of machinery from the factory.

A low engine noise. Then a metallic clank. I turned my head. The sound seemed to come from the CES buildings. Perfectly ordinary factory noises. I wondered whether that was what I'd heard from my bedroom.

Perhaps the thuds had just been someone moving equipment around. Sound could travel quite a long way across open ground, couldn't it? Especially at night, when everything else was quiet. That would explain the noises. And the lights could've been vehicles.

There. Mystery solved.

Except I still couldn't see how the lights could've come from somewhere so far beyond the buildings.

I looked towards the southeast again. Nothing. Perhaps there was another part of the factory out there. Some

smaller building hidden behind the grass. Or perhaps I'd simply got the direction wrong. That was entirely possible.

I wasn't exactly an expert at finding things in the dark. I pulled my phone out and checked the time. Nearly four. I'd been walking around for over an hour. Mum would probably start wondering where I'd got to soon.

I took one last look across the marsh.

It was difficult to imagine anyone working out there at night. There was nothing to see, nowhere obvious to go, and the ground looked horrible. Yet I'd definitely seen lights moving.

Twice.

I slipped my phone back into my pocket. Maybe Dad would know if CES had anything further out. He'd been studying the island for days now, and he'd probably seen more of it than I had.

I could ask him. Or perhaps Clem would know. Her dad worked at CES, after all. I hadn't thought about that until now. Well, that gave me another reason to talk to her. Not that I needed one.

I turned away from the marsh and started walking back towards the village. Behind me, the factory carried on working, its vehicles moving between the buildings and its big grey roofs standing out against the sky. And beyond it, somewhere to the southeast, the marsh

stretched away into the distance.

Empty, as far as I could tell. I still had no idea what the lights were. But at least now I had a better idea of where to look.

Chapter 15

By the time I got back towards the village, my feet were starting to ache. I'd been walking for ages, and although the new boots were much better than my trainers, I was beginning to think I'd overdone it a bit.

The wind had picked up, too. It wasn't particularly strong, but it was cold, and the air felt damp enough that I kept expecting it to start raining. I pulled my coat tighter around myself.

The village was quiet, as usual. A few windows were lit, and there was still a car parked outside the pub, but otherwise it looked much the same as it had when I'd left. I was going to head straight home.

Then I saw the shop.

The Mudpack Store & Post Office.

There was a little sign in the window advertising hot drinks. I stopped. Tea. That sounded lovely. I'd noticed the machine when I'd been in before, but hadn't tried it. And after spending most of the afternoon outside, the thought of something warm to hold was very appealing.

Besides, I wasn't in any particular hurry. Mum would still be writing, and Dad would probably be looking at birds on his computer. I pushed open the door.

A little bell rang above my head. The shop was warmer than outside, which was a relief. It smelt faintly of coffee, cardboard and whatever cleaning stuff they used on the floor.

There were a couple of people browsing the shelves, and the woman behind the counter was talking to someone. I didn't pay much attention. I went straight to the drinks machine near the back. It wasn't exactly a fancy café setup.

There was a hot-water dispenser, a selection of tea bags and instant coffee sachets, a little pile of paper cups and a plastic container full of wooden stirrers.

I picked up a cup and looked through the tea selection. English Breakfast. Earl Grey. Peppermint. Something called Forest Fruits. I chose English Breakfast. There was no point getting adventurous.

I dropped the tea bag into the cup and started filling it with hot water. That was when I heard the voice. "He ordered them yesterday, and they should be here now."

I froze.

I knew that voice. Or thought I did. It was a girl's voice, fairly quiet, with that dry, matter-of-fact way of speaking I'd heard before. I turned my head. Standing at the counter was a figure in a dark green coat. Messy brown hair, faded jeans, muddy boots.

Clem.

I stood there for a moment, holding my cup beneath the hot-water dispenser. She was talking to the cashier, who seemed to know her.

"Tell your dad I'll give him a ring when they come in," the woman said.

"Will do."

"And tell him I haven't forgotten about the other thing."

Clem smiled.

"I'll tell him. Not promising he'll remember."

The woman laughed.

I turned back towards my tea. Right. Clem was here. Actually here. After all that wandering around the village hoping to see her, she'd just appeared in the shop. I could go over and say hello. That would be normal.

We'd spoken before. We'd walked home together. She'd been perfectly friendly. There was no reason I couldn't say hello. Except what if she was busy? Or didn't particularly want to talk? Or thought I was being weird, turning up and acting like we were best friends after one conversation?

I stirred my tea. I was being ridiculous. It wasn't as though I was asking her to marry me. I just wanted to say hello. And, if I was being completely truthful, I was

lonely. Really lonely.

I'd spent most of the week talking to my parents, teachers and people on a screen. The only person my own age I'd had a proper conversation with since arriving on the island was Clem. I wasn't going to waste the opportunity because I was too nervous to say two words.

I added a little milk to my tea. Then some sugar. Then stirred it again, even though it didn't need stirring. Right. Just go over. I picked up the cup and walked towards the counter.

Clem was still there, finishing her conversation. I joined the queue behind her. And immediately pretended I hadn't noticed who she was. Which was possibly the stupidest thing I'd done all week. I looked at the shelves beside the till. Batteries. Chewing gum. A little display of keyrings shaped like crabs.

Very interesting. I studied the crab keyrings with enormous concentration. As though I'd come all this way specifically to admire them.

Then Clem turned around.

"Oh. Hello."

I looked up.

"Oh! Hi."

Excellent acting, Maya.

Absolutely convincing.

Clem smiled.

Not just a polite little smile, either.

A proper one.

She looked genuinely pleased to see me.

"Didn't know you were here."

"Yeah. Just getting some tea."

I held up the cup, as though she might not believe me otherwise.

"Nice."

"Yeah."

There was a tiny pause.

I had absolutely no idea what to say next.

Luckily, Clem didn't seem to have the same problem.

"Been out walking?"

"Yeah. Just around."

"Brave."

"Why?"

"Weather's rubbish."

I laughed.

"Bit cold."

"Bit?"

She looked at my coat.

"You look like you've been blown in from the North Sea."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

The cashier cleared her throat gently. Clem turned back.

"Oh, sorry."

She put a couple of things on the counter. A loaf of bread, a packet of crisps and something wrapped in brown paper. The woman rang them up.

"Anything else, Clem?"

"No, that's everything."

Clem paid, gathered her things and stepped aside. I expected her to leave. Instead, she stayed by the counter, waiting. For me.

I felt a little rush of relief. I put my tea down.

"Just this, please."

The cashier smiled.

"That'll be one pound fifty, love."

I paid and picked up my cup.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Clem was still standing by the door.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Yeah."

We went outside together. The cold hit us immediately.

"Oh, that's horrible," I said.

Clem pulled her coat tighter around herself.

"Welcome to Norfolk."

"I've been here over a week. I think I've been welcomed enough."

"Just making sure."

I smiled. We stood beside the shop window, where there

was a little shelter from the wind. I wrapped both hands around my tea. It was lovely and warm. For about three seconds, anyway.

"So," Clem said, "settling in yet?"

I made a face.

"Sort of."

"That good, eh?"

"It's not terrible."

"Glowing review."

I laughed.

"It's just different. I'm still getting used to it."

"Yeah. I can imagine."

"There's not exactly much to do."

"Nope."

"You're not even going to defend the place?"

Clem considered that.

"We've got a pub."

"I'm sixteen."

"Shop, then."

"We're standing outside it."

"See? Loads to do."

I laughed again. She smiled. It was easy talking to her. Or it should've been. For some reason, I was still painfully aware of every little pause. I kept trying to think of something interesting to say, which was making it much harder to say anything at all.

"How was your weekend?" I asked.

"All right. Went over to see Mum yesterday."

"Oh, nice."

"Yeah. Had lunch, did a bit of shopping. Nothing exciting."

"I went to Norwich with Dad yesterday."

"Look at you. World traveller."

"I know. Very glamorous."

"Did you survive?"

"Barely. He made me go into a shop that sold bird equipment."

Clem nodded seriously.

"Sounds awful."

"It was. There were binoculars everywhere."

"Did he buy any?"

"No, but he spent ages looking at them."

"Could've been worse. He might've made you look through them."

I grinned.

"He did."

Clem laughed. A proper laugh this time, not just a smile. It made me feel a bit less awkward.

"Poor thing," she said.

"Thank you. Finally, someone understands."

We stood there for a moment, smiling. A car drove past, its tyres hissing on the damp road. The wind caught a strand of Clem's hair and blew it across her face. She pushed it away with one hand.

"So where've you been walking today?" she asked.

"Just around the outskirts. Went east for a bit."

"Towards the old shipyard?"

"Yeah. I saw the CES buildings."

"Oh, right."

"Didn't realise they were so big."

"They've added quite a lot over the years."

"Your dad works there, doesn't he?"

"Yeah."

"What's he do?"

"Maintenance, mostly. Keeps things running."

"Sounds useful."

"He likes to think so."

I smiled.

"Mine just looks at birds."

"Someone's got to."

"Apparently."

I took a sip of tea.

It had already cooled down a bit.

"Do you ever go out on the marsh?" I asked.

"Sometimes. Depends where."

"Doesn't it get dangerous?"

"Can do. You've got to know where you're going."

"That's what everyone keeps telling me."

"Because it's true."

She gave me a sideways look.

"You weren't wandering off the paths, were you?"

"No!"

"Good."

"I quite like having feet. And keeping my boots on them."

"Useful things."

I laughed.

"I just walked along the paths near CES. Didn't go anywhere I wasn't supposed to."

"Fair enough."

She nodded towards my boots.

"At least you've got proper shoes now."

I looked down.

"Yes. You'll be pleased to know I took your advice."

"Miracles happen."

"Don't get used to it."

She smiled and we carried on talking for a few more minutes. Nothing particularly important. The weather. The shop. How early everything seemed to close. The fact that I'd nearly got lost twice while exploring the village. Clem told me that getting lost on the Mudpack was quite an achievement. I told her I was talented.

I was starting to relax. It was nice having someone to talk to who wasn't asking how school was going or whether I was settling in. Clem didn't seem to expect me to say I loved the island. She didn't seem offended when I said it was boring. She just accepted it. Which made it easier. But the cold was getting worse. My tea was barely warm now, and I could feel the damp creeping through my jeans. Clem shifted the shopping bag in her hand.

"Right," she said. "I'd better get going."

Oh. Already? I felt an immediate, ridiculous sense of disappointment. We'd only been talking for a few minutes. Well, probably longer than that. But it didn't feel long enough. I wanted to ask if she had anything else to do. Or whether she fancied going for a walk. Or just standing there talking a bit longer. But she'd said she needed to go. And I didn't want to be annoying. So I nodded.

"Yeah. Me too."

I didn't move. Neither did she, for a second. Then Clem smiled.

"See you around, Maya."

"Yeah. See you."

She turned and started walking away. I watched her go. For goodness' sake. I should've said something. I could've asked if she wanted to hang out sometime. That was perfectly normal. People asked each other that all the time. Instead, I'd stood there holding a cup of tea like an idiot. I looked down at it. It was almost cold. Brilliant.

I was just about to turn towards home when I heard my name.

"Maya?"

I looked up.

Clem had stopped a few steps away.

She turned around.

"If you're not doing anything, we could hang out later?"

For a second, I just stared at her. I hadn't expected that. At all. My heart gave a sudden little jump. Not because she'd said anything particularly amazing. Just because

someone had actually asked me to do something. Someone my own age. Someone who wasn't being forced to talk to me through a computer screen.

I nodded. Then realised I hadn't actually answered.

"Sure," I said quickly. "I'd love that!"

Possibly a bit too eagerly.

But Clem just smiled.

"Cool."

"Yeah. Definitely."

"Want to come round to mine?"

"Yeah. That'd be great."

"All right. Give me a bit to get this stuff home. Say half five?"

"Half five's good."

She nodded towards the road behind her.

"I'm just down the lane past the old post box. White cottage, green door. Can't miss it."

I tried to picture the lane.

I thought I knew which one she meant.

"Okay."

"And if you get lost, just ask someone where Clem lives."

I laughed. "I thought that was exactly what you weren't supposed to do in a small village."

"Depends who you're asking."

"Right."

She grinned. "See you later, then."

"See you!"

This time, when she walked away, I didn't feel disappointed. Quite the opposite. I stood there for a moment, smiling to myself. Half five. I had plans. Actual plans.

With someone who'd asked me, rather than the other way round. I looked at my phone. Just after four. That gave me enough time to get home, warm up, maybe have a shower and change. I started walking.

Then realised I was still carrying the tea. It had gone completely cold. I didn't care. For the first time since we'd moved to the Mudpack, I had something to look forward to that didn't involve leaving it.

Chapter Sixteen

The shower was probably hotter than it needed to be.

I'd turned it up until the water was almost too hot to stand under, then stayed there until my fingers started going wrinkly.

After spending most of the afternoon walking around in the cold, it felt wonderful. Now I was standing in front of the bathroom mirror with a towel wrapped around me, trying to dry my hair. The mirror was still steamed up, even though I'd left the door open. I wiped a little circle in the glass with my hand. My reflection looked back at me.

Pink cheeks. Damp hair. A ridiculous expression on my face. I was smiling. Again. I couldn't seem to stop.

Half five.

I glanced at the little clock on the bathroom shelf. Twenty past four. Plenty of time. I picked up the hairdryer and switched it on. It made its usual horrible noise, drowning out almost everything else in the house.

Almost.

From downstairs, I could hear Mum and Dad talking. I couldn't make out the words, but I recognised the

sounds of the kitchen. Cupboards opening and closing, plates being put on the table, the occasional clatter of something metal.

Dad was cooking. Mum was probably setting the table, which usually involved telling Dad he'd used every saucepan in the house. I switched off the hairdryer and ran my fingers through my hair. Still damp at the back.

I turned my head to check it in the mirror. That's when I heard Mum say my name.

"...Maya's going out tonight."

I stopped. They were talking about me. I knew I shouldn't listen. But the bathroom door was open, and their voices carried quite clearly up the stairs now the hairdrier was off.

"Oh, that's right," Dad said. "She's seeing that girl, isn't she?"

"Clem, yes."

"Good."

There was a little clatter of cutlery.

"I'm glad," Mum said. "She's been looking so lonely, bless her."

I looked at myself in the mirror.

Had I?

I supposed I had.

I hadn't exactly been hiding it.

"Well, it's been a big adjustment," Dad said. "She's gone from having friends around her all the time to being stuck here with us."

"Poor child."

"Speak for yourself. I'm excellent company."

Mum laughed.

"Of course you are, love."

"I tell fascinating stories."

"About birds."

"Fascinating birds."

"Yes, Julian."

I smiled. Dad was quiet for a moment.

"Still, it's nice she's found someone her own age."

"It is," Mum agreed. "She seemed really pleased when she came home."

"Good. She deserves to have a bit of fun."

"She does."

There was another pause. Then Mum added, more quietly, "I just hope it works out. She's trying so hard to be cheerful about all this."

I looked down at the hairdryer in my hand. I hadn't realised they noticed quite so much. Of course they did, though. They were my parents. They'd known me for sixteen years. It was probably quite difficult to hide things from people who'd once had to convince you that eating broccoli wouldn't kill you.

Dad said something I couldn't quite hear. Mum laughed softly. Then I heard the scrape of a chair and the sound of water running in the sink. I switched the hairdryer back on. When my hair was finally dry, I turned it off and closed the bathroom door. The house went quiet again, apart from the muffled sounds downstairs.

I stood there for a moment, thinking about what Mum had said. She's found someone her own age. That wasn't quite true. Not yet.

I'd met Clem a few times, and we'd had one proper conversation on the way back from the mainland. Then we'd talked outside the shop today. That didn't exactly make us friends. Acquaintances, perhaps. Although that sounded like something Mum would say about someone she met at a book signing.

I didn't want Clem to be an acquaintance. I wanted her to be my friend. A proper friend. Someone I could

message when I was bored, or ask to go for a walk, or sit around doing absolutely nothing with. Someone who'd actually want to spend time with me.

I took off the towel and pulled on my knickers, then reached for the clothes I'd brought into the bathroom. It was strange how difficult making friends suddenly seemed. Back in London, I'd never really thought about it.

You met people at school. You talked. You found things in common. Sometimes you became friends, sometimes you didn't. There were always other people.Here, there was Clem. And possibly a few other teenagers I hadn't met yet, but I certainly hadn't seen many.

I hoped I wasn't putting too much pressure on one person. That would be unfair. I pulled on my jeans and fastened them.

Clem was different from the girls I'd known in London. Not better or worse. Just different. My friends back home were always talking about something. Clothes, music, school, people they liked, people they hated, things they'd seen online. There was usually more than one conversation happening at once, and everyone had an opinion about everything.

Clem didn't seem like that. She was quieter. She didn't talk just to fill the silence. And when she did say something, it was usually funny without her even seeming to try. Like when she'd made fun of my shoes on the causeway.

Or when she'd stood outside the shop in the freezing cold, calmly telling me that the Mudpack had loads to offer because it had a pub and a shop. I smiled at the memory.

She had this way about her. I wasn't sure how to describe it. Strong, perhaps. Not physically, although she looked like someone who could manage a long walk without complaining about her feet every five minutes. More that she seemed comfortable with herself. She didn't appear to worry about what people thought.

She wore that enormous green coat and those muddy boots as though she'd never considered wearing anything else. She didn't seem to need anyone's approval. Or at least that was how she came across. For all I knew, she went home and worried about everything just as much as I did.

I hardly knew her. That was the point.

But I wanted to. I pulled my jumper over my head. It was the new one Dad had bought me in Norwich.Soft, dark blue, with sleeves that came down over my wrists.

I liked it.

I looked at myself in the mirror. Jeans. Jumper. Socks. Perfectly normal. Not that it mattered. I wasn't going anywhere special. Just round to someone's house. Someone who might become a friend. I took a breath.

Please let her be nice.

Well, she was nice.

Please let her keep being nice.

That sounded stupid. I laughed quietly at myself and went back to my bedroom to put the hairdryer away and check my phone.

Four thirty-eight.

I had nearly an hour. Well, a little less, because I still had to find Clem's house. She'd said it was down the lane past the old post box. White cottage, green door. Couldn't miss it. I could absolutely miss it.

I'd already proved that I could get lost in a village with about six streets. I sat on the edge of my bed and considered looking at a map. Then decided that would be ridiculous. I'd find it. Probably.

I checked my messages. There was a new one from my London friends. Someone had posted a picture of a truly enormous pizza. I replied with a picture of my bedroom ceiling. Living the dream.

A few laughing emojis appeared. Then someone asked what I was doing tonight. I typed:

Going to hang out with a girl I met here.

Almost immediately, a reply came back.

Oooooh new friend!

I smiled. Hopefully. Another message appeared.

See! Island life isn't all mud and sheep.

I shook my head.

There aren't even any sheep.

What kind of island is that???

I laughed and put my phone down. It was nice being able to tell them I had plans. Even if the plans were just sitting around at someone's house. Actually, especially if they were just sitting around at someone's house. That was exactly what I missed.

A little before five, Mum called up the stairs.

"Maya? Dinner, love!"

I checked the time. Right. I'd have to eat fairly quickly. I grabbed my phone, slipped it into my pocket and headed downstairs. The kitchen smelt lovely.

Dad had made pasta with some sort of tomato sauce, and there was garlic bread on the table. Mum was putting the last of the plates down.

She looked up when I came in.

"Oh, look at you. All ready to go."

I glanced down at myself.

"I'm wearing jeans, Mum."

"Very nice jeans."

"They're the same ones I always wear."

"Well, they're still very nice."

Dad looked over from the cooker.

"Oh, the new jumper?"

"Yeah."

"Excellent choice. Whoever bought you that has wonderful taste."

I smiled.

"Debatable."

He put a hand over his heart.

"Wounded."

Mum laughed.

I sat down at the table.

"Smells good."

"Thank you," Dad said. "I made an effort."

"Did you remember the milk?"

Mum burst out laughing.

Dad pointed his wooden spoon at me.

"That joke's getting old."

"Not as old as your milk."

"We haven't got any milk."

"Exactly."

He shook his head, smiling, and brought the pan over. Mum sat down opposite me.

"So," she said, helping herself to pasta, "half five, was it?"

"Yeah."

"Do you know where you're going?"

"Sort of."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sort of?"

"She gave me directions."

"All right. Take your phone, and let us know if you're going to be late."

"I will."

"And have a lovely time."

I smiled.

"Thanks, Mum."

Dad sat down beside her.

"Give our regards to Clem."

I looked at him.

"Dad, you've never met her."

"Doesn't mean I can't give her my regards."

"Please don't."

He grinned.

"All right. I'll save them for another time."

I rolled my eyes and reached for the garlic bread. They were being ridiculous. But I knew why. They were happy I was going out. Happy I had someone to spend time with. And, if I was being truthful, so was I.

I still didn't know whether Clem and I would become proper friends. Maybe we'd have nothing to talk about once we were sitting in her house. Maybe we'd discover we had absolutely nothing in common. Maybe she'd decide I was the most boring person she'd ever met.

But she'd asked me to come over. That had to mean something. I took a bite of garlic bread. For now, I was going to enjoy that. And try not to worry about the rest.

Chapter Seventeen

I'd repeated Clem's directions in my head at least a hundred times before leaving the house. Past the shop. Left at the church. Down the lane with the old post box. White cottage, green door.

Easy. Probably. I pulled my coat tighter around myself as I walked through the village.

It was getting dark already, and the cold had that horrible damp feeling that seemed to go straight through your clothes. My boots weren't particularly fashionable, but at least my feet were warm. I'd almost started to like them.

Almost.

There were lights on in most of the houses now, and a few people were making their way home. Somewhere, someone was cooking something that smelt of onions.

I passed the shop, turned left at the church and found the old post box without any trouble. So far, so good.

The lane was narrower than the main road, with a row of little cottages on one side and a low stone wall on the other. I walked slowly, checking the doors.

Blue.

Brown.

Another blue.

Then green.

The cottage was white, with a small garden and a wooden gate that looked as though it had been repaired more than once. There was a bicycle leaning against the wall, and a pair of enormous muddy boots stood beside the front door.

I stopped. Right.

This was it. I checked my phone. Five twenty-seven. Perfect. I put it away, pushed open the gate and walked up the little path.

Then I stood in front of the door for several seconds, wondering why knocking on someone's door suddenly felt so difficult.

It was just Clem. She'd invited me. I wasn't turning up unannounced. I raised my hand and knocked. I heard footsteps almost immediately.

The door opened. Clem stood there in jeans and a dark jumper, her hair looking just as messy as it had earlier.

"Oh, hi!"

She smiled.

"Hi," I said.

"Found it, then?"

"Eventually."

She looked past me towards the lane.

"Did you get lost?"

"No."

"Shame."

I laughed.

"Sorry to disappoint."

"Come in. It's freezing."

She stepped aside.

I walked into a small hallway that smelt faintly of woodsmoke and something cooking. There were coats hanging on hooks, a few pairs of shoes lined up against the wall, and a little wooden shelf full of keys, letters and other things people put down when they came home.

It looked lived in. Comfortable. A bit untidy, but in a nice way. I started taking off my coat.

"You can chuck that there," Clem said, pointing to a hook.

"Thanks."

I hung it up and bent to pull off my boots.

"Don't worry about those," she said. "Floor's seen worse."

I looked at the boots beside the door.

"I can believe that."

She grinned.

Then a man's voice came from somewhere further inside the house.

"That your friend, Clem?"

"Yeah, Dad."

"Well, don't leave her standing in the hall."

Clem rolled her eyes.

"Come on."

I followed her into the kitchen.

Her dad was enormous.

That was my first thought.

Not fat, just big. Broad shoulders, thick arms, and the sort of build that suggested he spent a lot of time lifting

heavy things. He had a full beard, dark hair with a little grey in it, and wore a checked shirt with the sleeves rolled up.

He was standing beside the kitchen counter, cutting vegetables. When he saw me, his whole face broke into a smile.

"Well, hello there!"

"Hi."

"You must be Maya."

"Yeah."

He wiped his hands on a tea towel and came over.

"I'm Tom. Clem's dad."

"Nice to meet you."

He held out his hand and I shook it. His hand was huge, and rough in the way Dad's sometimes got after he'd spent a long day outdoors. But he shook mine gently.

"Good to meet you too. Clem's mentioned you."

I glanced at her.

She made a face.

"Don't start, Dad."

"What?"

"Just don't."

He laughed.

"Only said you'd mentioned her."

"Exactly."

I smiled, not quite sure what to do with that information. Clem had mentioned me? That was nice. Tom looked at me again.

"You're the family that's just moved into the old house near the western road, aren't you?"

"Yeah. My dad's here doing a bird study."

"Ah, yes. Heard about that. How's he getting on?"

"All right, I think. He's out looking at birds most days."

Tom chuckled.

"Plenty of those about."

"Apparently not as many as there should be."

"Oh?"

"He says some of them are behaving strangely."

"Well, I'll leave that to the experts. I know more about

engines than birds."

Clem leaned against the counter.

"Dad works at CES."

I nodded. I knew that, but suddenly I couldn’t remember if it was something Clem had told me earlier.

"Maintenance. Keeping the machinery running, mostly. Not the most glamorous job in the world, but it keeps me busy."

"Do you like it?"

"Can't complain. Good people, decent work. Better than travelling back and forth to the mainland every day."

He smiled.

"And it means I get to be home to annoy this one."

He nodded towards Clem. She sighed.

"Constantly."

"One of the great joys of being a father."

I laughed. Tom looked pleased.

"Anyway, make yourself at home. You two want something to drink?"

"I'm all right, thanks," I said.

"Sure? Tea? Juice?"

"Honestly, I'm fine."

"Clem?"

"No, Dad."

"All right, all right."

He held up his hands.

"Off you go, then. I'll shout when dinner's ready."

Clem looked at me. And I shook my head slightly.

"We had dinner before I left."

"Right." She looked at her dad. It seemed they exchanged a look, then she continued.

"I will eat later. I’m not hungry."

Her dad just nodded with a smile and turned his attention towards the pots and pans again.

"Come on, Maya."

I followed her out of the kitchen.

Behind us, Tom called, "Nice meeting you!"

"You too!" I called back.

Clem led me towards the stairs.

"Sorry about him."

"Why?"

"He talks."

I laughed.

"He seems nice."

"He is."

She said it simply. No embarrassment, no pretending he was annoying when she didn't really mean it. I liked that.

Clem's bedroom was upstairs, at the end of a short hallway. She pushed open the door and stepped aside.

"Welcome to the palace."

I walked in. It was surprisingly normal. I'd half expected something completely different from my room, although I wasn't sure why.

There was a single bed against one wall, a desk beneath the window, a wardrobe and a couple of shelves full of books and assorted things. A few posters were stuck to the walls, including one of a band I vaguely recognised.

There were clothes on a chair, a pair of muddy trainers

beside the wardrobe, and a mug on the desk that looked as though it had been there for several days. The bed had a dark green duvet cover, slightly crumpled, with two pillows pushed against the wall.

There were books everywhere. Not just on the shelves, but stacked on the floor beside the bed and piled on the desk. I looked around.

"Nice room."

Clem snorted.

"That's generous."

"No, really."

"It's a mess."

"Mine's usually worse."

"Really?"

"Well, not right now. Mum made me unpack everything."

"Ah. Forced civilisation."

"Exactly."

She smiled and dropped onto the bed. I stood there for a second, wondering whether I should sit on the chair. Then Clem patted the mattress beside her.

"Sit down. I'm not going to make you stand there all evening."

"Oh. Right."

I sat down.

She shifted slightly to make room, then settled back against the wall, one leg bent beneath her. I was surprised by how close we were sitting.

Not uncomfortably close. Just closer than I'd expected. Our shoulders were only a few inches apart, and Clem didn't seem to think anything of it. Back in London, I was used to sitting on beds with friends. We'd spend hours doing homework, watching videos or talking about absolutely nothing.

But I'd only just met Clem. I wasn't sure what the rules were yet. Apparently, she wasn't worried about them. She looked perfectly comfortable. So I tried to relax.

"So," Clem said, "how's island life treating you?"

I made a face.

"Do you want the polite answer?"

"No."

"It's boring."

She laughed.

"Fair."

"Sorry."

"Why are you apologising? It is boring."

I smiled.

"I thought you'd be offended."

"Why would I be?"

"You live here."

"Doesn't mean I have to pretend it's exciting."

"True."

She pulled one of the pillows into her lap.

"What do you miss most?"

I thought about it.

"My friends, obviously."

"Yeah."

"And just being able to go places. In London, you can get on a bus or the Tube and be somewhere completely different in half an hour."

"Sounds handy."

"It is. Here, if I want to go anywhere, I have to check whether the road's underwater."

Clem grinned.

"Minor inconvenience."

"Very minor."

She laughed.

"What else?"

I looked down at my hands.

"School, a bit."

"Really?"

"Not the lessons. Just being there."

"With everyone?"

"Yeah. It's weird sitting in my bedroom while everyone else is together."

Clem nodded.

"I know what you mean. I did remote lessons quite a bit when I was younger."

"Because of the tide?"

"Mostly. Sometimes you just couldn't get across when

you needed to."

"That must've been annoying."

"It was. Especially when everyone else was doing something fun."

"Exactly!"

I looked at her.

"That's the worst bit. Everyone's together, and you're just watching."

"Yeah."

She nodded again.

"I remember that."

It was strangely nice hearing someone say that. Not because I wanted her to have had a miserable time at school. Just because she understood. I didn't have to explain it. We talked about school for a while.

Clem told me about some of the teachers at her mainland school, including one who apparently managed to lose the same set of classroom keys at least twice a week.

"How?" I asked.

"No idea. Think he just puts them down and forgets

they exist."

"Sounds like my dad."

"Does your dad teach?"

"No. He just loses everything."

"Ah."

"Keys, glasses, his phone. Once spent twenty minutes looking for his glasses while he was wearing them."

Clem laughed.

"Impressive."

"He's a scientist."

"Even better."

I grinned.

She told me about a girl in her class who'd once convinced a substitute teacher that everyone was supposed to leave ten minutes early on Fridays.

"Did it work?"

"Twice."

"No!"

"Yep."

"That's brilliant."

"Third time, the headteacher found out."

"Oops."

"Wasn't pretty."

We laughed.

Then Clem asked me about London. Not just whether I liked it, but what it was actually like living there. I told her about our old house, my school, the places I used to go with my friends. About taking the Tube into the centre and spending whole afternoons wandering around shops. About how busy everything was, even late at night.

She listened, asking questions now and then.

"Doesn't it get tiring?" she asked.

"What?"

"All those people."

"Sometimes. But you get used to it."

"I think I'd go mad."

"You get used to this place."

She smiled.

"Fair point."

"Have you ever been to London?"

"Couple of times. With Mum."

"Did you like it?"

"Yeah. For a day or two."

"Not longer?"

"Too many people."

I laughed.

"You're impossible."

"Been told."

She shrugged.

"I like having space. And quiet."

I looked around her room.

"You certainly get plenty of that here."

"Exactly."

At some point, we ended up sitting cross-legged on the bed, facing each other. I couldn't remember when we'd moved. It had just happened.

Clem was telling me about growing up on the island. How she'd learnt to ride a bike on the little roads around the village, how she'd spent summers exploring the safer parts of the coast, and how she'd once fallen into a muddy ditch and lost one of her wellies.

"Did you get it back?" I asked.

"Eventually."

"How?"

"Dad pulled it out with a rake."

I burst out laughing.

"Seriously?"

"Yep. Took ages."

"How old were you?"

"About nine."

"That's awful."

"Wasn't my finest moment."

I wiped my eyes.

"I would've loved to see that."

"Most of the village did."

"Oh, no."

"Small island. News travels."

I laughed again. She smiled. Then I asked about her mum.

"You said she lives on the mainland?"

"Yeah. Near Wells."

"Do you see her often?"

"Most weekends. Depends on the tides and what we've both got on."

"Is it far?"

"Not really. Once you're across the causeway, it's easy enough."

I nodded.

"Do your parents get along?"

"Yeah. Mostly."

She said it without hesitation.

"They split up a few years ago. Nothing dramatic. Just didn't work out."

"Oh."

"It's fine. Mum's got her place, Dad's got this one. I go back and forth."

"That sounds all right."

"It is."

She pulled at a loose thread on the edge of her pillow.

"Mum works at a little office on the mainland. Does accounts and stuff. Says it's boring, but she seems to like it. And not as boring as out here. To her."

I smiled.

"Sounds like my mum. She complains about writing all the time, but if she couldn't do it, she'd go mad."

"She writes books, right?"

"Yeah."

"What sort?"

"Mostly crime novels."

Clem looked interested.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Murders, detectives, people being suspicious."

"Sounds good."

"She's always asking us whether things sound believable."

"Like what?"

"Once she asked Dad how long it would take someone to die if they fell into freezing water."

Clem laughed.

"Nice dinner conversation."

"Exactly. He started explaining hypothermia while I was trying to eat pasta."

"Did she use it?"

"No idea. I stopped listening."

We laughed again. The time went surprisingly quickly. I hadn't expected that. I'd been worried we'd run out of things to say after ten minutes. Instead, we kept finding more things to talk about.

Music. Films. Teachers. Food. The island.

I told Clem about our trip to Norwich, and she told me about a little café on the mainland that made the best hot chocolate she'd ever had.

I made her promise to show me sometime. She said she would. It was such a small thing. But it made me happy.

A plan. Something we might actually do together.

At one point, Clem got up to find a charger for her phone, and I glanced towards her window. It looked out over the back garden and a stretch of rooftops. Beyond them, I could see the dark outline of the marsh. I thought about the lights.

The strange pale lights I'd seen moving in the distance. And the faint thuds.

I could ask her. She'd lived here all her life. She might know exactly what they were. Perhaps people went out there at night for some perfectly ordinary reason. Perhaps it was something to do with CES. Her dad worked there, after all.

I opened my mouth. Then closed it again.

What was I going to say?

By the way, I've been standing at my bedroom window watching mysterious lights in the marsh. Any idea what that's about? That sounded ridiculous. She'd probably think I was imagining things. Or that I'd been watching too many of those crime dramas on the Telly that Mum loved so much. I didn't want to spoil the evening by sounding weird. Not when things were going so well.

Clem turned around, holding a cable.

"Found it."

I smiled.

"Miracle."

"Only took three attempts."

She plugged in her phone and sat back down beside me.

"So," she said, "what's the worst thing about living here so far?"

I thought for a moment.

"The internet."

She laughed.

"Correct answer."

"Seriously. It goes weird every time it rains."

"Which is most days."

"Exactly."

"Yeah. It's rubbish."

"How do you survive?"

"Books."

I looked at the piles around her room.

"That explains a lot."

She grinned.

"And sometimes I go outside."

"Outside? Sounds dangerous."

"Very. Fresh air and everything."

I laughed. And just like that, I'd forgotten about the lights again. Eventually, I checked my phone. Quarter past eight. I stared at it.

"Oh, wow."

"What?"

"Look at the time."

Clem glanced at her own phone.

"Huh."

"I didn't realise it was that late."

"Me neither."

I looked towards the door.

"I should probably get going."

"Yeah. Fair enough."

She didn't sound particularly eager for me to leave. That was nice. I stood up and stretched my legs. They'd

gone a bit stiff from sitting on the bed for so long. Clem got up too.

"Come on. I'll walk you down."

We went downstairs together.

Her dad was in the living room, watching something on television.

He looked up when we passed.

"Off already?"

"Yeah," I said. "I'd better get home."

"Well, it was lovely meeting you, Maya."

"You too."

"Come round again sometime."

I smiled.

"Thanks. I will."

Clem looked at him.

"Dad."

"What?"

"Nothing."

He grinned and went back to his programme.

At the front door, I pulled on my coat and boots.

Clem stood beside me, waiting.

"Thanks for having me," I said.

"No problem."

"It was really nice."

"Yeah. It was."

She smiled. For a second, neither of us said anything. Then she opened the door and cold air rushed into the hallway. I made a face.

"Oh, lovely."

Clem laughed.

"Still hate the weather?"

"With a passion."

"You'll get used to it."

"Everyone keeps saying that."

"Because it's true."

I stepped outside.

The lane was quiet, with little pools of light beneath the streetlamps.

I turned back.

"See you around?"

"Yeah."

She hesitated for a moment.

"Maybe we could do something again next week."

I smiled.

"Definitely."

"Cool."

"Cool."

We both smiled. Then I waved.

"Night, Clem."

"Night, Maya."

She closed the door, and I started walking home. The village was almost deserted. There were lights in a few windows, and I could hear faint music coming from the pub, but otherwise everything was quiet.

I walked with my hands in my pockets, smiling to myself. It had been a good evening. A really good

evening. I'd gone to someone's house. Sat on her bed. Talked for hours. Laughed.

Made plans to do something again. Normal things. Things I'd taken for granted in London. But here, they felt important. I still didn't know Clem particularly well. There was loads I didn't know about her. What she was like when she was angry. What made her sad. What she wanted to do when she finished school. All the things you learnt about someone over time.

But I liked her. She was funny, easy to talk to, and she didn't seem to care that I was new or that I didn't know anything about the island. And she'd asked me to come back. That was the best part.

I looked up at the dark sky. There weren't many clouds tonight, and I could see a few stars. More than I'd ever seen in London. I supposed that was one good thing about living somewhere without much light. I smiled.

Maybe Mum and Dad were right. Maybe I was starting to settle in. Not completely. Not yet. I still missed my friends, my school and the city. I still wanted to go back when Dad's two years were up. But perhaps the next two years wouldn't be quite as lonely as I'd imagined.

Not if Clem and I became friends. And for the first time since we'd arrived, I thought there was a pretty good chance we would.

Chapter Eighteen

Monday morning arrived far too quickly.

My alarm went off at seven thirty, and for a few seconds I lay there wondering why I couldn't hear any traffic. Then I remembered.

The Mudpack. Of course.

I reached for my phone and turned off the alarm. There were a few messages from my London friends, mostly pictures and complaints about homework. Someone had sent a video of Josh from my old school attempting to jump over a bench and falling flat on his face.

I watched it twice. Then I got up. Downstairs, Dad was already getting ready to go out, and Mum was making toast.

"Morning, love," she said.

"Morning."

"Sleep well?"

"Yeah."

Dad looked up from the kitchen table, where he'd spread out a map and several sheets of paper.

"How was your evening with Clem?"

"Good."

"Just good?"

"Really good."

Mum smiled.

"That's lovely."

I reached for the toast.

"We're going to hang out again after school."

"Oh, brilliant," Mum said.

"She's coming here this time."

Dad looked around the kitchen.

"Better tidy up, then."

I glanced at the table.

"Starting with your bird stuff?"

He looked offended.

"This is important scientific research."

"It's covering half the table."

"Science takes space."

Mum laughed.

"Well, science can take its space somewhere else. I need to put the jam down."

Dad gathered his papers with a sigh.

"Nobody respects my work."

"Poor you," I said.

He grinned.

School was school.

Which meant sitting at my desk, staring at a screen, and occasionally wondering whether anyone in the classroom remembered I was there.

At least the internet behaved itself. Mostly.

During maths, Mrs Bennett went through a set of equations we'd already covered last week. I finished the exercises before most of the class had reached the halfway point.

Then I checked my answers. Then I checked them again. Then I spent ten minutes watching Josh try to explain why he'd somehow got a negative answer to a

question that couldn't possibly have one.

"Josh," Mrs Bennett said patiently, "what happened to the six?"

He stared at his paper.

"Dunno, miss."

"Well, it hasn't simply disappeared."

"Could've done."

A few people laughed. I smiled.

It was strange being able to see everyone but not really being part of it. During the break, Ellie sent me a message.

How's prison island?

I typed back:

Still surrounded by water.

Any escape plans?

Working on a tunnel.

Under the sea???

I'm ambitious.

She sent a laughing emoji.

Then:

You doing anything after school?

I smiled.

Actually yes. Got a friend coming over.

Omg! Island friend!

Hopefully.

You have to tell me everything.

I laughed quietly. There wasn't exactly much to tell. Clem was coming round. We'd probably talk. Maybe watch something. That was it. But I was looking forward to it far more than I wanted to admit.

By the time the last lesson finished, it was nearly four. I closed my laptop and stretched. My back was stiff from sitting in the same chair all day. I looked around my bedroom.

It was reasonably tidy. I'd made the bed that morning, the clothes were put away, and there weren't any dirty mugs on the desk. Not bad. I straightened one of the pillows. Then immediately felt ridiculous. Clem wasn't coming round to inspect my bedroom.

I checked my phone. She'd sent a message about ten minutes earlier.

Still okay for today?

I smiled.

Yep. Come whenever.

Her reply appeared almost immediately.

Be there in a bit.

I put the phone down. Then picked it up again.

You know where we live?

Small island, Maya.

I laughed.

Fair point.

Clem arrived just after half past four. I heard the knock downstairs and was halfway down the stairs before Mum had even reached the door.

"Someone's keen," she said.

"Mum."

She smiled and opened it. Clem stood outside in her enormous green coat, hands tucked into the pockets.

"Hi."

"Hello, love," Mum said warmly. "You must be Clem."

"Yeah. Hi."

"I'm Tori. Maya's mum. Come in, it's freezing out there."

"Thanks."

Clem stepped inside as I appeared beside Mum.

"Hi."

Clem smiled.

"Hi."

Mum looked between us.

"Well, I'll leave you two to it. There's juice in the kitchen if you want some, and biscuits in the cupboard."

"Thanks, Mum."

"Lovely to meet you, Clem."

"You too."

I led Clem upstairs.

She looked around as we went.

"Nice house."

"Thanks. It's getting there."

"Big."

"Compared with yours?"

"Yeah."

"More rooms to get lost in."

She grinned.

"Have you?"

"Only twice."

"Impressive."

My bedroom suddenly looked different with someone else standing in it. I wasn't sure why. It was the same room I'd spent the whole morning in, with the same posters and books and desk.

But now Clem was looking around, and I found myself wondering what she thought of everything. She stopped beside one of the posters.

"Oh, I like that film."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Saw it with Mum."

"I've watched it about six times."

"Only six?"

"Maybe seven."

She smiled.

Then she looked at my desk.

"Blimey."

"What?"

"Everything's so tidy."

I glanced at the neatly stacked notebooks and pens.

"Oh."

"Do you actually keep it like that?"

"Mostly."

"Mine looks like someone's emptied a bin onto it."

I laughed.

"I noticed."

"Rude."

"You brought it up."

"Fair."

She sat down on the edge of my bed and I sat beside her. For a moment, we just looked around the room,

then Clem nodded towards my laptop.

"How was school?"

"Thrilling."

"That good?"

"Spent half an hour watching someone lose a six."

She frowned.

"What?"

"Maths. Long story."

"Sounds exciting."

"Highlight of my day."

She laughed.

"Mine wasn't much better."

We talked about school for a while. She'd had a test she wasn't particularly happy about, and one of her teachers had apparently spent twenty minutes trying to get a video to play.

"Did it work?" I asked.

"Eventually. Then the bell went."

I laughed.

"Brilliant."

"Education at its finest."

After a while, Mum brought up two glasses of juice and a plate of biscuits.

She knocked before opening the door.

"Thought you might like these."

"Thanks, Mum."

Clem smiled.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome, love."

Mum put everything on the desk and disappeared again.

Clem looked at the biscuits.

"Your mum's nice."

"Yeah. She is."

"Mine would've just shouted that there were biscuits downstairs."

I laughed.

"That sounds more efficient."

"Exactly."

We helped ourselves.

Then Clem asked how I'd been getting on with exploring the island.

"Still finding your way around?"

"Mostly."

"Only mostly?"

"I went for a long walk yesterday."

"Oh yeah?"

"Out towards the eastern side."

"Near CES?"

"Yeah."

She nodded.

"Not much out there."

"No. That's what I thought."

I hesitated. This was probably a good time to ask. I'd been thinking about it since Sunday. The lights. I hadn't wanted to mention them at Clem's house because we'd only just started getting to know each other. But now she'd come round to mine.

And she was asking about the island. It wasn't that strange a question, surely. I picked up my glass.

"Actually, can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Have you ever seen lights out on the marsh at night?"

Clem looked at me.

"Lights?"

"Yeah. Like torches or something."

"Where?"

"East of here. Quite far out."

She frowned slightly, while tapping her front tooth.

"Not sure what you mean."

I felt a little embarrassed.

"Probably nothing. I've just seen them from my window a couple of times."

She glanced towards the curtains.

"Out there?"

"Yeah."

I got up and walked over to the window. Clem followed and I pulled the curtain aside. The sky was already starting to darken, but there was still enough light to see the marsh beyond the houses.

"Somewhere out there," I said, pointing. "More to the right, I think."

Clem leaned closer to the glass.

"Right."

"They move around. Sometimes there's one, sometimes two. They disappear and come back."

"Could be boats."

"That's what I thought. But they seem to be on land."

She looked at me.

"How can you tell?"

"I can't. Not really."

I felt a bit silly.

"It's just that they don't move like boats. And when I went walking yesterday, I tried to work out where they were coming from."

Clem smiled faintly.

"You've been investigating?"

"Not exactly."

"Sounds like investigating."

I laughed.

"All right. A little."

She looked out again.

"Where did you go?"

"Past CES. There's a path that goes further east, but I couldn't get very far."

"Yeah, I know the one."

"I think the lights are somewhere southeast of the factory."

Clem was quiet for a moment. Then she straightened slightly.

"Oh."

I looked at her.

"What?"

"Hang on. I think I know what you mean."

"Really?"

"Maybe."

She looked out of the window again.

"There's some CES stuff out that way."

I turned towards her.

"What sort of stuff?"

"Not sure, exactly."

"Buildings?"

"Possibly. Roads, definitely."

I frowned.

"Roads?"

"Yeah. Proper roads. They go out into the marsh from the eastern side of the site."

"I didn't see any."

"You wouldn't from the public paths. They're further round, behind the main buildings."

I looked out of the window again. That would make sense. If there were roads out there, the lights could be vehicles.

"What's out there?" I asked.

Clem shrugged.

"No idea."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"But your dad works there."

"He works on the main site."

"Right."

She leaned against the windowsill.

"He told me about it once. They have different crews. Dad's on days, and then another lot comes in at night."

"Like shifts?"

"Yeah. Except they're not doing exactly the same jobs."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Dad and his lot work in the main buildings. Maintenance, machinery, all that stuff. But there's another team that comes in later and works out on the eastern side."

"Doing what?"

Clem shrugged again.

"Don't know."

I looked at her.

"Nobody knows?"

"Not really. Not anyone I know, anyway."

"That's a bit odd."

"Suppose."

She didn't sound particularly bothered. I thought about the factory I'd seen on Sunday. The big buildings. The fences. The vehicles moving around.

"So the night crew uses those roads?"

"I think so."

"And the day crew doesn't?"

"No. They're not allowed out there."

I turned to her.

"Not allowed?"

"Yeah. It's a restricted area."

"Why?"

"No idea. Dad says it's off limits to his lot."

"Even though he works for the company?"

"Yep."

I frowned.

"That is weird."

Clem considered it.

"Maybe. But companies have restricted areas all the time, don't they?"

"I suppose."

"Could be dangerous equipment or something. Dad doesn't really talk about it much."

I looked out at the marsh again. There was nothing visible from here. Just the grey sky and the darkening land.

"So there are actual roads out there," I said.

"Yeah."

"Proper roads?"

"Tarmac. Not just muddy tracks."

"Wow."

Clem smiled.

"You're very excited about roads."

I laughed.

"Sorry."

"Should've brought you to the main road earlier. You'd have loved it."

"Shut up."

She grinned and we went back to the bed. I sat down and picked up a biscuit, thinking. Roads. Night workers. Restricted areas. It certainly explained the lights. Or at least it could. If CES had vehicles driving around out there after dark, that was probably what I'd been seeing.

It was a perfectly sensible explanation. Still, I couldn't help wondering what they were doing.

"Does your dad ever work nights?" I asked.

Clem shook her head.

"No. He's always on the day crew."

"Does he know anyone on the night team?"

"Not really. Says they mostly keep to themselves."

"That's strange."

"Maybe they're just miserable."

I laughed.

"Maybe."

She took another biscuit.

"Why are you so interested, anyway?"

I hesitated.

"Just curious."

"About lights?"

"Well, I've seen them a few times. And I heard some noises too."

"What sort?"

"Like thuds. Really faint. Could've been anything."

Clem nodded.

"Probably machinery."

"That's what I thought."

"Sound travels quite far out here."

"Yeah."

She looked at me for a moment.

"You're not thinking there's some sort of mystery, are you?"

I laughed.

"No!"

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sure?"

"I'm not."

"All right."

She smiled.

"Just checking."

I threw a pillow at her.

She caught it easily.

"Violence," she said. Which made me think of dad.

"You deserved it."

"Probably."

We talked about other things after that. Clem wanted to know what London was like at Christmas, and I told her about the lights in Oxford Street, the crowded shops and the horrible queues for everything.

She said she'd rather stay on the island. I told her she was mad. We argued about music for a while, then ended up watching a few videos on my laptop.

The internet froze twice. Clem wasn't even surprised.

"Welcome to the Mudpack," she said.

"I hate this place."

"No, you don't."

I looked at her.

"Don't I?"

"Not all of it."

She smiled.

I smiled back.

"All right. Not all of it."

It was getting dark outside now. The window had turned into a reflection of my room, and I could no longer see the marsh. I glanced towards it once or twice. Thinking about the lights. About the roads Clem had mentioned. About the night crew.

There was probably a perfectly ordinary explanation for everything. CES was a big company. Big companies had lots of different jobs, and not everyone needed to know what everyone else was doing.

That made sense.

Still, it was strange to think that somewhere out beyond

the village, people were working at night on roads nobody else was allowed to use. I wondered what they did out there.

Then Clem showed me a video of a dog trying to carry a stick through a doorway, and I forgot about it for a while. We laughed so hard that Mum called up the stairs to ask what was going on.

"Nothing!" I shouted back.

Clem was still laughing. I looked at her, sitting comfortably on my bed, holding my laptop on her knees. It felt surprisingly normal having her there. As though she'd been coming round for ages.

And I realised that I hadn't spent the whole afternoon worrying about whether she liked me. I'd just enjoyed myself. That was nice - really nice. Whatever was happening out on the marsh could wait.

For now, I had a friend sitting beside me. And that seemed much more important.

Chapter Nineteen

The internet had stopped working sometime during the night. Again.

I discovered this at eight fifteen on Tuesday morning, when I sat down at my desk, opened my laptop and found that absolutely nothing would load.

I tried refreshing the page. Nothing. I disconnected from the Wi-Fi and reconnected. Still nothing.

Then I restarted the laptop, because that was what everyone always told you to do when something stopped working. Of course It made no difference whatsoever. I stared at the screen.

"Brilliant."

Downstairs, I could hear Dad moving around in the kitchen. I grabbed my phone and went to investigate.

"Is the internet down?" I asked as I walked in.

Dad was standing at the table, packing things into his big outdoor bag.

"Morning to you too, sweetheart."

"Morning. Is the internet down?"

"Afraid so."

"Again?"

"Apparently."

I looked at Mum, who was sitting at the other end of the table with a cup of tea and a rather unhappy expression.

"How are you working?"

"I'm not," she said. "I'm trying to remember how people wrote books before the internet."

"With typewriters?" Dad suggested.

"Thank you, Julian."

"Quills?"

She gave him a look. He grinned. I sat down.

"So what am I supposed to do about school?"

"Your mum's already contacted them," Dad said. "They know the connection's down."

"Used my phone," Mum added. "Which has just enough signal to send a message if I stand beside the upstairs window and hold it at a ridiculous angle."

"Very professional," I said.

"Extremely."

Dad zipped up his bag.

"Well, since you're temporarily unemployed, fancy coming to work with me?"

I looked at him.

"Doing what?"

"Looking at birds."

I considered that.

"Do I get paid?"

"Fresh air and valuable knowledge."

"Terrible salary."

"Excellent working conditions."

Mum snorted.

"Except for the cold, the mud and the fact that your boss won't stop talking."

Dad put a hand over his heart.

"Such cruelty in this house."

I smiled. Actually, it didn't sound too bad.

It was better than sitting in my bedroom staring at a screen that wouldn't load.

"All right," I said. "I'll come."

Dad beamed.

"Excellent. My new research assistant."

"Temporary research assistant."

"Of course."

"And I'm not carrying anything heavy."

"We'll negotiate."

Half an hour later, we were outside. Dad was wearing his enormous blue coat, the one that made him look like he'd been inflated, with binoculars hanging around his neck and a bag slung over one shoulder. I had my new boots, thick socks, gloves and the warmest coat I owned. It still wasn't quite enough.

"Why is it always so cold here?" I asked.

Dad locked the front door.

"Because it's November, sweetheart."

"Very helpful."

"You're welcome."

He handed me a small pair of binoculars.

I looked at them.

"Are these mine?"

"Borrowed. Try not to drop them in the sea."

"No promises."

He laughed and led the way as we walked out of the village towards the western side of the island, following a narrow lane that eventually became a gravel path.

The sky was grey, but at least it wasn't raining. The wind wasn't too bad either. For once. Dad seemed delighted.

"Lovely day for it."

I looked around at the damp grass and muddy ditches.

"Really?"

"Absolutely."

"Your standards are very low."

"That's the secret to happiness."

I smiled.

Before we left the proper path, Dad stopped and took a folded map out of his coat pocket. It was covered in pencil marks, little circles and coloured lines. I leaned closer.

"What's all that?"

"My survey routes."

He opened it fully and held it between us.

The island was shown in surprising detail, with the village near the middle, the causeway to the west and the wide stretches of marsh around the edges. Several routes had been marked in green. Other areas were crossed out in red.

"These are the paths I've checked and know are safe," Dad explained, tracing one of the green lines with his finger. "And these are the places I take my observations."

He pointed to a series of numbered circles.

"One, two, three, four. Each has a slightly different habitat, so I can compare what I'm seeing."

"What's the red stuff?"

"Places I don't go."

"Because they're dangerous?"

"Some of them. Soft mud, deep channels, ground that looks solid until you put your foot on it."

I looked towards the marsh. It all looked fairly solid to me. Dad followed my gaze.

"That's the problem. You can't always tell."

"Right."

"So we stick to the green routes. No wandering off."

"Yes, boss."

He smiled.

"Good assistant."

I studied the map again. Most of his marked observation points were on the western side of the island. There were a few near the village and some further north, but hardly anything in the east.

"Why are they all over here?" I asked.

"Because this is where the birds are."

"All of them?"

"Not all. But most of the ones I'm finding."

He folded the map.

"Come on. I'll show you."

Our first stop was beside a shallow stretch of water surrounded by tall grass. Dad told me to keep quiet. Which, coming from him, was rather funny. He took out his binoculars and scanned the water.

I copied him. At first, I couldn't see anything. Just mud, water and grass. More mud. Then something moved.

"Oh!"

Dad lowered his binoculars.

"What have you got?"

"There's a bird."

"Excellent start."

I gave him a look.

"Small. Brownish. Long legs."

"Where?"

"Near that bit of grass."

He looked.

"Ah. Redshank."

"How can you tell?"

"Orange-red legs, fairly straight bill, and listen."

We stood quietly.

A moment later, the bird made a sharp, piping call.

Dad smiled.

"That's a redshank."

I watched it through the binoculars. It was picking its way along the edge of the water, stopping every now and then to poke its bill into the mud.

"What's it doing?"

"Feeding. Looking for little creatures in the mud."

"Lovely."

"To a redshank, absolutely."

He took out a notebook and wrote something down. I looked over his shoulder. There were columns of numbers, times and little abbreviations I didn't understand.

"Do you count every bird?"

"As many as I can. Species, numbers, behaviour, where they're feeding. Then I compare that with previous surveys."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"It is."

"Do you enjoy it?"

He looked at me.

"Very much."

I smiled. I knew he did. I'd always known.

Dad could spend an entire afternoon watching a bird do practically nothing and come home looking as though he'd had the most exciting day of his life.

We carried on along the path. Dad stopped frequently. Sometimes because he'd seen something. Sometimes because he'd heard something. And sometimes, apparently, because he wanted to tell me something about a bird that wasn't even there.

"Now, we should be seeing more dunlin around here," he said at one point.

I looked around.

"What's a dunlin?"

"Small wading bird. Brownish-grey, longish bill. They often gather in flocks."

"How many?"

"Sometimes hundreds."

I stared at him.

"Hundreds?"

"Yes."

"Where are they, then?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

He looked out over the water.

"Previous records show this area should support quite a lot more birds than we're seeing."

"Maybe they've gone somewhere else."

"Possibly."

"Somewhere warmer."

He smiled.

"Wouldn't blame them."

We walked a little further. At the next observation point, Dad spotted a curlew. He handed me the binoculars and pointed.

"See that one? Long curved bill."

I found it after a bit of searching.

"Oh, wow."

"Beautiful, isn't it?"

"Looks like someone's bent its nose."

Dad laughed.

"Very scientific description."

"Thank you."

"Curlew. One of my favourites."

"Because of the nose?"

"Among other things."

He explained how they used their long bills to find food in the mud. Then he told me about oystercatchers, which apparently didn't only eat oysters, and how some birds could find tiny creatures buried beneath the surface without actually seeing them.

I listened for the most part. There was a surprising amount to know about birds. And Dad knew all of it. Or at least he talked as though he did.

"Did you know," he began, as we approached another stretch of water, "that some migratory birds travel thousands of miles every year?"

I sighed.

"Here we go."

He grinned.

"Some even return to almost exactly the same place."

"Why?"

"Because they know where to find food. Where it's safe.

Where they've successfully bred before."

"Sounds sensible."

"It is. Which is why it's interesting when they stop coming back."

I looked at him.

"Like here?"

He nodded.

"Exactly."

By late morning, we'd reached a small wooden viewing platform overlooking a wide, shallow pool. Dad said it was one of his regular observation points.

We sat on the bench, and he took out a flask of tea. I accepted a cup gratefully.

"Best part of the job," I said.

"Tea?"

"Definitely."

He laughed and we sat for a while, watching the water. There were several birds feeding along the edge, and Dad pointed out the differences between them and I was beginning to recognise a few. Not many, but a few.

"That one's a redshank," I said, pointing.

Dad looked.

"Correct."

"And that one?"

"Also a redshank."

"Oh."

He smiled.

"You're getting there."

I took another sip of tea. Then I thought about the eastern side of the island. The factory and the lights. The roads Clem had told me about.

"Do you ever go over east?" I asked.

Dad shook his head.

"Not much."

"Why not?"

"Very little wildlife over there, from what I've seen."

"None?"

"Not literally none. But much less than I'd expect."

He looked towards the distant village.

"The eastern marsh should be good habitat. Plenty of feeding ground, sheltered areas, water channels. But the birds seem to be avoiding it."

"Why?"

"That's what I'm trying to establish."

"Could it be CES?"

He considered that.

"Possibly."

"Because of the factory?"

"Noise, perhaps. Machinery, vehicles, human activity. Birds can be quite sensitive to disturbance."

I looked at him.

"So the factory scares them away?"

"That's one possibility. But I can't say that for certain."

He took a sip of tea.

"The trouble is, the numbers started changing some time ago, and there are several things that could explain it. Habitat changes, food availability, weather patterns, disturbance. I need more information."

I nodded. That sounded like Dad. He never liked guessing. Not when he could collect data instead. I

looked across the marsh.

"CES goes further south than the factory, you know."

Dad turned towards me.

"Does it?"

"Yeah."

He raised an eyebrow.

"What do you mean?"

"Apparently they've got roads going out into the marsh. Proper tarmac roads."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Southeast of the main buildings."

He looked interested now.

"How far?"

"Not sure. But further than you can see from the public paths."

"Where did you hear that?"

"From Clem. Her dad works there."

"Ah."

"She said there are areas the day workers aren't allowed into. And another crew works there at night."

Dad frowned slightly.

"Night shifts?"

"Yeah."

He looked down at his map.

"That's interesting."

"Why?"

"Well, I'd assumed most of their activity was contained within the old shipyard site."

"Apparently not."

"Hmm."

He unfolded the map and studied the eastern side. There weren't many markings there. He ran his finger along the edge of the industrial area.

"That could change things a little."

"How?"

"If they're operating further out into the marsh, the disturbance might cover a much larger area than I thought."

"Would that explain the missing birds?"

"Possibly."

He looked at me.

"But remember, Maya, that's only a possibility. We don't know what they're doing out there, or whether it's affecting the wildlife."

"Right."

"I'd need to know where those roads go, what sort of activity takes place and when. Then I'd have something useful to compare with my observations."

He folded the map again.

"Interesting, though."

I smiled.

"See? I'm helping."

He grinned.

"Excellent research assistant."

"Can I have a pay rise?"

"Double your current salary."

"Still nothing."

"Plus another cup of tea."

I held out my cup.

"Now we're talking."

We spent another hour walking between observation points. By then, I was getting tired. Dad, annoyingly, seemed perfectly happy to keep going all day. He stopped to watch a group of birds take off from a shallow pool, then spent several minutes explaining why they all seemed to turn at the same time.

I nodded. I even understood some of it.

Eventually, he checked his watch.

"Right. Think that's enough for today."

"Thank goodness."

He laughed.

"Not enjoying yourself?"

"I am. But my legs are falling off."

"That would make the walk home difficult."

"Very."

He packed away his notebook and binoculars. Then he handed me the empty flask.

"Here. You can carry this."

I stared at it.

"Child labour."

"Character building."

"Terrible employer."

"Excellent references, though."

I took the flask and we walked home along the same safe paths we'd used that morning. The wind had dropped a little, and the sky was beginning to brighten.

Dad kept pointing things out. A bird sitting on a fence. A particular patch of grass. A place where the water had risen higher than he'd expected. I listened, occasionally asking questions. It reminded me of when I was little. Dad used to take me on walks all the time. Not just birdwatching. We'd go to parks, woods, beaches, anywhere he could find something interesting to show me.

He'd hold my hand when we crossed roads, lift me over puddles and tell me stories about the things we saw. I used to believe he knew absolutely everything. Then I'd got older. I'd started going out with friends instead, and our walks had become less frequent. Not because I didn't like spending time with him. Just because there were always other things to do. School, homework, friends. Life.

Now, walking beside him across the marsh, I felt a little like that girl again. His little girl. Not in an embarrassing way. Just safe. Comfortable. Like I didn't have to worry about anything for a while.

Dad looked down at me.

"All right, sweetheart?"

"Yeah."

"Not too cold?"

"No."

"Feet still attached?"

"Just about."

He smiled.

"Good. Your mother would never forgive me if I brought you home without them."

We reached a muddy stretch where the path narrowed between two shallow ditches. Dad stepped across first, then held out his hand.

"Careful here."

I looked at him.

"Dad, I'm sixteen."

"I know."

"I can manage."

"Of course you can."

He kept his hand there anyway. I rolled my eyes. Then took it and he helped me across. His hand was warm through my glove. For a moment, I remembered being about six years old, wearing tiny wellies and holding his hand while we walked through a park after the rain.

I smiled. He let go once we were safely across.

"See? No casualties."

"Miracle."

"Excellent expedition."

We carried on towards the village. By the time our house came into view, I was hungry, tired and quite pleased to see it. Mum was probably inside working on her book, or trying to, depending on whether the internet had returned.

Dad was talking about what he wanted to check tomorrow. Something about comparing the numbers from two observation points. I wasn't really listening anymore. But I liked hearing his voice. I liked walking beside him.

And I liked that, for a few hours, I'd had him entirely to

myself. It was funny. I'd spent so much time thinking about everything I'd lost by moving here. My friends, school, the stores. The city really. All the things I couldn't do anymore.

But today had given me something I hadn't realised I'd missed. Time with Dad - proper time. Just the two of us. He reached over and gave my shoulder a gentle squeeze.

"Thanks for coming along, sweetheart."

I looked up at him.

"Thanks for taking me."

"Any time."

I smiled. And I knew he meant it.

For the rest of the walk home, I stayed close beside him, carrying his empty flask and listening to him tell me about a bird whose name I'd already forgotten. I didn't mind. For once, I was perfectly happy just being his little girl.

Chapter 20

The internet was still down by Wednesday. I'd checked it when I woke up, then again after breakfast, and once more just in case something miraculous had happened in the five minutes between. But nothing.

My laptop was sitting on my desk, connected to a Wi-Fi network that apparently existed for decorative purposes only. Downstairs, Dad was getting ready to go out.

"Any news?" I asked when I came into the kitchen.

"About the internet?"

"Unless you've heard something more exciting."

He smiled.

"Afraid not. I asked at the shop yesterday. Apparently, when the weather gets bad in autumn, it can sometimes take weeks to get the connection sorted."

I stared at him.

"Weeks?"

"That's what they said."

"Actual weeks?"

"Afraid so."

I looked at Mum.

"How are we supposed to live?"

She was sitting at the table with her laptop, surrounded by notebooks.

"Well, I've rediscovered the extraordinary invention known as paper."

"This isn't funny."

"It's a little funny, love."

I groaned and dropped into a chair. Dad poured himself another cup of tea.

"You're welcome to come out with me again."

I considered that for approximately half a second.

"No, thanks."

"Not even for a chance to see the magnificent redshank?"

"I saw the magnificent redshank yesterday."

"Different redshank today."

"Still no."

He laughed.

"Fair enough."

"It's too cold out there. And wet."

"Moist," Mum corrected.

I looked at her.

"Please don't say moist."

"All right, love."

Dad grinned.

"Very moist."

"Both of you, stop."

They laughed.

I helped myself to a piece of toast and wondered what on earth I was going to do all day.

By eleven, I'd run out of ideas. I'd read three chapters of a book, reorganised the folders on my laptop, listened to some music and spent far too long staring at the ceiling. My school had sent assignments through to Mum's phone, but I couldn't access half the materials I needed. I'd done what I could offline, which hadn't taken very long. The rest would have to wait.

I was curled up on my bed with my duvet wrapped around me. The heating was on, but the house still had a chill to it, especially upstairs.

Outside, the sky was a miserable shade of grey. Not exactly raining but also not sunny. Just damp-looking.

I checked my phone. No new messages. I thought about London. If I'd been there, I'd be at school right now. Probably sitting beside Carly, complaining about something, or waiting for lunch.

Here, I was alone in my bedroom, listening to the wind. I sighed. Then I thought about Clem. She might be at school, of course. But with the tides and the weather, she might be home. I could go and see. Just knock on her door and ask if she wanted to hang out.

The idea made me a little nervous.

I'd never really liked turning up at someone's house without arranging it first. But Clem had said I could come round again. And it wasn't as though I had anything else to do. I sat up. Right. That was decided.

Twenty minutes later, I was walking through the village. The air was horribly damp, and my coat was already picking up little droplets of moisture, even though it wasn't properly raining. I pulled my hood up.

At least I knew where I was going this time. Past the shop. Left at the church. Down the lane. White cottage, green door. This time I found it without any trouble.

There was no car outside, and the enormous muddy boots were missing from beside the front door. Perhaps Clem's dad was at work. I hesitated at the gate. What if Clem wasn't home?

Well, then I'd walk back.

Hardly the end of the world.

I went up the path and knocked. For a while, nothing happened. Then I heard footsteps. The door opened. And there was Clem.

Wearing a towel.

Just a towel.

Her hair was wet, and she had another small towel in one hand.

"Oh, hi!"

I blinked.

"Hi."

She smiled.

"Come in."

I stood there for a second.

"Are you sure? I can come back."

"Why?"

"Well, you've obviously just had a shower."

"Yeah. Finished now."

She stepped aside.

"Come on, it's freezing."

I went in and she closed the door behind me.

"Sorry. Didn't hear you at first. Had the shower running."

"No, that's fine."

"Wasn't expecting anyone."

"Sorry. I should've messaged."

"Don't be daft."

She smiled.

"Nice surprise."

That made me feel better. Quite a lot better, actually. I took off my coat and looked around.

"Is your dad home?"

"Nah. He's at work."

"Oh."

"Got the place to ourselves."

She said it casually, as though it were the most ordinary thing in the world. Which, I supposed, it was.

"Come upstairs," she said. "I need to get dressed."

I followed her to her bedroom.It looked much the same as it had on Sunday. Books everywhere and her clothes on the chair. The same mug still sitting on the desk. I wondered whether it had moved at all. Clem dropped the smaller towel onto the chair and went over to her wardrobe.

"Internet still dead at yours?" she asked.

"Completely."

"Same here."

"Dad says it could be weeks."

"Yeah, wouldn't surprise me."

She pulled open a drawer. I sat on the edge of the bed.

"Weeks, Clem. How do people live like this?"

"Very badly."

That made me laugh. She found some clothes and laid them on the bed beside me.

"CES doesn't have that problem, though," she said.

I looked up.

"What do you mean?"

"They've got their own systems."

"Internet?"

"Power and phones, mostly. Their own generators and communications setup. Dad says they can keep operating even when everything else on the island goes down."

"Seriously?"

"Yep."

"That's unfair."

"Bit."

"So we're sitting here without internet, and they're carrying on like nothing's happened?"

"Pretty much."

I shook my head.

"Maybe I should move into the factory."

Clem grinned.

"Don't think they'd let you."

"I could pretend to be a recycling expert."

"Can you recycle anything?"

"Paper."

"Impressive qualifications."

"Thank you."

She laughed and without any fuss, she started getting dressed. I hadn't expected that. I mean, she'd said she needed to get dressed. Obviously, that involved putting clothes on. But I'd assumed she'd go back into the bathroom, or ask me to turn around, or something.

Instead, she just got on with it. I looked away almost immediately, suddenly very interested in the books on her shelf. There were a couple of fantasy novels, some old paperbacks and a little wooden figure of a bird. I stared at the bird.

Very nice bird. Probably handmade.

"What's that?" I asked, pointing.

Clem glanced over.

"What?"

"The bird."

"Oh. Dad made it."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Ages ago."

"That's nice."

"Suppose."

She carried on getting ready while I tried to act completely normal. Which was difficult, because I was suddenly aware of absolutely everything. Where I was looking. Where my hands were. Whether I was sitting strangely. Whether I was being too quiet. I wasn't used to this. At all.

Even after P.E. at school, I'd always hated changing in front of other girls. I'd usually put my normal clothes on as quickly as possible and shower at home instead.

Some girls didn't care. They'd stand around talking, getting changed, doing their hair, borrowing deodorant, acting as though there was nothing remotely awkward about any of it.

I'd never understood how they could be so relaxed.

And here was Clem, someone I'd only met a handful of times, behaving as though I'd been coming round for years. She didn't seem embarrassed. Didn't seem to expect me to be embarrassed either.

It was just getting dressed. Nothing more complicated than that. I glanced towards her, then looked away again. She was so different from the girls I knew in London. Not just in the way she dressed. There was something wonderfully unbothered about her.

I couldn’t help looking at her bum for a moment. She didn't seem to spend much time worrying about whether she looked fashionable, or whether her hair was sitting properly, or whether she'd done all the things girls were apparently supposed to do before anyone saw them.

Her hair was messy. Her skin was bare of make-up. She was simply herself and I found that fascinating. And, rather unexpectedly, attractive. The thought caught me off guard. I looked down at my hands.

Oh.

Well.

That was new. Or perhaps it wasn't completely new. I'd noticed girls before. Of course I had. But this felt different somehow. Maybe because Clem wasn't trying to impress anyone. She wasn't trying at all. She was just comfortable.

I wished I could be like that.

"Everything all right?"

I looked up.

Clem was watching me.

"Yeah!"

A little too quickly.

"Fine."

She smiled.

"You're quiet."

"Just tired."

"Ah."

She pulled on her jumper.

"Bad night's sleep?"

"Not really. Just bored out of my mind."

"Fair enough."

I smiled. She didn't seem to have noticed anything. Thank goodness. A minute later, Clem sat down beside me, now wearing jeans and a loose grey jumper. Her hair was still damp.

"Right," she said. "Civilised again."

I laughed.

"Were you uncivilised before?"

"Probably."

She picked up a brush from the bedside table and ran it through her hair a few times.

Then she gave up and put it down.

"That'll do."

I smiled.

"You don't spend much time on your hair, do you?"

"Should I?"

"No!"

She laughed.

"Good. Can't be bothered."

I looked at her. Her hair was already beginning to stick out in different directions. It suited her. I wasn't going to say that, though. At least not yet.

"So," she said, "what've you been doing with yourself?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Sounds productive."

"Very."

I leaned back against the wall.

"Went out with Dad yesterday."

"Oh yeah? Birdwatching?"

"Bird research," I corrected, putting on my best serious voice.

Clem nodded solemnly.

"My apologies."

"Very important scientific work."

"Of course."

"Mostly involved standing in the cold while Dad told me about birds that weren't there."

She laughed.

"Sounds thrilling."

"It actually wasn't too bad."

"Really?"

"Yeah. It was nice spending time with him."

Clem smiled.

"That's good."

I nodded.

"It was."

We talked about Dad's work for a while. I told her about the marked paths on his map, the observation points and how he counted the birds he saw. Clem seemed genuinely interested.

"Does he really do that all day?"

"Pretty much."

"Blimey."

"He's got notebooks full of numbers."

"Sounds complicated."

"It is. But he loves it."

I smiled.

"He was showing me redshanks and curlews and something called a dunlin."

"Dunlin," Clem repeated.

"Yeah. Apparently there should be hundreds of them."

"Used to be."

I looked at her.

"What?"

"Loads of them around here when I was little."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Especially out on the eastern side."

I sat up slightly.

"East?"

She nodded.

"That used to be the wildlife side of the island."

I frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, there were always birds out there. Loads of them. And other animals too."

"Like what?"

"Rabbits, mostly. Foxes sometimes. You'd see all sorts if you went walking."

I thought about the empty marsh I'd seen on Sunday.

"There wasn't much when I went out there."

"No. Not now."

"When did it change?"

Clem considered that.

"Couple of years ago, I suppose. Maybe a bit longer."

"About when CES moved in?"

"They've been here longer than that. But they started getting bigger around then."

I nodded.

"That's interesting."

She looked at me.

"Why?"

"Because Dad says the birds are avoiding the east side. He thinks it might be the noise from the factory."

"Could be."

"He didn't realise CES was operating so far out into the marsh."

"Yeah, well, most people don't go out that way anymore."

"Because of the fences?"

"Partly. And there's not much to see."

I thought about that.

"Except at night."

Clem looked at me.

"The lights again?"

"Yeah."

She smiled faintly.

"Still thinking about those?"

"A bit."

"You're determined to find out what they are, aren't you?"

"Not determined."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Curious, then."

"Very curious."

I smiled.

She laughed.

"Fair enough."

I looked towards her window.

It faced the other way, so I couldn't see the eastern

marsh from here.

"Do you think they're vehicles?" I asked.

"Probably."

"On those roads you told me about?"

"Would make sense."

"But what are they doing out there?"

"No idea."

"Doesn't your dad ever ask?"

"Ask who?"

"His boss, or someone."

Clem shrugged.

"Don't think he cares much. He's got enough to do during the day."

I nodded. That made sense. Most people probably didn't spend their evenings wondering what other people at work were doing. I was only interested because I'd seen the lights from my bedroom. And because Dad was studying the birds. And because the whole thing was a bit strange. At least, I thought it was.

We spent the next hour talking about other things. Clem showed me a book she'd been reading, and I told her

about a film I'd watched with Mum and Dad. We argued about whether the ending was obvious. She thought it was. I thought she was just saying that to annoy me. Which she probably was. At one point, we went downstairs to make tea.

The kitchen was quiet without Tom there, and Clem moved around it with the same easy confidence she seemed to have everywhere else. She knew exactly where everything was. She didn't have to think about it.

I watched her fill the kettle and find two mugs.

"Do you ever get bored here?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

"What do you do?"

"Read. Walk. Visit Mum. Annoy Dad."

"Busy schedule."

"Very."

I smiled.

She handed me a mug.

"Milk?"

"Please."

She added some, then passed it over.

"Thanks."

We took our tea back upstairs.

I sat on the bed again, this time without even thinking about it.

Clem sat beside me.

Close enough that our shoulders almost touched.

And this time, I didn't feel awkward. Well. Not quite as awkward. I was still a little too aware of her. Of the way she tucked her feet beneath her. Of how she pushed her damp hair away from her face. Of how she laughed at things without trying to make the laugh sound prettier or quieter.

It was ridiculous.

I'd come over because I was bored and wanted to spend time with a friend. That was all. Except I was beginning to suspect it wasn't quite all. I took a sip of tea. It was too hot. I nearly burnt my tongue. Clem looked at me.

"All right?"

"Yep."

"You sure?"

"Fine."

She smiled.

"You're a bit strange, Maya."

"Thanks." I laughed. But I got very aware of myself.

"You're welcome."

I looked at her. She was smiling too. And I thought, not for the first time, that I was very glad I'd met her.

Outside, the wind rattled softly against the window. The internet was still down. School was still a mess. And somewhere beyond the village, the eastern marsh was as empty and mysterious as ever. But sitting there beside Clem, drinking tea and talking about nothing in particular, I found I didn't mind any of it quite so much.

Chapter Twenty-One

By half past eleven, the house was quiet.

Mum had gone to bed about an hour earlier, and Dad had followed shortly afterwards, taking a mug of tea upstairs and promising not to fall asleep before he'd finished it. He probably had.

I was sitting on my bed with a book open in front of me, but I hadn't turned a page in ages. I kept looking towards the window. I'd been thinking about the lights again.

Not constantly. I'd managed to get through dinner, watch something with Mum and spend an hour reading without giving them much thought. But now that it was dark, I wanted to see whether they were there. I closed the book.

Then I got up, pulled the curtains aside and looked out. There they were.

"Oh, come on."

I wasn't sure whether I was pleased or annoyed. Perhaps a bit of both. The night was clearer than it had been before. There was still some mist hanging low over the marsh, but I could make out more of the dark ground beyond the house.

And the lights were definitely there. Three of them, as far as I could tell. One was quite bright and seemed to be staying in the same place. Another was smaller, further to the right. The third was moving. I watched it travel slowly across the darkness, disappear behind something I couldn't see, then appear again a little further along. It wasn't moving like someone walking with a torch. It was too steady. And too slow.

Almost like a vehicle. A large one, perhaps. A lorry. I thought about the big vehicles I'd seen at CES on Sunday. The ones moving between the buildings. Could it be one of those?

I pulled the desk chair over to the window and sat down. If I was going to spend half the night staring at the marsh, I might as well be comfortable. And for a while, I just watched.

The moving light stopped. Then it started again. Another light appeared close to the stationary one, stayed there for perhaps a minute, then vanished. I couldn't tell whether it had been switched off or simply moved behind something. That was the most annoying part. There was nothing to judge anything against. No buildings or streetlights. No trees tall enough to stand out in the darkness. Just little patches of light appearing and disappearing somewhere out on the marsh.

I tried to imagine what the scene would look like in daylight. A road. Perhaps a lorry parked beside it. Some kind of equipment. People working. That was probably

all it was. Clem had said there were proper tarmac roads out there. And a night crew. So the lights made sense. Mostly.

What didn't make sense was why nobody seemed to know what the night crew actually did. I rested my chin on my knees. Maybe they were transporting waste. CES was a recycling and waste-processing company, after all. They'd need to move things around. Perhaps the main buildings were where everything was sorted, and the roads led to storage areas further out. That sounded reasonable.

But why would they need to work at night? Maybe because there was too much to do during the day. Or because some machinery had to run constantly. Or because the roads were easier to use when there weren't other people around. I frowned. I could come up with explanations all evening. That didn't mean any of them were right. A faint noise came from outside.

I sat up. Had that been another thud? I listened. Nothing. I considered opening the window again, then remembered how cold I'd been last time.

No, thanks. The sound could've been anything anyway. Dad had said that noise travelled a long way over open ground. If CES had heavy machinery working at night, perhaps that was what I was hearing. And perhaps that was what was frightening the birds away.

I thought about the walk I'd taken with Dad. The redshanks picking their way through the mud. The

curlew with its enormous curved bill. All those observation points he'd marked on his map. Nearly all on the western side. Because that was where the birds were.

But Clem had said something yesterday that I hadn't really thought about until now. The eastern side used to be where all the wildlife was. Not just a few birds. Loads of them. Rabbits, foxes, wading birds, too. And now there was hardly anything. I looked out towards the lights. Something had changed. That much was obvious.

Dad was trying to find out what. I started going over everything I knew. The birds had moved away from the eastern marsh. CES had expanded its operations. There were roads leading southeast from the factory. There were two different work crews. The day crew worked on the main site. The night crew worked further out.

And the day crew wasn't allowed into those areas.

I frowned.

It was starting to feel like there might be a connection. Not necessarily anything terrible. Just a connection. If the night crew was operating heavy vehicles out on the marsh, the noise and activity could explain why the birds had stopped feeding there. That was what Dad had suggested, wasn't it? Disturbance.

Birds didn't like being disturbed. Especially at night. But then another thought occurred to me. Clem had said

the eastern side used to be full of wildlife until a couple of years ago. When exactly had that changed? And when had CES started operating there? I sat up straighter. Hang on. When had CES actually arrived on the island?

I knew they'd taken over the old shipyard. And Dad had said they'd brought jobs and money and all sorts of improvements. But I didn't know when. Five years ago? Ten? Twenty? I couldn't remember anyone giving me an actual date.

Clem had said the company had been there longer than a couple of years, but had started getting bigger around the time the wildlife disappeared. That was interesting. If I could find out when the expansion happened, I could compare it with when the birds started disappearing.

Not that I had the bird records. Dad did, though. And I could probably find something about CES online. News articles. Company announcements. Planning applications, perhaps. There had to be something. I reached for my phone.

No internet. Of course. I stared at the screen. The Wi-Fi symbol was there, but nothing would load. I turned Wi-Fi off and checked the mobile signal. Zero bars. I held the phone up towards the window. Nothing.

I moved it slightly to the left. Still nothing.

"Oh, for God's sake."

I stood up and held it as high as I could. As though an extra thirty centimetres was going to make all the difference. Nope. I tried opening a browser anyway.

The little loading symbol spun for a while. Then stopped. *You're offline*.

"Yes, thank you. I'd noticed."

I gave up and tossed the phone onto my bed. It bounced once and landed beside my pillow. I looked back out of the window. The lights were still there. Somewhere out in the darkness, people were doing something. And I couldn't even look up when the company had been founded. Wonderful. I thought about going to ask Dad. He might know.

He'd been reading reports about the island for weeks, and he'd probably come across something about CES. He might even have the dates in his notes. I glanced at the clock. Eleven fifty-eight. No. He'd be asleep.

And putting on knickers just to wake him up at midnight to ask when a recycling company had opened would probably make him think I'd gone completely mad.

I could ask tomorrow. I should ask tomorrow. That was sensible. I sat back down. One of the lights moved slowly towards the stationary one. Then both disappeared. I leaned forward.

A few seconds later, the moving light appeared again.

Further to the left this time. I tried to picture the road it might be following. Perhaps it was turning a corner. Perhaps there were buildings hidden out there. Clem had said there might be.

But why couldn't I see them during the day? I had walked as far east as I safely could. The marsh had looked completely empty. Of course, the land wasn't perfectly flat. There were little rises and dips, patches of tall grass and areas where the ground dropped towards the water.

A low building could easily be hidden. Especially from a distance. I wished I had a proper map. Not the ordinary sort that showed the village roads, but one with every track and building marked. Dad's survey map might help. Although he hadn't marked much on the eastern side. I sighed. There were too many things I didn't know.

I tried to organise my thoughts. That usually helped.

At school, when a problem looked complicated, I liked breaking it into smaller pieces. What did I know? What could I prove? What was I assuming? I could do that here. I knew there were lights. I'd seen them myself. I knew CES had a night crew. Clem had told me.

I knew there were roads going out into the eastern marsh. Again, Clem. I knew the birds had largely abandoned that area. Dad had confirmed it. And I knew the change had happened over the last few years. Or at least I thought I knew that. Clem remembered the

wildlife being there when she was younger, but that wasn't exactly a scientific record.

I frowned.

That was the trouble. Everything was based on what someone remembered or what someone had told me. I didn't have proper dates. I didn't have measurements. I didn't even know exactly where the lights were. I had a handful of facts and a lot of guesses. Which was not how I liked solving problems.

I could almost hear Mrs Bennett telling us to show our working. Well, my working was rubbish.

I stared at the marsh. Maybe CES had nothing to do with the birds. Perhaps something had changed naturally. A shift in the water channels. A shortage of food. A particularly bad winter. Dad had mentioned all sorts of possible causes. Maybe the lights were completely unrelated.

Just ordinary industrial activity happening near a place where the wildlife had happened to disappear.

It was possible.

But the timing bothered me. If CES had expanded into the marsh at roughly the same time the animals stopped using it, that seemed worth looking into. Didn't it?

I wished I could check. I wished I had the internet. I wished I knew more about birds. And roads. And

recycling plants. And practically everything else.

I rubbed my face. This was getting nowhere. By half past midnight, I was still sitting at the window. The lights had become less interesting. One had stayed in the same place for ages. Another had disappeared completely. The moving one was still travelling slowly back and forth, although I couldn't tell whether it was the same light or a different one.

I was tired. My eyes were starting to ache from staring into the darkness. And I was getting increasingly annoyed with myself. Normally, I was good at this sort of thing. Not investigating mysterious lights, obviously.

But working things out. Finding patterns. Spotting things that didn't fit. Give me a maths problem and I could usually see where to start.

This was different. There wasn't enough information. And every time I thought I'd found an answer, it turned into another question. I stood up and pushed the chair back towards my desk.

"Useless," I muttered.

I wasn't sure whether I meant the internet, the situation or my own brain. Probably all three.

I took one last look outside. The stationary light was still there. Small and pale, sitting somewhere beyond the dark outline of the marsh. I wondered how many nights it had been there before I'd moved to the island.

Perhaps every night. Perhaps for years. And nobody had thought anything of it. I pulled the curtains closed. I climbed into bed and reached for my phone. Still no signal. Naturally. I put it down again.

Tomorrow, I'd ask Dad when CES had expanded. That was at least one thing I could find out without the internet. And perhaps Clem knew more than she realised.

Her dad worked there, after all. There might be something useful in the little bits of information she'd heard over the years. I turned off the lamp.

The room went dark. For a while, I lay there staring at the ceiling, trying to fit everything together one last time.

Birds. Noise. Roads. Night workers. Lights. There had to be a way of making sense of it. But I couldn't find one.

Eventually, I rolled onto my side and pulled the duvet up around my shoulders. My brain was usually quite good at figuring things out. Tonight, it was being spectacularly unhelpful. And that annoyed me almost as much as the lights themselves.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Thursday morning began with the same little symbol on my laptop telling me I was connected to the Wi-Fi.

And the same complete lack of internet. I tried opening my school timetable. Nothing. I tried a news website. Nothing. I even tried the weather forecast, which seemed particularly pointless considering I could look out of the window and see that it was grey, damp and miserable.

Still nothing.

"Wonderful," I muttered.

I shut the laptop. At this rate, I was going to forget how to use the internet before it came back.

Dad had already left for work. I'd heard him moving around downstairs earlier, followed by the front door closing just before eight.

I wished I'd got up in time to catch him. There were things I wanted to ask. Quite a few things, actually. Instead, I pulled on knickers and a jumper and went downstairs.

Mum was sitting at the kitchen table with a cup of tea, a notebook and a plate containing half a piece of toast. She was staring at the notebook with the expression she

usually wore when one of her fictional characters had done something she hadn't planned.

"Morning," I said.

She looked up.

"Morning, love."

"Internet's still dead."

"Yes, I gathered that from the complete absence of civilisation."

I smiled and went to make some toast.

"How's the book going?"

"Terribly."

"Good terribly or bad terribly?"

"Not sure yet. I've just discovered that someone I thought was innocent might actually be the murderer."

I looked at her.

"You're writing it."

"I know. Very inconsiderate of them."

I laughed and Mum pushed the notebook aside.

"Come and sit down. You look miserable."

"I'm bored."

"Ah."

"Really bored."

"That does sound serious."

I brought my toast over and sat opposite her.

She studied me for a moment.

"How are you doing, love? Generally, I mean."

I shrugged.

"All right."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

She raised an eyebrow.

I sighed.

"Mostly."

"That's better."

I took a bite of toast.

Mum waited. She was quite good at that. Not saying anything until I decided whether I wanted to talk.

"It's just weird," I said eventually. "Being here."

"I know."

"I mean, it's getting better. Clem's nice. And I liked going out with Dad."

"That's good."

"But everything's so... small."

Mum smiled faintly.

"The island?"

"Everything. The village. The number of people. The things you can do."

I looked towards the window.

"Back home, if I was bored, I could just go somewhere. Here I can't even watch something online."

"Well, the internet situation is particularly unfortunate."

"It's ridiculous."

"It is."

"And two years is ages."

Mum nodded.

"I know it feels that way."

"It doesn't just feel that way. It is."

She gave me a sympathetic smile.

"I suppose when you're sixteen, two years is a rather large chunk of your life."

"Exactly."

I put my toast down.

"I'll be eighteen when we leave."

"Yes."

"That's practically a different person."

"Possibly one who remembers to bring her mugs downstairs."

I looked at her.

"Mum."

"Sorry, love."

But she was smiling. I smiled too, despite myself. Then she reached across the table and touched my hand.

"I do understand, Maya. We asked a lot of you when we moved here."

"I know Dad needs to do his research."

"That doesn't mean you're not allowed to hate parts of it."

"I don't hate all of it."

"I know."

She squeezed my hand.

"And I'm glad you've met Clem."

I looked down at my plate.

"Yeah. Me too."

"She seems lovely."

"You've met her for about thirty seconds."

"I'm an excellent judge of character."

"You're a crime writer. Half your characters turn out to be murderers."

"Exactly. I've had plenty of practice."

I laughed and we ate quietly for a little while. Mum returned to her notebook, occasionally writing something down and then crossing it out. I watched her.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course, love."

"Have you ever noticed anything strange out on the marsh at night?"

She looked up.

"Strange how?"

"Lights. Moving around."

"Lights?"

"Yeah."

I explained what I'd seen from my bedroom window. The pale lights in the distance. How some moved and others stayed still. How they disappeared and reappeared. And the faint thuds I'd heard on a couple of nights. Mum listened, her pen resting against her chin.

"How far away?" she asked.

"Quite far. Somewhere east of the village, I think. Maybe southeast of CES."

"Could they be boats?"

"That's what I thought at first. But they look more like vehicles."

"Ah."

"And Clem says there are roads out there. CES uses them."

"Well, there you are, then."

"Maybe."

Mum took a sip of tea.

"Perhaps they're moving equipment."

"That's what I thought too. But why at night?"

"Shift work?"

"Yeah, but apparently the night crew does different things from the day crew. And the day workers aren't allowed into that part of the marsh."

Mum considered that.

"That does sound a little mysterious."

"Exactly."

Her eyes brightened.

"Oh, perhaps it's smugglers."

I stared at her.

"What?"

"Smugglers. This is the Norfolk coast, after all. Perfect place for it."

"Mum."

"Little boats coming in under cover of darkness. Men carrying crates across the marsh. Secret tunnels beneath the old shipyard."

I laughed. Then got serious again. Couldn’t be. Could it?

"There's a recycling factory there."

"An excellent cover."

"You're not helping."

"Sorry."

She didn't look sorry.

I shook my head.

"Seriously, though. Dad says the wildlife has moved away from the eastern side. Clem says there used to be loads of animals out there until a few years ago."

"Really?"

"Yeah. And CES expanded around the same time."

Mum tilted her head.

"Well, that might be connected."

"That's what I'm thinking."

"Noise from the machinery, perhaps?"

"Probably. But I want to know when they expanded. If it was at the same time the birds started disappearing, that would be interesting, wouldn't it?"

"It would."

I nodded. Finally. Someone was following my thinking. Then Mum looked thoughtfully towards the window.

"Or perhaps the birds know something we don't."

I sighed.

"Mum."

"No, listen. Imagine an old shipwreck buried beneath the marsh. The spirits of the sailors have been disturbed by the factory, and now they wander the island at night, searching for their lost vessel."

I stared at her.

She smiled.

"Too much?"

"Just a little."

"Could be quite atmospheric."

"You're writing another book in your head, aren't you?"

"Possibly."

I laughed.

She picked up her pen.

"Shipwrecked sailors from days of yore. I rather like that."

"Please don't write that down."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm trying to work something out."

"And I'm providing possibilities."

"Ridiculous possibilities."

"Some of my best work begins with ridiculous possibilities."

I shook my head, smiling.

She scribbled something in her notebook.

"Oh, honestly."

"What?"

"You're actually writing it down!"

"Never waste a good idea, love."

I tried again.

"Look, I don't think there's anything supernatural happening."

"Probably wise."

"I just think there's something going on out there that might explain why the birds have gone."

Mum nodded.

"And that's something your dad would be interested in."

"Exactly."

"Have you told him?"

"Sort of. I told him about the roads, but I haven't asked him about the dates yet."

"Well, ask him tonight."

"I was going to ask him this morning, but he'd already left."

"He's usually up with the birds."

I looked at her.

"Was that intentional?"

"Entirely."

I smiled. Mum put her notebook aside again.

"Seriously, love. It's good that you're taking an interest in his work. He was absolutely delighted you went out with him on Tuesday."

"Was he?"

"Oh, yes. He spent half the evening telling me what a wonderful research assistant you were."

I laughed.

"I mostly complained about being cold."

"He mentioned that too."

"Of course he did."

She smiled.

"He likes having you around."

I looked down at my toast.

"Yeah. I liked it too."

"Then perhaps you could go with him again."

I made a face.

"Not today."

"Too cold?"

"Too cold. Too damp. Too much mud."

"Understandable."

I glanced at her notebook. She'd written something near the bottom of the page. I leaned forward.

"Did you actually write 'ghost sailors'?"

Mum quickly covered the page with her hand.

"That's confidential."

I burst out laughing.

"You're impossible."

"Thank you, love."

After breakfast, I helped clear the table. Mum made herself another cup of tea and returned to her writing. I lingered in the kitchen, trying to think what to do next. I could read. Again. I could do some more schoolwork.

Except I'd already finished everything I could do without access to the materials online.

I could go for a walk. But it was cold, and the sky looked as though it might start raining at any moment. Then I thought about Clem. She'd probably be home. The internet was still down, and the tide wasn't particularly convenient for getting to school today. Even if she wasn't, it wouldn't hurt to check.

Besides, Clem knew more about the island than I did.

She'd lived here all her life. Perhaps she remembered when CES had expanded. Or knew someone who worked on the night crew.

I could ask. And if she didn't know anything, we could just hang out. Which, if I was being truthful, was a much better reason to visit her anyway.

"I'm going out," I announced.

Mum looked up.

"Oh? Where to?"

"Thought I'd see if Clem's home."

"Lovely."

She smiled.

"Take your coat. It looks cold."

"I know, Mum."

"And your boots."

"Yes, Mum."

"And perhaps a torch in case you're late coming back."

I looked at her.

"Are you worried about the ghost sailors?"

"Naturally. Can't be too careful."

She grinned and went back to her notebook. Upstairs, I changed into jeans and a warm jumper. I brushed my hair, then spent a moment looking at myself in the mirror. It was a bit of a mess. Not terrible. Just not particularly tidy. I reached for the brush again.

Then stopped. Clem wouldn't care. She'd probably open the door with her own hair sticking out in six different directions. I smiled at the thought and put the brush down.

My phone was still sitting on the bed. I picked it up and checked for signal. One bar. Then none. Wonderful.

I considered messaging Clem anyway, but there was little point if the message couldn't get through.

I'd just go.

I pulled on my coat, grabbed my boots and headed downstairs.

"Bye, Mum!"

"Have fun, love!"

"And don't put me in your book!"

"No promises!"

I laughed and closed the front door behind me.

Outside, the air was cold enough to make me pull my scarf up around my chin. The village was quiet. A few cars were parked near the shop, and someone was walking a dog along the road towards the church. I headed in the opposite direction.

Past the shop. Left at the church. Down the lane with the old post box. I knew the way now. I didn't even have to think about it. As I walked, I went over the things I wanted to ask Clem.

When had CES expanded? Had the eastern marsh always been restricted? Did she know anything about the night workers? And had she ever seen the lights herself? I tried to organise the questions in my head.

Then realised I was doing exactly what I always did.

Turning a perfectly ordinary visit into some sort of research project. I smiled at myself. Maybe I was more like Dad than I wanted to admit. But I was curious. And I was tired of not knowing things. If the internet had been working, I could've looked everything up myself. Instead, I was relying on people who actually lived here. Which wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

I reached Clem's lane a few minutes later. Her house was just as I'd left it yesterday. White walls. Green door. Small garden. The enormous muddy boots were missing again. Good.

That probably meant Tom was at work. I walked up the path and knocked. For a moment, I wondered whether

Clem would be surprised to see me again so soon. We'd only spent yesterday together. Perhaps I was becoming a nuisance. Then I heard footsteps inside.

The door opened. And there was Clem. I smiled before I could help it.

"Hi."

She smiled back.

"Hi, Maya."

And just like that, I was glad I'd come.

Chapter Twenty- Three

"Come in," Clem said, stepping aside. "You're going to freeze out there."

I walked into the hallway and pulled down my scarf.

"Lovely weather."

"Beautiful."

"Nearly got blown into a hedge on the way here."

"That's how we welcome visitors."

I laughed. Clem closed the door behind me.

She was wearing a pair of dark jogging bottoms and a faded jumper that looked about two sizes too big. Her hair was tied back, although several strands had already escaped.

"Internet still down?" she asked.

"Yep."

"Same."

"Dad says it might be weeks."

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"How are you so calm about this?"

She shrugged.

"Practice."

I took off my coat and hung it beside hers. Enjoying this little conversation was becoming a tradition already.

"Is your dad working?"

"Yeah. Won't be back till six, probably."

"Right."

"Fancy some tea?"

"Please."

She led me into the kitchen.

The house was warm, and there was a faint smell of toast. A radio was playing quietly on the windowsill, although I couldn't make out what the presenter was saying.

Clem filled the kettle while I sat at the little kitchen table.

"How's school?" she asked.

"Nonexistent."

"Sounds good."

"It was for about an hour. Now I'm going mad."

She laughed.

"I've got some work I can do offline, but not much."

"Same. Mum's started making up things for me to do."

"Like what?"

"Yesterday she suggested I organise the kitchen cupboards."

"Seriously?"

"Apparently I looked bored."

"Did you?"

"Course not."

She grinned.

"I went for a walk instead."

"Good choice."

She made the tea, found a packet of biscuits and put everything on a tray.

"Come on. It's warmer upstairs."

Her bedroom was cosy in a way mine still wasn't quite.

Not because it was tidier.

It definitely wasn't.

There were books piled beside the bed, a jumper hanging off the chair and a collection of hair ties scattered across the desk.

But it felt comfortable. Like she'd been living there for years, which of course she had.

The curtains were half drawn against the grey afternoon, and a small lamp beside the bed gave the room a warm yellow glow.

Clem put the tray on her bedside table."Mind if we sit here? It's freezing by the window."

"Sure."

She climbed onto the bed, pulled the duvet over her legs and settled against the pillows.

I sat beside her.

"Want some?" she asked, lifting the edge of the duvet.

I hesitated for a second.

Then smiled.

"Yeah. Thanks."

I tucked my legs underneath it.

The duvet was warm, and the mattress dipped slightly as Clem shifted closer to make room. It was such a simple thing, sitting together under a duvet, drinking tea. But it felt strangely personal. Not uncomfortable.

Quite the opposite. There was something lovely about being allowed into someone's ordinary life like this. No special arrangements. No effort to impress. Just Clem, her slightly messy room, and two mugs of tea.

I leaned back against the wall.

"This is much better than my bedroom."

"Why?"

"Because there's someone else in it."

Clem looked at me. Then smiled.

"Fair enough."

We talked about the internet for a while.

Apparently, the island had always had trouble with its connection, especially during bad weather. I recalled someone else - or perhaps Clem - had told me before, but I didn’t mind and leaned in.

Clem told me about one winter when the phone lines had gone down for nearly a fortnight.

"How did anyone manage?" I asked.

"Same as now. Complained a lot."

I laughed.

"Very British."

"Extremely."

She took a biscuit.

"At least the electricity's better these days."

"Was it bad before?"

"Terrible."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Used to go off all the time."

"How often?"

"Depends. In winter, sometimes a couple of times a week. If there was a proper storm, you could lose it for hours."

I stared at her.

"That sounds awful."

"It was annoying. Dad kept torches everywhere."

"Well, he works in maintenance. That makes sense."

"Yeah. Think he enjoyed having something to fix."

She smiled.

"Once spent an entire evening trying to get an old generator working. Mum said he was happier than he'd been all month."

I laughed.

"So what changed?"

"CES, mostly."

I looked at her.

"The factory?"

"Yeah. They helped get the power lines from the mainland upgraded. Bigger supply, better equipment, that sort of thing."

"Oh."

"Used to be really unreliable. Now we hardly ever lose electricity."

I thought about that.

"So the whole island benefits?"

"Pretty much."

"That's quite a big deal."

"Yeah."

She looked at me.

"That's why people like them so much."

I took a sip of tea.

"Actually, I wanted to ask you something about CES."

Clem smiled.

"Thought you might."

I laughed.

"Am I that obvious?"

"Bit."

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise. It's fine."

She tucked her feet further beneath the duvet and wiggled them under my thigh.

"What do you want to know?"

"Well, I was talking to Mum this morning about the

lights. And Dad's bird research."

"Right."

"And I realised I don't actually know when CES started here."

"Oh. Four years ago."

I looked at her.

"Four?"

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

"Pretty sure. I remember when they started building the new plant."

"What was there before?"

"Old shipyard."

"I know that bit."

"Well, most of it wasn't being used anymore. Some workshops and storage buildings, but a lot of it was empty."

She took another sip of tea.

"Then CES bought the place and started building."

"All at once?"

"Not really. Took a while. They cleared some of the old buildings, put up the big sheds and all the new fences."

I thought about the factory I'd seen on Sunday.

"Was it a big thing for the island?"

"Huge."

"Really?"

"Yeah. People talked about it constantly."

"Why?"

"Jobs, mostly."

She shrugged.

"There wasn't much work here before. Not unless you wanted to fish, farm or travel to the mainland every day."

"Right."

"And travelling to the mainland isn't always easy."

I smiled.

"I've noticed."

"Exactly."

She pulled another biscuit from the packet.

"CES started hiring locals. Proper jobs, decent wages. Dad got his job there not long after they opened."

"Was he working somewhere else before?"

"Yeah. Mostly maintenance jobs on the mainland. Sometimes he'd be gone all day."

"Because of the tides?"

"Yeah. If he missed the crossing, he'd have to wait ages or stay over."

"That must've been annoying."

"It was."

She looked down at her mug.

"Much better now. He's home most evenings."

I could understand why she'd like that. I tried to imagine how it would be to be home alone in the evening here.

"So the plant was built four years ago," I said.

"Yep."

"And the wildlife started disappearing a couple of years ago?"

Clem made a face.

"Not sure."

"But you said there used to be loads of birds on the eastern side."

"There did."

"When did they go?"

She thought for a moment.

"Honestly, I don't know."

"Not even roughly?"

"Well, it's not like they all disappeared one Tuesday."

I laughed.

"No, I suppose not."

"It happened gradually, I think. There were always fewer birds around each year. But I wasn't exactly counting them."

"Right."

"I just remember there used to be more."

I nodded slowly. That was frustrating. Not Clem's fault, obviously. But I wanted dates. Actual dates. If the plant had been built four years ago and the birds had started

leaving around the same time, that would be interesting. But if they'd been disappearing for years before CES arrived, it would mean something quite different. I couldn't tell.

Clem watched me.

"You're doing that thing again."

"What thing?"

"Thinking really hard."

I smiled.

"Sorry."

"Does it hurt?"

"Sometimes."

She laughed.

I took another sip of tea.

"Do you think CES could be responsible?"

"For the birds?"

"Yeah."

"Maybe."

She shrugged.

"Big factory. Lots of noise. Wouldn't surprise me if animals didn't like it."

"That's what Dad thinks might be happening."

"Well, there you go."

"But he's not sure."

"Sounds like a scientist."

I laughed.

"Exactly."

Clem leaned back against the pillows.

"Thing is, most people here wouldn't want CES to leave, even if it did scare away a few birds."

I looked at her.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because they've done so much for the island."

She said it as though it were obvious.

I supposed, from her point of view, it was.

"Like the electricity?"

"That, yeah. And the jobs. They buy things from local businesses, pay for stuff, help out with community events."

"Really?"

"Yeah. They're always sponsoring something."

"Like what?"

"Village events. Repairs. That sort of thing. They paid towards fixing up the playground a while back."

I nodded. I'd seen the little playground near the village green. It looked quite new compared with some of the other things around here.

"And there's the bridge," Clem added.

I looked at her.

"The one people keep talking about?"

"Yeah."

"Is that actually happening?"

"Supposed to be."

"That's what everyone says."

She smiled.

"Well, they're planning it. CES is pushing for it, apparently."

"Why?"

"Make it easier to get people and equipment on and off the island. And it'd help everyone else too."

I considered that.

A proper bridge.

No more waiting for the tide.

No more checking whether the causeway was underwater.

No more being trapped here whenever the sea decided it was time.

"That would be amazing," I said.

Clem laughed.

"Thought you'd like that."

"I'd love that."

"Most people would."

"Except the ones who like being cut off."

"There's a few of those."

"Of course there are."

She smiled.

"But yeah. That's another reason people like CES. They reckon the company's finally getting things done that nobody else bothered with."

I thought about the conversations I'd overheard in the shop. The way everyone seemed pleased whenever CES was mentioned. The cashier talking about jobs. The people discussing the bridge. The bridge would make a lot of sense for CES of course. Considering they wouldn’t have to sail the waste in anymore.

Even Dad had said the company was popular.

"Does anyone ever complain about them?" I asked.

Clem frowned.

"Not really."

"Nobody?"

"Well, people complain about the lorries sometimes. And the noise."

"Right."

"But nothing serious."

"Nothing about what they're doing out in the marsh?"

She shook her head.

"Not that I've heard."

"That's strange."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Just seems like someone would be curious."

"Maybe they are."

"Are you?"

"About what?"

"The night crew. The roads. All that."

She thought for a moment.

"Not particularly."

I looked at her.

"Really?"

"Well, Dad works there. He says it's a good place to work. They pay him properly and don't mess him about."

"Right."

"And if they want to keep some parts of the site

restricted, that's their business, isn't it?"

"I suppose."

She looked at me.

"Most people don't know exactly what goes on inside a factory."

"True."

"And it's not like there are stories about them doing anything bad."

I nodded. That was something else I'd noticed. Every time anyone mentioned CES, it was positive. Jobs, investment, better electricity, the bridge. Even the little articles I'd seen about the company before the internet went down had been full of praise.

"Never anything negative?" I asked.

Clem shook her head.

"Not that I know of."

"Not even rumours?"

She smiled.

"What sort of rumours?"

"I don't know. Dodgy business practices. Secret experiments. Evil recycling machines."

Clem burst out laughing.

"Evil recycling machines?"

"Could happen."

"Terrifying."

"They come for your plastic bottles at night."

She laughed harder. I grinned.

"See? That's why nobody suspects them."

"Oh, definitely."

She wiped at her eyes.

"You're ridiculous."

"Thank you."

For a while, we stopped talking about CES. Clem showed me some old photographs on her phone. They'd been saved there for years, so she could still open them without internet.

There was one of her when she was about ten, standing on a beach with her hair blowing across her face and a huge grin. Another showed her sitting on Tom's shoulders at some village event. He looked exactly the same, just with a slightly darker beard.

"That's cute," I said.

Clem made a face.

"Don't."

"What?"

"Call me cute."

I laughed. But I could sense she meant it.

"Sorry."

She swiped to the next photo.

This one showed a group of people standing beside a little wooden boat.

"Who's that?"

"Grandad. Dad's dad."

"Does he live here?"

"Not anymore. Moved to the mainland a few years ago."

"Oh."

"Still comes over sometimes."

She showed me another picture. Then another. It was nice seeing bits of her life from before I'd arrived. The island in summer. The village decorated for Christmas. Clem with shorter hair. Clem covered in mud. Clem

looking furious because someone had apparently made her wear a dress. I laughed at that one.

"Oh, you look thrilled."

"Wasn't."

"How old were you?"

"Twelve."

"What's wrong with the dress?"

"Nothing. Just didn't want to wear it."

"Fair enough."

She shrugged.

"Mum thought I'd look nice."

"You did."

Clem looked at me. I felt my cheeks warm slightly.

"I mean, you looked fine."

She smiled.

"Thanks."

I took a very long sip of tea.

Outside, the wind had started picking up.

It rattled the window occasionally, and I could hear rain beginning to tap against the glass.

Clem pulled the duvet a little higher over her legs.

"Lovely day."

"Beautiful," I said.

"Fancy going for a walk?"

I stared at her.

She grinned.

"Didn't think so."

I laughed.

"No, thanks."

We sat quietly for a while. It wasn't an awkward silence. That was something I was beginning to notice about Clem.

She didn't seem to mind when nobody was talking. She could just sit there, drinking tea, looking at her phone or staring out of the window. And somehow that made it easier for me to relax too.

Back in London, I was used to being around people who always had something to say. There was nothing wrong with that. I liked it. But this was different.

Quieter.

Comfortable.

I glanced at Clem.

She was sitting with her knees tucked up beneath the duvet, her mug resting between her hands. Her hair had escaped its tie again. A few strands were falling across her forehead. She didn't seem to notice. I smiled to myself.

"What?" she asked.

"Nothing."

She narrowed her eyes.

"You're smiling."

"Am I not allowed?"

"Suspicious."

I laughed.

"You're impossible."

"Been told."

She smiled and looked back at her mug.

I settled a little deeper against the pillows.

After a while, I returned to the subject that had brought me here.

"So if CES was built four years ago, do you remember what the eastern marsh was like before that?"

Clem thought about it.

"More open, I suppose."

"How?"

"Well, you could walk further out. There weren't as many fences."

"Was it safe?"

"Some parts. You had to know where you were going."

"Did you go there?"

"Yeah. With Dad sometimes. And with Mum when I was little."

"Did you see lots of birds?"

"Loads."

"What sort?"

She made a face.

"You're asking the wrong person."

I laughed.

"Long legs? Funny beaks?"

"Pretty much."

"Very scientific."

"Thank you."

She smiled. "There were rabbits too. And sometimes you'd see foxes around the edges."

"And now?"

"Not so much."

I nodded.

"Did CES fence off the whole eastern side?"

"No. Just their land. But some of the old paths don't go anywhere useful anymore."

"Because they end at the fences?"

"Yeah."

I thought about the path I'd followed on Sunday. The one that had taken me towards the factory before I'd turned back.

"That explains a few things."

Clem looked at me.

"You're not planning to go wandering out there, are you?"

"No."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously."

"Good."

"Why?"

"Because the marsh is dangerous if you don't know it."

"I know. Dad told me."

"He's right."

She said it more firmly than usual. I looked at her. She wasn't joking now.

"I won't," I said.

"Good."

Then she smiled again.

"Besides, I'd have to come and rescue you."

I laughed.

"Very heroic."

"Terrible inconvenience."

"Sorry."

"Would probably ruin my boots."

I grinned.

"Can't have that."

By the time the rain eased, we'd finished the tea and most of the biscuits. I glanced at the clock. It was nearly four. I'd been there for hours. Again. I looked at Clem.

"Sorry. I've taken up your whole afternoon."

She frowned.

"So?"

"Well, I just turned up."

"Yeah."

"Without even messaging."

"Internet's down, Maya."

"I know, but..."

She looked at me for a moment. Then smiled.

"If I didn't want you here, I wouldn't have let you in."

I laughed.

"Fair point."

"Besides, it's been nice."

I looked at her.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

She said it so simply.

As though there was nothing to be uncertain about.

I smiled.

"Good."

We stayed where we were for a little longer. Neither of us seemed particularly eager to move. I thought about the morning. How bored I'd been. How trapped the island had felt. How I'd been counting the days until the internet came back.

Now I was sitting in Clem's room, warm beneath her duvet, with the rain tapping softly against the window. And I wasn't bored at all.

I still wanted to know what was happening out on the eastern marsh. I still wanted to ask Dad about the bird records. And I still wished the internet would come back so I could look up everything I wanted to know.

But for now, I was happy to sit there. Clem reached for the last biscuit. She looked at it, then at me.

"Want half?"

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She broke it in two and handed me the larger piece.

"Thanks."

"No problem."

We ate our biscuits in comfortable silence.

And I found myself thinking that, whatever else happened during our two years on the Mudpack, meeting Clem might turn out to be the best part of it.

Chapter Twenty-four

By Friday afternoon, I'd decided that if I had to spend another day looking at the same four walls, I was going to lose my mind.

The internet was still down. Of course it was.

Mum had stopped asking whether it was working and had taken to writing her book by hand, which she claimed was making her feel like a proper Victorian novelist.

Dad had gone out early again, armed with his notebooks and binoculars. Well, most of his binoculars. I'd borrowed the smaller pair. I'd asked him over breakfast, and he'd looked delighted.

"Going birdwatching, sweetheart?"

"Something like that."

"Excellent! Where are you heading?"

"Thought I'd have a walk with Clem."

"Ah. Good idea. Just remember what I said about the paths."

"I know, Dad."

"Stay on the safe ones."

"I will."

"And don't get too close to any of the channels."

"Yes, Dad."

He'd smiled and handed me the binoculars.

"Have fun."

I hadn't told him we were going east. Not because I was trying to hide anything. At least, that was what I told myself. I just didn't want another lecture about unstable ground. Besides, Clem knew the area. She'd grown up here.

And we weren't planning to do anything stupid. We were just going for a walk. With binoculars. Towards a restricted industrial site. Perfectly normal Friday afternoon.

Clem was waiting for me outside the shop when I arrived. She had her usual enormous green coat on, with a scarf wrapped loosely around her neck and her hands tucked into her pockets. She looked at the binoculars hanging around my neck.

"Very professional."

"Thank you."

"Planning to invade somewhere?"

"Birdwatching."

"Right."

"Very serious hobby."

She grinned.

"Any particular birds?"

"Whatever's out east."

"Good luck with that."

I laughed.

"Come on."

We started walking through the village towards the eastern road. The weather was better than it had been for most of the week. Which wasn't saying much. But there was no rain, at least, and the wind had dropped to something that didn't feel personally offensive.

The sky was still grey, and a thin mist hung over the fields beyond the houses.

"Think we'll be able to see anything?" I asked.

"Depends how far out it is."

"That's encouraging."

"You're welcome."

We walked past the last few cottages and onto the gravel path leading towards the old shipyard. I recognised it from Sunday. The low stone walls and the rough grass. The occasional patch of standing water beside the road. Further ahead, I could see the tops of the CES buildings. Large grey shapes rising above the landscape.

"Do you come out here much?" I asked.

"Not anymore."

"Used to?"

"All the time when I was little."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Dad used to take me walking out here."

I looked at her.

"Before CES?"

"Mostly. Before they fenced everything off."

"Did you go far?"

"Sometimes."

She pointed towards a narrow path branching off the main track.

"That one goes round the back of the old fields. Used to be a good place for seeing birds."

"Does it still go through?"

"Yeah. But it gets pretty muddy further along."

I smiled.

"Well, we're properly equipped."

She looked down at my boots.

"Much better than your old trainers."

"Please don't remind me."

"Still got them?"

"Yes."

"Planning to take them swimming again?"

I laughed.

"Shut up."

We left the main track and followed the narrower path. It wound between patches of long grass and shallow ditches, sometimes rising onto slightly firmer ground before dipping again.

Clem walked ahead, apparently knowing exactly where she was going. I followed carefully.

"You're sure this is safe?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"How sure?"

She looked back.

"Pretty sure."

"Clem."

She laughed.

"I'm joking. Dad used to bring me this way. It's one of the old walking paths."

"Good."

"Just don't wander off it."

"Wasn't planning to."

She pointed towards the ground on our right.

"See that?"

I looked.

It was a patch of dark mud, not particularly different from the rest.

"What?"

"That bit's soft. There's a little channel underneath. You'd sink if you stepped there."

I stared at it.

"Seriously?"

"Yep."

"Looks completely normal."

"That's the problem."

I thought about Dad's warnings. He'd said exactly the same thing.

"Right. Staying on the path."

"Good girl."

I gave her a look. She grinned.

After about twenty minutes, we reached a low rise overlooking a wide stretch of marsh. The path continued along the higher ground, but Clem stopped beside a weathered wooden post.

"Here."

I looked around. There wasn't much to see. Grass. Mud. Shallow pools. Mist. And, somewhere in the distance, the grey shapes of the CES buildings.

"Is this it?" I asked.

"Good view from here."

"Of what?"

"The marsh."

I stared at her.

"Very helpful."

She laughed.

"You're the one who wanted to come."

"True."

I lifted the binoculars.

Through them, the distant grass looked much closer, and I could make out little channels cutting through the mud. But there was still no sign of any buildings. I slowly scanned the area. Left. Right. Back again. Nothing.

"See anything?" Clem asked.

"Not yet."

I adjusted the focus.

There were a few birds on a shallow pool to our left. I watched them for a moment. Then moved further east.

"Hang on."

"What?"

"There's something out there."

Clem stepped closer.

"Where?"

I pointed.

"See that darker patch? Beyond the grass?"

She squinted.

"Sort of."

I looked through the binoculars again. There were several thin shapes sticking up from the ground. Straight. Evenly spaced.

"Poles," I said.

"Poles?"

"Or stakes. Something like that."

I handed her the binoculars. She raised them to her eyes. For a while, she said nothing. Then she lowered them.

"Oh, yeah."

"What do you think they are?"

"Dunno."

"Fence posts?"

"Maybe."

"But there's no fence."

"Could be marking something."

I looked at her.

"Like what?"

"Roads. Boundaries. Places they're planning to build."

I took the binoculars back. There were at least six of them. Perhaps more. They seemed to form a rough line across the marsh, disappearing into the mist further south. I tried to follow the line. But the ground beyond was too hazy.

"Do you remember those being there?" I asked.

Clem shook her head.

"No."

"Could they be new?"

"Could be."

I lowered the binoculars.

"Helpful."

She grinned.

"Full of useful information, me."

We walked a little further along the path. The ground rose slightly, giving us a better view towards the southeast. The main CES buildings were now mostly hidden behind a low ridge, although I could still see the top of one of the larger sheds.

Beyond that was the open marsh. Or what looked like open marsh. I lifted the binoculars again. There were more poles. And something else. I frowned.

"What's that?"

Clem looked at me.

"What?"

"Over there."

I pointed towards a low patch of mist.

She followed my finger.

"Can't see anything."

"Neither can I. Not properly."

I adjusted the focus. There was something rising from the ground. Pale grey. Thin at first, then spreading out and disappearing into the mist.

I watched it for several seconds. It seemed to be moving upwards. Not drifting sideways like the fog.

"Is that smoke?"

Clem leaned closer.

"Where?"

I handed her the binoculars.

"Just to the right of those poles. See that darker patch?"

She looked.

For a moment, she was quiet.

Then she said, "Oh."

"You see it?"

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

"Looks like smoke."

She lowered the binoculars and looked towards the marsh with her own eyes. Without the magnification, it was almost impossible to see.

The pale grey plume blended into the mist until there was no clear difference between them.

"Could be steam," she said.

"From what?"

"Machinery?"

"But there's nothing there."

"Nothing we can see."

I looked at her. That was true. The ground wasn't completely flat. There could be equipment or low buildings hidden behind the rises. Especially with the mist. I took the binoculars back. The smoke, or steam, was still there. It seemed to be coming from one particular place. Not moving around. Just rising slowly, then spreading out into the damp air.

"That's strange," I said.

Clem nodded.

"A bit."

I looked at her.

"A bit?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"That it's incredibly mysterious and we need to

investigate immediately."

She laughed.

"All right. It's incredibly mysterious."

"Thank you."

"But we're not investigating immediately."

"Why not?"

"Because we'd have to walk through that."

She pointed towards the marsh.

I looked down.

Beyond the path, the ground was a mixture of mud, shallow water and patches of grass. There was no obvious route towards the poles.

"Fair point."

"And Dad would kill me if I dragged someone out there."

I smiled.

"Mine too."

We sat on a patch of dry grass beside the path. Well, relatively dry. Clem pulled her coat around herself and stretched out her legs. I sat beside her, resting the

binoculars in my lap. For a while, we just looked out over the marsh.

It was quiet. Much quieter than the western side had been when I'd gone out with Dad. There were no birds calling nearby. No little movements in the grass. Just the occasional sound of wind and, very faintly, machinery from the direction of CES.

"Funny," I said.

"What?"

"How empty it is."

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

"Dad says this should be good habitat."

"Used to be."

I looked at her.

"You really remember lots of animals out here?"

"Yeah."

"Like loads?"

"Loads."

She smiled faintly.

"Dad used to bring a flask and sandwiches. We'd sit somewhere like this and watch the birds."

"Sounds nice."

"It was."

She looked across the marsh.

"Sometimes we'd see rabbits running around. And there were always birds making a racket."

I smiled.

"Sounds like my dad's idea of heaven."

"Mine too."

"Really?"

"Yeah. He likes being outside."

I thought about Tom. His enormous hands. His beard. The way he'd looked completely at home standing in the kitchen in his checked shirt. I could imagine him walking across the marsh with a much younger Clem beside him.

"Do you miss it?" I asked.

She shrugged.

"A bit."

"The birds?"

"Just being able to come out here. There were more places to walk before."

I nodded and we sat quietly for another minute. Then I lifted the binoculars again. The poles were still there. The smoke was still rising. And somewhere beyond them, hidden by the mist and the uneven ground, were the roads Clem had told me about. I was almost certain of it.

"Do you think that's where the lights are?" I asked.

Clem followed my gaze.

"Could be."

"Look at the direction."

I pointed back towards the village.

"My bedroom window faces this way. When I see the lights, they're somewhere out here."

"Yeah."

"And those poles are pretty far south of the main plant."

"They are."

"So if there are roads out there, and machinery, and smoke..."

I stopped.

Clem looked at me.

"What?"

"I don't know."

She laughed.

"Strong conclusion."

"I'm working on it."

I looked through the binoculars again. It was frustrating. I could see enough to know there was something out there. But not enough to work out what. And without the internet, I couldn't even look up an aerial photograph or a map of the area.

I lowered the binoculars.

"I wish we could see it properly."

"Well, we can't make the mist go away."

"I know."

"Could come back another day."

"Maybe."

I looked towards the distant poles. Then I thought about the lights. At night, there was activity out there.

Vehicles moving. People working. Whatever was happening, it was easier to see after dark. Not the buildings, perhaps. But the lights themselves. I turned towards Clem.

"What if we came back tonight?"

She looked at me.

"Tonight?"

"Yeah."

"In the dark?"

"That's generally when the lights are on."

She gave me a look.

I smiled.

"Sorry."

She considered it.

"To here, you mean?"

"Maybe a bit further, if there's a safe path."

Clem looked out over the marsh. For once, she didn't answer immediately. I waited.

Then she said, "I do know some of the old paths further east."

I sat up.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Dad used to take me along them when I was little."

"Would they still be there?"

"Most of them, probably."

"Would you know where to go?"

She shrugged.

"I reckon so."

I looked at her.

"That's not terribly reassuring."

She smiled.

"You're the one suggesting we go wandering about in the dark."

"True."

She thought for another moment.

"We'd need torches."

"I've got one."

"Proper boots."

I lifted one foot.

"Already sorted."

"And we'd have to be careful. Some of the paths get really narrow."

I nodded.

"Obviously."

"Seriously, Maya."

I looked at her.

She wasn't smiling now.

"I know."

"There's places out here you really don't want to step."

"I won't. I will do as you say."

She glanced towards the poles again.

Then back at me.

"All right."

I blinked.

"All right?"

"Yeah."

"You're serious?"

"Well, I'm curious now."

I grinned.

"See!"

She laughed.

"Don't look so pleased with yourself."

"Can't help it."

"But we stick to the paths. And if I say we're turning back, we're turning back."

"Deal."

She held out her hand. I shook it. Her fingers were cold. But the sensation of holding her hand - even for a brief moment made me warm inside.

"Deal," she repeated.

We stayed for another ten minutes, trying to work out where the old paths might lead. Clem pointed out a low ridge further east and a narrow strip of grass that appeared to run between two shallow channels.

She remembered walking there with Tom years ago, although she wasn't certain how much had changed

since then. I tried to memorise everything. The wooden post where we'd stopped. The bend in the path. The little rise overlooking the marsh. The distant line of poles.

It all looked fairly straightforward in daylight. At night, I suspected it would be a different matter. But Clem seemed confident. And I trusted her. Probably more than I should have, considering I'd only known her for a little over a week. Still, she knew this place. I didn't. And I wasn't planning to do anything without her.

Eventually, we got up and started walking back towards the village. The mist was getting thicker again, and the distant poles had almost disappeared by the time we reached the main gravel track.

I glanced back once. The smoke was no longer visible. Neither was anything else. Just grey marsh stretching away into the distance.

"So what time?" I asked as we walked.

Clem looked at me.

"Tonight?"

"Yeah."

She thought about it.

"Half nine?"

"That late?"

"Want to see the lights, don't you?"

"Fair point."

"And Dad'll be home by then. I'll tell him I'm going out for a walk."

I nodded.

"I'll tell mine too."

"Meet by the old post box?"

"Sounds good."

She glanced at the binoculars.

"Bringing those?"

I considered it.

"Probably not much use in the dark."

"Exactly."

"Torches, then."

"Torches."

I smiled. This was actually happening. We were going out onto the eastern marsh at night. To see what CES was doing. I felt a little nervous. But mostly excited.

For days, I'd been watching those lights from my bedroom, wondering what they were. Now, perhaps, I was finally going to find out.

Clem looked at me.

"You're smiling again."

"Am I?"

"Yep."

"Sorry."

She laughed.

"Don't apologise."

We walked on together, our boots crunching against the gravel. Behind us, the mist settled slowly over the marsh, hiding the poles, the smoke and whatever else lay beyond. By tonight, I hoped we'd be able to see a lot more.

Chapter Twenty-Five

By nine twenty-five, I was standing outside the old post box, wondering whether this was a brilliant idea or a completely stupid one. Probably the second.

The village was almost deserted. A few windows were lit, and I could hear faint music coming from the pub, but there wasn't anyone else around.

I'd told Mum and Dad I was going for a walk with Clem. Which was true. I just hadn't mentioned exactly where.

Dad had reminded me to take a torch and wear something warm. Mum had asked whether we were going to be late, and I'd promised to be back at a reasonable hour. I'd avoided defining reasonable.

Now I was wearing my thick coat, gloves and boots, with a torch in one pocket and my phone in the other. The phone still had no signal. Naturally. I checked the time. Nine twenty-eight.

Then I saw Clem coming down the lane. She had her enormous green coat on, with her hood pulled up and a torch in one hand.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi."

"Ready?"

I looked towards the dark road leading out of the village.

"Define ready."

She smiled.

"Got your torch?"

"Yep."

"Boots?"

I lifted one foot.

"Present."

"Any last words?"

I laughed.

"That's not reassuring."

"Just checking."

She started walking. I fell into step beside her.

It was strange seeing the village at night. During the day, everything looked ordinary. Small cottages, stone walls, the shop, the church. Now the houses were mostly dark, and the narrow streets seemed much quieter than they should have been. Our footsteps

sounded surprisingly loud.

"Do you come out at night much?" I asked.

"Sometimes."

"Out this way?"

"Not really."

I looked at her.

"Brilliant."

She smiled.

"I know the paths, Maya."

"That's what you keep saying."

"Because it's true."

We reached the last few houses and continued along the gravel road towards CES. There were lights visible above the factory buildings, bright white ones that lit up parts of the yard. Even from here, I could hear the distant hum of machinery.

"Busy tonight," I said.

"Always is."

"Does your dad ever mention the night crew?"

"Not much."

"Does he know when they finish?"

"Morning, I think. Before the day lot come in."

"So they work all night?"

"Far as I know."

I looked towards the factory. It was odd to think of people working there while the rest of the island slept. Not that night shifts were unusual. Hospitals had them. Factories had them. Loads of places did.

Still, something about the isolated buildings and the dark marsh beyond made it feel different.

We reached the narrow path we'd taken that afternoon.

Clem stopped.

"Torches on."

I took mine out and clicked it on. A bright circle appeared on the gravel. Clem switched hers on too.

"Right," she said. "Stay close."

"Yes, boss."

She grinned.

"Good."

The path looked completely different in the dark. During the afternoon, I'd been able to see the marsh stretching away on either side.

Now there was only the narrow strip of ground illuminated by our torches. Everything beyond it was black.

Occasionally, the light caught a patch of water, which reflected it back at us. I kept looking down. The last thing I wanted was to step into one of those muddy channels Clem had warned me about.

"How far is it?" I asked.

"To the place we stopped earlier?"

"Yeah."

"About fifteen minutes."

"Feels longer."

"We've been walking for three."

"Oh."

She laughed. We continued.

The wind was fairly gentle, but the air was damp and cold. Little droplets of moisture collected on my coat. There was mist hanging over the marsh, thicker than it had been that afternoon. Our torch beams caught it,

making pale shapes in the darkness. It was almost like walking through smoke.

I looked towards Clem.

"Can you actually see where we're going?"

"Yep."

"How?"

"Because I've been here before."

"In daylight."

She glanced back.

"Still the same path."

"That's what I'm hoping."

She smiled.

"You're very cheerful tonight."

"I'm having a wonderful time."

"Glad to hear it."

After a while, the gravel gave way to a narrower dirt path. Clem slowed down.

"Careful here."

I followed her torch beam. The path curved around a shallow pool, then rose slightly onto firmer ground. Beyond it, I could see dark mud and standing water.

"That's the bit you showed me earlier?" I asked.

"Yeah."

"The soft ground?"

"Yep."

I looked at it.

In the dark, it was impossible to tell where the firm ground ended.

The whole area looked the same.

I moved a little closer to Clem.

She noticed.

"All right?"

"Yeah."

"Just follow me."

"I am."

She walked on. I stayed directly behind her, placing my boots where hers had been. It felt a little silly. But I'd rather look silly than disappear into a muddy hole.

We reached the low rise where we'd stopped that afternoon. Clem turned off her torch.

"Do the same."

I hesitated.

"Why?"

"Just want to see something."

I switched mine off. And immediately, the darkness seemed to close around us. For a few seconds, I couldn't see much at all. Then my eyes began to adjust.

The sky was slightly lighter than the ground, and I could make out the dark shape of Clem standing beside me. Further away, the lights from CES glowed above the factory. And beyond them, out towards the southeast, there were other lights. The ones I'd seen from my bedroom.

I felt a little thrill.

"There!"

Clem looked in the direction I was pointing.

"Yeah."

"You see them?"

"Yep."

There were at least four. Two were stationary. Another moved slowly across the darkness. The fourth appeared for a moment, then disappeared again.

"That's them," I whispered.

Clem nodded.

"Looks like vehicles."

"That's what I thought."

We stood watching. One of the moving lights stopped beside a stationary one. Then both seemed to brighten for a moment.

"Headlights?" I asked.

"Could be."

I looked towards the main CES buildings. The lights were definitely further south. Quite a bit further.

"Can we get closer?"

Clem considered it.

"There's another path."

"Safe?"

"Used to be."

I looked at her.

"Clem."

She smiled faintly.

"I know. We'll be careful."

She switched her torch back on.

"Come on."

The next path was much narrower. It followed a slightly raised strip of ground between two areas of marsh, with tall grass growing along the edges.

Clem moved slowly, sweeping her torch over the ground ahead. I followed.

The lights were disappearing behind the mist now, but I could still see a pale glow in the distance. We were getting closer. I was sure of it.

After another few minutes, I noticed something strange. A smell. At first, I thought it was just the marsh. The usual mixture of salt, mud and rotting vegetation. But there was something else underneath it.

Something sharp. Unpleasant. I wrinkled my nose.

"Can you smell that?"

Clem stopped.

"Yeah."

"What is it?"

She sniffed.

"Dunno."

I took another breath. It reminded me of something from school. Chemistry. That horrible smell when someone opened the wrong bottle or mixed something they shouldn't.

"Smells like sulphur," I said.

Clem looked at me.

"Does it?"

"Sort of. Or phosphorus. Something chemical."

"Phosphorus?"

"I don't know. I'm not a chemist."

She smiled.

"Could've fooled me."

"I'm serious."

"So am I."

She sniffed again.

"Definitely smells odd."

I looked towards the lights.

"Could it be from CES?"

"Probably."

"Does the factory normally smell like that?"

"Not that I've ever noticed."

We stood quietly for a moment. The smell seemed stronger when the wind came from the southeast. I didn't like it. It wasn't unbearable. Just wrong somehow. Not the sort of smell I expected in the middle of a marsh.

A noise came from somewhere ahead. A metallic rattle. We both stopped. I turned towards Clem.

"Did you hear that?" I whispered.

She nodded.

The noise came again. A series of clanks, followed by something heavier hitting something else. Then silence. I swallowed.

"Machinery?"

"Probably."

"Right."

We waited.

A low rumbling sound began, grew louder for a few seconds, then faded. It reminded me of a lorry engine.

"Definitely vehicles," Clem whispered.

I nodded. That made sense. Lorries. Machinery. Industrial work. Perfectly ordinary things. Except we were standing in the middle of a dark marsh, surrounded by mist, listening to noises we couldn't identify.

And suddenly, ordinary explanations didn't feel quite as convincing. I thought about Mum. Shipwrecked sailors from days of yore. I almost laughed. Almost.

Instead, I looked out into the darkness. The mist was moving slowly across the ground, catching the distant lights and making them spread into pale, shifting shapes.

For a moment, one of those shapes looked almost like a person standing in the distance. Tall. Still. Watching. I blinked. The shape changed. Just mist.

Obviously.

I shook my head.

"What's wrong?" Clem asked.

"Nothing."

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

I hesitated.

"Just remembered something Mum said."

"What?"

"She reckons the marsh is haunted."

Clem stared at me.

Then laughed.

"Seriously?"

"Not seriously. She's a writer."

"Ah."

"She started talking about shipwrecked sailors and ghosts."

Clem grinned.

"Well, there have been shipwrecks around here."

I looked at her.

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't make it worse."

She laughed.

"Sorry."

I looked back towards the mist. A pale patch drifted across the path ahead.

"Honestly, though," I said, "you can see why people used to believe in ghosts."

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

"All this mist. Strange noises. Lights in the distance."

"Dead sailors wandering about."

"Exactly."

She smiled.

"Looking for their lost ship."

I groaned.

"Stop it."

"Maybe they're looking for someone to join them."

"Clem!"

She burst out laughing.

I shoved her gently with my shoulder.

"You're horrible."

"Sorry."

She didn't sound sorry at all. We carried on. The path dipped slightly, then rose again. The ground was firmer here, with patches of short grass and gravel mixed into the mud. Clem seemed to recognise the area.

"Used to come this way with Dad," she said quietly.

"Really?"

"Yeah. There's an old drainage channel further along."

"Is it safe?"

"As long as we stay on this side."

I nodded.

The smell was stronger now. Definitely chemical. And the mist seemed thicker. Or perhaps it wasn't all mist. I remembered the smoke we'd seen that afternoon. The thin grey plume rising from somewhere beyond the poles. Now, looking towards the distant lights, I could see pale clouds drifting across the ground.

Some moved with the wind. Others seemed to rise from somewhere lower down before spreading out.

"That's smoke, isn't it?" I whispered.

Clem stopped beside me.

"Looks like it."

"Or steam."

"Yeah."

We watched.

The pale clouds mixed with the mist until it was impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. Another metallic rattle came from ahead. Then a low thud. I felt it more than heard it. A dull vibration that seemed to travel through the ground.

I looked at Clem.

"That."

"What?"

"That's the noise I've been hearing from my bedroom."

She listened.

A few seconds later, there was another thud.

Not particularly loud.

But unmistakable.

Clem frowned.

"Yeah. That's definitely machinery."

"Or something heavy being dropped."

"Could be."

I looked towards the lights. We were closer now. Close enough that I could make out different sources of light rather than just pale dots in the distance. One was high up. Another was lower, moving slowly behind the mist. And somewhere further to the right, a bright white beam swept across the ground. Like headlights.

I felt my heart beating a little faster. We were getting somewhere. Clem reached out and touched my arm.

"Hang on."

I stopped.

"What?"

She pointed towards the path ahead. It disappeared around a low rise covered in long grass. Beyond it, the ground seemed to drop away.

"We need to be careful here."

I nodded.

"Okay."

"I haven't been this far in a while."

That wasn't exactly reassuring.

"How long?"

She thought about it.

"Couple of years, maybe."

I stared at her.

"Clem!"

"What?"

"You said you knew the paths."

"I do."

"From when you were little!"

She smiled.

"Still here, aren't they?"

I looked down at the narrow strip of ground beneath our feet. "Mostly."

She laughed quietly.

"Look, we can turn back if you want."

I looked towards the lights. We were so close. Not close

enough to see what was happening, but much closer than I'd ever been before. I thought about all the nights I'd spent staring out of my bedroom window. All the questions. All the things I couldn't work out.

And now, somewhere just beyond that rise, there might finally be an answer. I shook my head.

"No. Let's keep going."

Clem studied me for a moment. "Sure?"

"Yeah."

"All right. But slowly."

She switched her torch to a lower setting. I did the same. We moved forward carefully, keeping to the narrow path. The chemical smell hung in the damp air.

Somewhere ahead, metal rattled against metal. A low engine rumbled. And through the mist, the pale lights moved across the darkness. I thought again about Mum's ghost sailors.

It was ridiculous, of course. There were no ghosts out here. Just people. Machines. And whatever CES was doing beyond the marsh.

I knew that.

But as we crept towards the low rise, with the strange smell in the air and the mist curling around our boots, I

found myself wishing I could be quite as certain as I sounded in my own head.

Chapter Twenty-Six

We stayed crouched for a moment. Then Clem moved slowly up the last few feet of the rise. I followed, keeping low. At the top, she lay down on her stomach. I did the same beside her. And finally, we could see what was happening.

There was a road.

A proper road, just as Clem had said.

It ran across the marsh below us, disappearing into the mist in both directions. Several large vehicles were parked along it. Two lorries. A tanker. And something that looked like a digger, with a long mechanical arm and a bucket on the end.

There were bright floodlights mounted on poles, illuminating a patch of ground beside the road.

I stared.

"Bloody hell," I whispered.

Clem didn't answer. But I knew she saw it too. There were men down there. At least five that I could see. They were wearing dark work clothes, reflective jackets and hard hats. One stood beside a lorry, apparently checking something on a clipboard. Two others were working near the digger. Another was guiding a vehicle

backwards, making small movements with his hands.

It was all strangely quiet. Not silent, obviously. The engines and machinery were making plenty of noise. But the men weren't talking much. Nobody was laughing or calling out to one another. They just seemed to be getting on with whatever they were doing.

I looked around. There were no buildings. No big sheds. No offices. Just the road, the vehicles and the lights. Beyond them, the marsh stretched away into darkness.

"Is this part of CES?" I whispered.

Clem nodded towards one of the lorries.

"Look."

On the side was the familiar blue and green logo. CES. I felt a little jolt of excitement.

"So it is them." I sputtered.

"Looks like."

I watched the men for a moment.

"What are they doing?"

"Dunno."

The digger moved. Its arm rose slowly, then swung to

one side. Something heavy dropped from the bucket with a dull thud. The same sort of sound I'd heard from my bedroom. I looked at Clem. She was watching just as closely as I was.

One of the men suddenly shouted something. I couldn't make out the words. But his voice carried across the marsh. Clem immediately ducked.

"Down!"

I dropped my head so quickly that my chin hit the ground.

"Ow."

"Shh."

I went still.

The shouting stopped. For a few seconds, all I could hear was the machinery. Then another voice called out. I couldn't understand that one either. My heart was thumping.

Had they seen us?

Surely not. We were lying in the grass, well above the work area. And it was dark.

I turned my head slightly towards Clem. She was lying completely still.

"Do you think...?" I whispered.

She put a finger to her lips.

I shut up.

We waited.

And waited.

It felt like forever. My elbows were getting cold. There was something damp pressing against my stomach, and I was fairly certain one of my knees was sitting in mud.

I wanted to move. I wanted to look. Mostly, I wanted to know whether someone was coming up the slope towards us. But Clem wasn't moving.

So neither was I.

After what felt like ten minutes, although it was probably less than two, she slowly raised her head. I watched her. She looked towards the work area. Then back at me.

"Think we're fine," she whispered.

I lifted my head a little. The men were still working. The digger was moving. A lorry was reversing towards the floodlights. Nobody seemed to be looking in our direction. I let out a breath.

"God."

Clem smiled faintly.

"Bit jumpy?"

"Someone shouted!"

"People do that."

"Very funny."

She grinned. But I noticed she kept her head low too.

We watched for another few minutes. The lorry stopped beside the digger. One of the men climbed onto a platform at the back and started working with something I couldn't see. Then there was the loud familiar metallic rattle.

A large container began to tilt. I frowned.

"What's that?"

Clem leaned forward slightly.

"Looks like they're unloading something."

"Into what?"

"Can't see."

I tried to look past the lorry. There was something in the ground beside it. A dark shape.

At first, I'd thought it was a shadow. But now I could

see a straight edge running along one side. It looked like a large opening.

"Is that a hole?" I whispered.

Clem narrowed her eyes.

"Maybe."

The container tilted further. Something began to slide out. I couldn't see exactly what it was. There were dark shapes, some large, some smaller. A few made a clattering noise as they fell. Then the digger moved again.

Its bucket scooped up a load of earth and dropped it somewhere beyond the lorry. I stared.

"Are they burying something?"

Clem didn't answer.

I looked at her. She was frowning.

"Maybe," she said.

I turned back. The lorry was blocking most of the view. I could see the container. The digger. The men. But not where the material was going. I wanted to see. Really see. Not just guess.

I glanced along the rise. There was a patch of taller grass further to our right, beyond the end of the narrow

path. From there, the angle might be better. I pointed.

"What about over there?"

Clem followed my finger. She looked down at the ground between us and the grass.

"That's off the path."

"I know."

She gave me a look. I sighed.

"Just a little way."

"Maya."

"We can see the ground. It's grass."

"Doesn't mean it's solid."

I looked again. There was a narrow strip of slightly raised earth running towards the taller grass. It didn't look particularly dangerous. But then, neither had the muddy patch Clem had shown me earlier.

I hesitated.

"Do you think we could get there?"

Clem studied it for a moment. Then she looked towards the work area.

"I don't like it."

"Neither do I."

"Then why are we doing this?"

"Because I want to know what they're burying."

She looked at me. For a moment, I thought she was going to say no. Then she sighed.

"All right. But only as far as that grass. And you stay behind me."

I nodded.

"Okay."

"Seriously."

"I know."

We moved very slowly. Clem went first, keeping low and testing the ground before putting her full weight on it. I followed in exactly the same places.

The grass was wet, and the mud underneath was softer than it had looked. At one point, my boot sank several centimetres.

I froze.

Clem looked back.

"All right?"

"Yeah."

"Don't put your weight on that bit."

"Little late."

She reached back and offered me her hand.

I took it.

She helped me shift onto firmer ground.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

We continued. It was only a few metres. But it felt much further. Finally, we reached the taller grass. Clem crouched behind it. I settled beside her.

From here, we had a clearer view of the work area. And I could see the hole. Except it wasn't really a hole. It was an enormous opening in the ground.

The edges were uneven, with pale rock visible beneath the dark surface soil. There was a steep drop, and beyond it, darkness. I stared.

"What the hell is that?"

Clem shook her head.

"No idea."

It looked almost like the entrance to an underground cavern. Or a quarry. Something much bigger than a simple pit.

The floodlights illuminated only the upper part. The rest disappeared into blackness. There were pipes or cables running along one edge, and a metal platform had been built beside it.

A lorry was positioned so its load could be emptied directly into the opening. I watched as the container tilted again. This time, I could see what was falling.

Large dark bags. Broken containers. Pieces of industrial material. Some looked like drums or barrels. Others were wrapped in heavy plastic. They slid out of the lorry and disappeared over the edge.

A moment later, there was a distant crash from somewhere below. I felt my stomach tighten.

"Clem."

"Yeah."

"They're dumping rubbish down there."

She didn't answer.

I looked at her. Her face was serious now.

"Looks like it."

I watched another container fall. There was another loud metallic bang. Then silence. A man near the edge waved to the driver. The container tilted further.

More material slid out.

I stared.

"That's not recycling."

Clem shook her head slowly.

"No."

The smell was much stronger here. Sharp and unpleasant. I pulled my scarf up over my nose.

"God, that stinks."

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

A pale cloud drifted up from the opening. It rose slowly, then spread out across the ground, mixing with the mist. That was what we'd seen earlier. The smoke. Or fumes.

Whatever it was, it was coming from underground.

I watched it spread.

"Do you think it's dangerous?"

Clem looked at me.

"I wouldn't want to breathe it."

I pulled my scarf higher. Below us, the men were moving quickly now. One of them was standing beside the digger, directing the operator. The bucket swung over the opening and dropped another load of earth. Some of it fell onto the waste below.

The rest landed near the edge.

"They're covering it up," I whispered.

Clem nodded.

The digger moved again. Another load of soil. Another dull thud. I thought about the sounds I'd heard at night. The lights moving across the marsh. The birds disappearing from the eastern side.

The strange smell. The smoke. Suddenly, it all seemed to fit together. I looked at Clem.

"That's why."

She turned towards me.

"What?"

"The birds."

I pointed towards the opening.

"That's why they've gone."

Clem looked back at the work area.

"Maybe."

"Look at it!"

"I am."

"They're burying waste underground. God knows what it is."

She nodded slowly.

"Yeah."

I felt a mixture of excitement and anger. I'd wanted an explanation. I'd wanted to know what was happening. But I hadn't expected this.Not really.

CES was supposed to be a green company. Clean energy. Recycling. Environmental solutions. That was practically their entire identity. And here they were, in the middle of the night, tipping industrial waste into a hole beneath the marsh.

I shook my head.

"Unbelievable."

I reached for my phone.

Clem noticed.

"What are you doing?"

"Taking pictures."

She looked towards the men.

"Maya..."

"We need proof."

"We've seen it."

"Yeah, but nobody else has."

I took out my phone. The screen lit up, far too bright in the darkness. I immediately lowered the brightness. Then I opened the camera.

I zoomed in towards the opening. The image was grainy. Very grainy. But I could make out the lorry. The CES logo. The men. The waste being tipped into the ground. I took a photograph.

Then another. And another.

"Can you see anything?" Clem whispered.

"Sort of."

I showed her the screen. She leaned closer.

"Not bad."

"Could be better."

"Don't get up."

"I'm not."

I adjusted the angle. The lorry moved slightly, giving me a clearer view of the opening. I took another picture. This one was better. The floodlights illuminated the falling waste. A large dark container was halfway over the edge. The CES logo was visible on the side of the lorry.

Perfect. Or at least as perfect as I was going to get.

I switched to video.

"What's that for?" Clem asked.

"Video."

"I gathered."

"I want to show Dad."

She nodded.

"Right."

I pressed record.

For the next thirty seconds, I held the phone as still as I could. The lorry's container tilted. Several large bags slid out. Something metallic fell after them, striking the

edge before disappearing into the darkness. The sound echoed from below.

Then the digger moved. Its bucket swung over the opening. Earth poured down. I kept recording. The whole thing was right there. The vehicles. The men. The waste. The opening. It was impossible to mistake what they were doing.

I glanced at the timer. Forty-two seconds. Enough. I stopped recording. Then checked the video. It played.

The picture wasn't brilliant, but it was clear enough. I felt a rush of relief.

"Got it," I whispered.

Clem looked at me.

"Good."

I smiled.

"Actually got it."

She smiled back, although she still looked worried.

"Right. Can we go now?"

I looked towards the work area. Another lorry was approaching along the road. Its headlights swept across the marsh. I ducked slightly.

"Yeah."

"Good."

I put the phone in my pocket .

Clem shifted backwards, preparing to move away from the grass. Then a voice shouted. Loudly. Much louder than before.

We both froze.

I looked towards the work area. One of the men was standing near the floodlights. He was pointing. Not towards the lorry. Not towards the digger.

Towards us.

Another man turned.

Then another. I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Clem."

She looked. The man shouted again. This time, I heard the words.

"OI! YOU TWO!"

My heart seemed to stop. For a second, neither of us moved. Then a bright beam of light swung across the marsh. It passed over the grass. Moved away. Then came back. Straight towards us.

Clem grabbed my arm.

"Maya."

I stared at the approaching light.

"They've seen us."

"Yeah."

The man shouted something else. Another torch beam appeared. Then a third.

Clem's grip tightened.

"Get up."

I looked at her.

"What?"

"Now."

And from somewhere below us, I heard the sound of men starting to run.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

"RUN!"

She didn't have to tell me twice. I scrambled to my feet, nearly falling over as my boot slipped on the wet grass. Behind us, someone shouted again.

"STOP! YOU THERE!"

I grabbed Clem's hand, and we ran. Or tried to.

Running across a marsh in the dark turned out to be considerably more difficult than I'd imagined.

The ground was uneven, the grass was wet, and the narrow strip of firm earth we'd crossed earlier seemed to have become even narrower. Clem went first, pulling me along behind her.

"Watch your feet!" she called.

"I AM!"

"Then stop looking back!"

I hadn't realised I was doing it. But I was. I kept glancing over my shoulder, expecting to see the men right behind us. Instead, I saw torch beams sweeping across the grass on the other side of the rise.

Someone shouted. Another voice answered. Then there was the sound of an engine revving. Oh, God.

They were coming after us.

We reached the path and turned sharply to the left. Clem finally let go of my hand so we could run properly.

"Keep up!"

"I'm trying!"

My boots thudded against the ground. I could barely see anything beyond the small patch illuminated by my torch.

Clem's light bounced ahead of me, occasionally catching the tall grass beside the path.

I was breathing hard already.

Cold air burned in my throat.

I wasn't particularly unfit, but I wasn't used to running in boots, wearing a thick coat, through a marsh in the middle of the night.

Especially not while being chased.

A shout came from behind us. I looked back. The men were still on the far side of the marsh. Their torches moved rapidly along the road, then stopped near the

edge of a dark channel.

One of them shouted something. Another answered. They couldn't come straight towards us. I realised that with a sudden rush of relief.

There was a wide stretch of mud and water between the road and the path we were following. The men would have to find another way around.

"THEY CAN'T FOLLOW!" I shouted.

Clem glanced back.

"Not straight across!"

"GOOD!"

"KEEP RUNNING!"

Right. Yes. Running. Very good idea.

We followed the narrow path around a shallow pool. Clem knew exactly where to turn. At least, I hoped she did. She seemed to.

Her torch moved quickly over the ground, finding the firmer sections and avoiding the darker patches. I stayed as close as I could. Behind us, the shouting continued. It was getting harder to hear over my own breathing. Then I heard an engine again.

A vehicle. Perhaps one of the lorries. Or something

smaller. I looked back. There were headlights moving along the distant road.

Fast.

Much faster than the lorries had been moving earlier.

"CLEM!"

"I HEAR IT!"

"THEY'VE GOT A CAR!"

"CAN'T DRIVE IT THROUGH HERE!"

I hoped she was right. I really hoped she was right.

The headlights disappeared behind a low rise. For a few seconds, there was nothing but darkness behind us. Then the beams appeared again, further to the left.

They were trying to get around. I felt my stomach twist.

"They're going to catch us!"

"No, they're not!"

"HOW DO YOU KNOW?"

"BECAUSE WE'RE NOT LETTING THEM!"

It wasn't exactly a detailed plan. But I appreciated the confidence.

We ran for another minute or two.

It felt like much longer.

My legs were starting to ache. My coat was too warm now, despite the cold air, and my scarf kept slipping over my mouth. I pulled it down.

"Clem!"

"What?"

"Wait!"

She slowed.

I bent forward, hands on my knees, trying to breathe.

"Just... a second."

Clem turned towards the lights behind us.

"Can't stop long."

"I know."

I sucked in a breath. Then another. My heart was pounding so hard I could feel it in my ears.

"What are they going to do?" I asked.

Clem looked at me.

"Who?"

"The men!"

"Dunno."

"Why are they chasing us?"

She gave me a look.

"Maya, you filmed them dumping rubbish into a hole."

"I know!"

"Probably not thrilled about it."

"But they don't know I filmed them!"

"Maybe not."

I looked back. The distant headlights were moving again.

"Then why chase us?"

Clem didn't answer immediately. That frightened me more than anything else. I straightened.

"We need to tell someone."

"Yeah."

"The police."

"Yeah."

"I've got the video."

"Good."

I reached for my phone. The screen lit up.

No signal. Of course. I stared at it.

"Still nothing!"

"Put it away."

"We need internet!"

"Won't get it out here."

"Then we need to get somewhere that has it!"

Clem nodded.

"Mainland."

I looked at her.

"The mainland?"

"Best chance. Phone signal's better once you're across."

"But the causeway..."

"I know."

She looked towards the village.

"First we get back. Then we work that out."

I shoved the phone into my pocket.

"Right."

Clem held out her hand.

"Come on."

I took it. And we started running again.

The path narrowed as it passed between two stretches of wet ground. I remembered this part. Or thought I did. We'd come this way earlier, before reaching the rise where we'd first seen the lights.

The ground sloped gently down on either side, disappearing into dark mud and shallow water.

Clem slowed slightly.

"Careful here!"

I nodded, although she couldn't see me. My torch beam bounced across the path. There were little puddles everywhere. My boots were already covered in mud.

I could hear the distant engine, but it seemed to be getting further away. Perhaps the vehicle had taken a different road. Perhaps they'd lost us. I wanted to believe that.

Then a shout came from somewhere to our right. Closer than before. I nearly jumped out of my skin.

"Clem!"

"I heard!"

A torch beam appeared in the distance. Not behind us. To the side.

Someone was moving along another stretch of raised ground. I couldn't tell how far away. The mist made everything difficult to judge.

The light swung towards us.

"THERE!" a man shouted.

Oh, God.

They'd found another way around.

Clem grabbed my sleeve.

"FASTER!"

We ran.

I stopped thinking about where I was putting my feet. That was my mistake. I knew it almost immediately. But by then, it was too late. The path curved slightly to the left. Clem followed it.

I was a step behind her, looking towards the torch beam

on our right. I saw it sweep across the grass. I heard another shout. And I panicked.

I tried to run faster.

My right foot landed near the edge of the path. The ground gave way beneath it. Not completely. Just enough.

My boot sank into something soft and cold. I stumbled.

"Oh!"

I threw my left foot forward to catch myself. And that one landed off the path too. For one short second, I thought I'd simply stepped into a puddle. Then both feet began to sink.

Fast.

The mud closed around my boots. I tried to pull my right foot free. It wouldn't move.

I pulled harder. My left foot sank deeper.

"CLEM!"

She stopped and turned.

"What?"

"I'M STUCK!"

She hurried back. She looked down. The mud was

already above my ankles. It was thick and dark, with a thin layer of water on top. I tried to lift my right foot again. Nothing.

It felt as though someone had grabbed my boot from underneath.

"Clem!"

"Don't move!"

"I can't!"

"Then stop trying!"

I froze. She crouched at the edge of the path, shining her torch down at my legs.

"Oh, bloody hell."

That was not what I wanted to hear.

"What?"

"You're off the path."

"I KNOW!"

"All right. Just stay still."

I looked down again. The mud had reached the lower part of my shins. I couldn't tell whether I was still sinking or whether it only looked that way because the water was moving around me.

My heart was hammering.

"Clem, I can't get my feet out."

"I know."

"What do I do?"

"Don't move."

"You keep saying that!"

"Because you keep moving!"

I stopped trying to pull my legs free.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then I felt my left foot settle a little deeper.

"Oh, God."

Clem looked at the mud, then at the ground around me. She wasn't smiling anymore. Not even a little. Somewhere behind us, a man shouted.

I turned my head. The torch beam was still moving across the marsh. It seemed closer.

Much closer.

"Clem, they're coming!"

"I know."

"We have to go!"

"I know, Maya."

I tried to pull my right foot again. The mud tightened around my boot. I made a frightened little noise.

"Stop," Clem said sharply.

I froze. She took a breath.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to shout."

"It's okay." I could hear the fear in my own voice.

"Just don't struggle, all right?"

I nodded. My throat felt tight. I looked down.

My legs were stuck in black mud. The ground around them looked almost solid, but every time I shifted my weight, I could feel it moving.

I didn't understand how something could look so harmless and be so horrible.

"Is it quicksand?" I whispered.

Clem shook her head.

"Not exactly."

"Then what is it?"

"Soft mud. Really soft."

"Can you get me out?"

She didn't answer straight away.

That was worse than if she'd said no.

"Clem?"

"I'm thinking."

She shone her torch around the edge of the path. The raised ground was only a short distance away. Less than a metre. I could almost reach it.

But my feet were stuck, and I didn't dare lean forward.

"What if I grab your hand?" I asked.

Clem looked at the ground between us.

"Not yet."

"Why?"

"Because I don't know if it'll hold me."

I stared at her. She was right. Of course she was right. If she stepped off the path to reach me, she might get stuck too.

And then we'd both be standing in the mud while those men came running towards us. I felt suddenly sick.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

Clem looked up.

"What?"

"I'm sorry. I wasn't looking."

"Doesn't matter."

"I should've stayed behind you."

"Maya."

I looked at her.

"Just stay still."

I nodded.

She looked back towards the path, then towards the dark ground around my legs. I could almost see her trying to work something out. Usually, Clem seemed to know exactly what to do. She always had an answer.

Even if it was something ridiculous. But now she looked uncertain.

And that frightened me. The engine noise had stopped. I noticed it suddenly. The marsh seemed quieter.

There were still distant sounds from the CES work area, but the vehicle that had been moving along the road was no longer audible.

Then I heard footsteps.

Not close. But somewhere out in the darkness. A man called something. Another answered. Clem switched off her torch.

"Turn yours off."

I did. Everything went black. I could still make out Clem's shape, crouched on the path in front of me.

Beyond her, there was only mist and darkness. My feet were freezing. The mud felt horribly cold around my legs.

I wanted to move.

I wanted to scream.

I wanted to be back in my bedroom, with the duvet pulled up around me, complaining about the internet. Instead, I was standing in a marsh at night, stuck in mud, while men from a recycling company searched for us. I swallowed hard.

"Clem?"

"Yeah?"

My voice came out much smaller than I'd intended.

"I'm scared."

She looked up at me.

For a moment, neither of us said anything.

Then she reached towards me, stopping just short of the mud.

"I know."

I stared at her hand.

It was close enough that I could almost touch it.

Almost.

"Are you scared?" I whispered.

She hesitated.

"Bit."

That made my stomach drop. Clem was scared. Clem, who walked around the island as though she owned it. Who knew every path. Who laughed at ghost stories and didn't care what anyone thought. She was scared too.

But she was still there.

Still trying to work out what to do.

"Okay," she whispered. "First thing, don't move your feet. Not even a little."

I nodded.

"Okay."

"And keep your weight as steady as you can."

"Okay."

She looked down at the mud again. Then at the edge of the path. Then back at me. I waited for her to tell me what came next.

But she didn't. Not yet.

She was thinking.

Trying to work out how to reach me without getting stuck herself. And I stood there, perfectly still, with the cold mud holding my legs and the distant voices of the men drifting through the darkness.

For the first time since we'd left the village, I genuinely didn't know whether we were going to get home.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"Don't move," Clem whispered again.

"I know."

"Not even if you feel yourself sinking."

I swallowed.

"That's not particularly reassuring."

"Sorry."

She was crouched at the edge of the path, looking around with her torch switched off. I could barely make out her face, but I could see her turning her head from side to side.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Something long."

"Like what?"

"A branch. Piece of wood. Anything I can reach you with."

I looked around too. Not that I could see much. Being very careful to not turn my torso but only my head. There was grass, mud, more grass, and somewhere

beyond it all, the dark outline of the marsh.

"There's nothing here."

"There's bound to be something."

"Where?"

"Don't know yet."

She stood up carefully.

"Stay there."

I gave a short, nervous laugh.

"Wasn't planning on going anywhere."

Clem didn't laugh.

She was already looking further along the path. I tried to stand perfectly still. Which sounded easy. After all, I was stuck. But it was surprisingly difficult.

My legs were beginning to ache from holding the same position, and every instinct I had was telling me to pull my feet out.

I wanted to lift one boot. Just a little. Just enough to see whether it would move. But Clem had told me not to. And I trusted her. So I stayed where I was.

The mud was cold. Horribly cold. It had worked its way around my boots and up my legs, and I could feel the

pressure of it against my shins.

I wasn't sure whether I'd stopped sinking.

I hoped so.

It was difficult to tell in the dark.

"Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"Am I still going down?"

She came back to the edge and looked.

"Don't think so."

"Don't think so?"

"Looks about the same."

I nodded.

"Right."

That was something. At least I wasn't disappearing into the marsh. Yet.

Clem turned her torch on for a second, keeping the beam low. She examined the ground around me, then switched it off again.

"You're only a little way off the path," she said.

"Feels further."

"Yeah."

"Can you reach me?"

"Not safely."

I looked at the dark strip of ground between us.

Less than a metre.

It might as well have been a hundred.

A low rumbling sound came from somewhere in the distance. We both stopped talking. At first, I thought it was another lorry working at the dumping site. But the noise grew louder.

An engine.A powerful one. Then another.

Clem turned towards the sound.

"Oh, brilliant," she muttered.

"What?"

"Vehicles."

"I can hear them."

"They're coming this way."

I stared into the darkness.

"How?"

"Must be another track further round."

I listened.

The engines were still some distance away, but they were definitely getting louder. There was a rough, rattling quality to them, as though the vehicles were travelling over uneven ground.

I imagined headlights sweeping across the marsh. Men climbing out. Torches. Shouting. I thought about the man who'd spotted us.

OI! YOU TWO!

My stomach tightened.

"Clem, they're coming."

"I know."

"We have to get out of here."

"I know, Maya."

Her voice was still quiet, but there was something different about it now.

She was frightened.

I could hear it.

That made everything worse.

Clem moved a few steps along the path.

"There's some old wood around here somewhere," she said.

"What wood?"

"Bits of fencing. Dad showed me years ago."

"Where?"

"Further along, I think."

She turned on her torch again, shielding the light with her hand so it wouldn't shine across the marsh. I watched the faint beam move over the ground.

Grass. Stones. Mud. A broken wooden post.

Clem stopped.

"Hang on."

"What?"

She crouched beside the post and pulled at something.

I heard wood scraping against gravel.

Then a quiet grunt.

"Got something?"

"Maybe."

She pulled again.

A piece of wood came free.

I could hear it moving, but I couldn't see how long it was.

Clem brought it back.

It was a rotten-looking section of fence rail.

About the length of her arm.

She held it towards me.

I reached out.

"Too short," she said.

I stared at it.

"Can you get closer?"

"No."

"Just a little?"

"Maya."

I looked at her. She shook her head.

"If I step into that, we could both get stuck."

I knew she was right. I hated that she was right. She dropped the piece of wood beside the path.

"Need something longer."

The engines grew louder. I could hear them clearly now. There were at least two. Perhaps more. One seemed to be revving hard, then slowing, then revving again. I pictured the vehicles trying to find a way through the marsh.

Following the roads. Searching for us. And I couldn't move. I couldn't even hide.

If someone shone a torch in our direction, they'd see me standing there like an idiot with my legs buried in mud.

I looked down.

My boots had disappeared beneath the surface.

The mud was still around my shins.

I tried not to think about how deep it might be underneath. What if it went on for metres? What if I sank further? What if Clem couldn't get me out?

I took a breath. Then another.

They were coming too quickly. I could feel panic building again, making my chest tight.

"Clem?"

She was searching along the edge of the path.

"Yeah?"

"What if we can't find anything?"

"We will."

"But what if we don't?"

She looked back at me.

"We'll work something else out."

"What?"

"Dunno yet."

I stared at her.

She gave me a small, determined smile.

"One thing at a time, yeah?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

But my hands were shaking.

Then something happened that was so embarrassing I almost forgot about everything else.

Almost.

I felt a sudden warmth spreading through my trousers.

For a second, I didn't understand.

Then I did.

Oh, God.

No.

No, no, no.

I looked down in horror.

I was wetting myself.

I tried to stop.

I couldn't.

My body had apparently decided it had had quite enough of the evening and was no longer interested in asking my permission.

I stood there, frozen in the mud, while it happened.

And all I could think was: Please don't let Clem notice. Which was ridiculous. Completely ridiculous. There were men searching for us. I was stuck in a marsh. We might be in actual danger.

And I was worrying about whether a girl I liked would think I was disgusting. But I couldn't help it. I felt my face burning. Tears built up faster in my eyes.

Thank goodness it was dark. I stared straight ahead, trying to act as though nothing had happened.

The warmth faded quickly in the cold air. My trousers felt horribly uncomfortable. I just wanted to disappear.

Not into the mud, obviously. That would make things worse. But perhaps into some other place where nobody had ever heard of me.

Somewhere without marshes. Or recycling companies. Or girls called Clem. Especially girls called Clem.

I thought about the previous afternoon, sitting beside her in bed, drinking tea and laughing about the island.

I'd felt so comfortable. So pleased that we were becoming friends. And now here I was. Sixteen years old. Standing in a muddy hole. Having wet myself.

Brilliant.

Absolutely brilliant.

I could practically hear the universe laughing.

"Anything?" I asked, trying to keep my voice steady.

Clem was a few metres further along the path.

"Not yet."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

She turned towards me.

"You all right?"

"Yeah."

"Sure?"

"Fine."

It came out far too quickly.

Clem looked at me for a moment.

Then nodded.

"Okay."

She went back to searching. I let out a shaky breath. Had she noticed? Surely not. It was dark. And she was busy trying to save me. She had much more important things to think about.

I tried to tell myself that. But my brain wasn't cooperating. I imagined her finding out. Her face changing. That awkward silence. Perhaps she'd pretend not to notice. Perhaps she'd say something kind.

Or perhaps she'd laugh.

No.

Clem wouldn't laugh. Not about something like that. I knew that. At least, I thought I did.

She could be sarcastic, and she teased me constantly, but she wasn't cruel. Still, knowing that didn't make the embarrassment go away. A bright light appeared in the distance.

I saw it through the mist, low against the ground. Then another. Headlights. My stomach dropped.

"Clem!"

She looked up.

"I see them."

"They're getting closer!"

"Yeah."

I could hear the engines clearly now. They sounded rough and powerful. Not ordinary cars. Something made for driving over difficult ground. Perhaps four-wheel drives. I didn't know. I didn't care.

All I knew was that they were coming. And I was still stuck. Clem hurried back towards me.

"Right. Listen."

I looked at her.

"There's an old bit of fencing further along. I think there might be a longer rail."

"Can you get it?"

"I'm going to try."

"How long?"

"Couple of minutes."

I stared at her.

"Couple of minutes?"

"I'll be quick."

I looked towards the headlights. They were moving slowly now. Searching.

"Clem..."

She crouched in front of me.

"Maya, look at me."

I did. Her face was pale in the faint light.

"You're not sinking anymore."

I glanced down. She was right.

At least, I didn't seem to be.

"You're stuck, but you're not going anywhere."

I nodded.

"So I need you to stay still while I find something to pull you out with."

"Okay."

"Can you do that?"

I nodded again.

"Yeah."

"Good."

I wanted her to stay. More than anything. But I also wanted to get out. So I watched her move away along the path.

The engines were louder now. I could hear one of them slowing down. Then stopping. A door slammed somewhere in the distance.

I froze.

Voices. Men talking. I couldn't make out the words. Then a torch beam swept across the mist.

I held my breath.

The light moved slowly from left to right. Stopped.

Then moved back again. I wanted to crouch. To hide.

But I couldn't. I was standing in the mud, with my legs trapped and nowhere to go. I turned my head towards Clem.

She was several metres away, crouched beside something in the grass. I could hear wood scraping. Then a sharp crack. She was pulling at the old fence.

"Come on," I whispered.

I wasn't sure whether I was talking to her, the wood or myself.

Another torch beam appeared. Closer. I looked back towards the headlights. The men were still somewhere beyond the channels. They couldn't come straight across. At least, I didn't think they could.

But they were finding their way around.

And sooner or later, they'd reach us. I tried to concentrate on breathing. Slowly.

In. Out. In. Out. It didn't help much. My legs were aching. My trousers were cold and wet. My hands were shaking and every few seconds, I found myself looking down to check whether the mud had risen any further.

It hadn't. I was still stuck at roughly the same depth. That should have been reassuring. But it wasn't.

I thought about Dad. He'd warned me about the marsh. He'd shown me the map. The safe paths. The dangerous areas. And I'd promised him I wouldn't leave the marked routes. Then I'd done exactly that. I wondered what he'd say if he could see me now.

Probably nothing at first. He'd just be frightened. Mum too. I felt a sudden ache in my chest. I wanted to go home. I wanted to sit in the kitchen with them, drinking tea while Mum made ridiculous jokes about ghost sailors.

I'd never complain about being bored again. Well. Not for at least a week.

There was another crack from further along the path. Then Clem's voice.

"Got it!"

I turned, as much as I could without shifting my weight. She was coming back. Carefully, because she was carrying something long and awkward.

A wooden rail. Much longer than the first piece. Perhaps two metres. One end was splintered, and there were bits of old paint clinging to it. But it looked solid.

I cried with relief.

"Will that work?"

"Hope so."

She stopped at the edge of the path and examined the ground between us.

Then she lowered herself onto her knees.

"Right."

I watched her. She laid the rail across the mud towards me. It reached. Just.

The end stopped a little beyond my hands. I stared at it.

"Oh, thank God."

Clem looked up.

"Don't grab it yet."

I froze.

"Why?"

"Need to make sure I've got a good hold."

She shifted backwards onto firmer ground, bracing herself with one boot against the raised edge of the path.

Then she gripped the rail with both hands.

I watched her test it. The wood creaked. She frowned.

"Not brilliant."

My stomach dropped.

"But it'll do?"

She looked at me. Then at the distant headlights. Then back at the rail.

"We'll find out."

I swallowed. Behind us, another engine stopped.

A man's voice carried across the marsh. Closer than before. Clem tightened her grip on the wood.

"Right, Maya. Listen carefully."

I looked at her.

"Don't try to stand up. Don't pull with your legs. Just take hold of this and keep still until I tell you what to do."

I nodded.

"Okay."

She pushed the rail a little further towards me. I reached out with shaking hands. My fingers closed around the rough wood. And for the first time since I'd stepped off the path, I had something solid to hold on to.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Right," She whispered. "Hold on tight."

I tightened my grip on the wooden rail.

It was rough and damp, with little splinters sticking out along one side. I could feel them pressing into my palms, but I didn't care. I had something to hold on to.

That was all that mattered.

Clem was lying almost flat on the path, with her boots braced against a patch of firmer ground. She had both hands wrapped around the other end of the rail.

"Don't try to pull your feet straight up," she said.

"Okay."

"Lean forward a little. Slowly."

I tried.

The mud held me.

Nothing happened.

"I can't."

"Just a little."

I leaned forward again. There was a horrible sucking feeling around my legs. I stopped immediately.

"Oh, God."

"You're all right."

"It feels like it's pulling me down."

"It's not. That's just the mud holding your boots."

"How do you know?"

"Because that's what mud does."

I looked at her.

"Very scientific."

She gave me a quick smile.

"Learned from the best."

Then she pulled gently on the rail.

"Come on. Little bit at a time."

The first few attempts did absolutely nothing. I leaned forward. Clem pulled. The wood creaked. And my legs stayed exactly where they were. I was beginning to think we'd never get anywhere.

Behind us, the engines were still running. One seemed to be moving slowly along a track somewhere to our

right. I could hear the tyres rattling over uneven ground.

A man shouted something. Clem stopped pulling and we both froze as a torch beam swept across the mist in the distance.

I held my breath. It moved away.

Then another appeared.

"They're getting closer," I whispered.

"I know."

"Clem..."

"Look at me."

I did.

"We're getting you out."

She said it with such certainty that, for a moment, I almost believed her. Then she glanced at the rail.

"Right. Try moving one leg a tiny bit."

I stared at her.

"You told me not to move!"

"I know. But now you've got something to hold on to."

"Which leg?"

"Whichever feels less stuck."

"They're both extremely stuck."

She smiled.

"Pick your favourite."

Despite everything, I let out a nervous laugh.

"Right."

I tried moving my left leg.

Not lifting it. Just twisting it slightly. The mud shifted around my calf. I made a frightened noise.

"That's it," Clem said.

"That's what?"

"You're moving."

"Am I?"

"Yeah! Keep doing that."

I tried again.

A little twist. A little pull.

The mud made an unpleasant sucking sound. But suddenly my left leg moved. Not much. Perhaps a centimetre. But it moved.

"Oh!"

Clem looked up.

"See?"

I stared at her.

"It moved!"

"Told you."

She grinned.

"Again."

We worked slowly.

Clem pulled gently on the rail while I shifted my weight and tried to loosen my legs. Sometimes nothing happened. Sometimes I felt the mud release its grip for a second, only to tighten again.

My arms were beginning to ache. The rail was digging into my hands. And I was still absolutely terrified.

But I was moving. Very slowly. A few centimetres at a time. The mud was no longer quite so high against my shins. I could feel myself leaning further forward.

"That's good," Clem whispered.

"Doesn't feel good."

"Well, it looks good."

I laughed breathlessly.

"Glad one of us is enjoying the view."

She smiled.

Then pulled again.

I felt my right foot shift.

Something gave way underneath it.

I nearly screamed.

"Clem!"

"You're fine!"

"My foot!"

"What's wrong?"

"It moved!"

"That's what we want!"

"I know, but it feels horrible!"

She laughed quietly.

"Just keep going."

Then, for no reason I could properly explain, I decided to tell her. Perhaps it was because I was frightened. Perhaps because I was exhausted.

Or perhaps because I'd spent the last several minutes worrying about something that was completely ridiculous compared with everything else. Whatever the reason, the words came out before I could stop them.

"Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"I need to tell you something."

She looked up immediately.

"What?"

I swallowed. Oh, God. Why was I doing this? Why couldn't I just keep my mouth shut?

"I, um..."

She waited.

I stared at the wooden rail between us.

"I had an accident."

Clem frowned.

"What sort of accident?"

My face went hot.

"An accident."

She looked confused for another second.

Then her expression changed.

"Oh."

I wanted the mud to swallow me.

Which was unfortunate, considering that was already one of my main concerns.

"I'm sorry," I whispered.

Clem stared at me.

"Sorry?"

I nodded miserably.

"I couldn't help it."

For a moment, she didn't say anything. Then her face softened. Completely. All the worry was still there, but something else appeared too.

Something warm and understanding.

"Oh, Maya."

I looked away.

"Please don't laugh."

"Laugh?"

She sounded genuinely surprised.

"Why would I laugh?"

I shrugged helplessly.

"Because it's embarrassing."

"Maya, you're stuck in a bloody marsh with people chasing us."

"I know."

"You're allowed to be scared."

I swallowed. She gave me the gentlest smile I'd seen from her.

"Honestly. It's all right."

I looked at her.

"Really?"

"Of course."

"But..."

"No buts."

She shifted her grip on the rail.

"Let's get you out first, yeah?"

I nodded.

"Okay."

"And then we can worry about everything else."

I looked down at my muddy legs.

"Everything else?"

She smiled.

"Well, preferably not the ghost sailors."

I let out a shaky laugh. And just like that, the horrible knot of embarrassment in my stomach loosened a little. Not completely. I was still mortified. But Clem knew. And she hadn't laughed. She hadn't looked disgusted.

She hadn't even seemed particularly surprised.

She'd just looked at me as though I mattered more than whatever had happened to my trousers. Which, right then, meant more than I could possibly explain.

"Ready?" she asked.

I nodded.

"Ready."

"Right. Same again."

She pulled. I twisted my left leg. The mud shifted. Then, with a horrible sucking noise, my left foot suddenly came free.

Or rather, only my foot came free. My boot didn't. I felt it slip off as my leg moved upwards.

"Oh!"

Clem looked up.

"What?"

"My boot!"

"What about it?"

"It's gone!"

She stared at me.

"What do you mean, gone?"

"It's still in there!"

I looked down.

My left foot was now above the mud, covered only by a thick sock that had once been white. The boot had disappeared completely.

Clem stared for half a second. Then she started

laughing. Not loudly. Just a short, surprised laugh.

I stared at her.

"Clem!"

"Sorry!"

"My boot!"

"I know!"

"It's gone!"

She pressed her lips together, trying to stop smiling.

"Well, at least your foot's still attached."

I looked at her. Then, despite everything, I started laughing too. It was ridiculous. Completely ridiculous. I was standing in a marsh with one boot missing, one leg still trapped, wet trousers and a group of men searching for us.

And somehow, Clem had managed to make me laugh.

"Right," she said, still smiling. "One more."

I nodded.

"Okay."

My right leg was harder. Much harder. The mud seemed determined to keep it. Clem pulled on the rail. I twisted

my foot.

Nothing.

I tried again. Still nothing.

"Come on," I muttered.

Clem shifted backwards, bracing herself more firmly.

"Try leaning towards me."

I did.

The rail bent slightly. For one horrible moment, I thought it was going to snap.

"Careful!" I whispered.

"It's fine."

"That wood looks ancient!"

"So do half the houses here. They're still standing."

"Not helping!"

She grinned. Not amused really. Then pulled again. I felt something move. A sudden loosening around my ankle.

"Oh!"

"That's it!"

I twisted my leg. The mud made an enormous sucking noise.

And my right foot came free. Without the boot.

Of course.

"Oh, for God's sake!"

I lurched forward. Clem pulled hard on the rail.

My balance went completely.

One second, I was standing in the mud.

The next, I was falling towards her.

"CLEM!"

"WHOA!"

She dropped the rail and grabbed my arms. I stumbled onto the path. My knees hit the ground. And then I fell straight on top of her. For a moment, neither of us moved. We were lying in a heap on the narrow path.

Clem was flat on her back.

I was sprawled across her, with one arm trapped awkwardly beneath me and both my muddy socks somewhere near her knees.

The wooden rail had rolled into the grass beside us.

I stared down at her.

She stared up at me.

Then she started laughing. Properly laughing. The kind where you can't quite catch your breath. I tried to sit up. My arms wouldn't cooperate.

"Oh, God. Sorry!"

She shook her head, still laughing.

"You're all right."

"I'm crushing you!"

"You're not."

"I am!"

"Maya, you're about as heavy as a wet cat."

I burst out laughing.

"A wet cat?"

"Very angry wet cat."

I tried to push myself up again. She caught my arm to steady me. And for a moment, we were suddenly very close. Her face was only a few inches from mine.

Her hair had come loose from its tie, and there was a smear of mud on her cheek.

She was still smiling.

I looked at her. Really looked at her. And I felt that strange little flutter again. The one I'd felt in her bedroom the other day.

Only stronger. Much stronger.

Then something happened that completely surprised me. Clem leaned in. And just like that, she kissed the tip of my nose.

A tiny, quick kiss.

Then she pulled back and grinned.

I blinked. And I must have looked proper surprised. For a second I didn’t know what to do.

“Thank you.”

I wasn’t sure if I thanked her for saving my life or kissing my nose. Possibly both.

"You're welcome."

I felt my cheeks getting warm. Which was ridiculous, considering everything else that had happened tonight. But I couldn't stop smiling.

Neither could she.

Then a distant shout brought us both back to reality.

We froze. The engines were still out there. The men were still searching. And we were lying on a path in the middle of the marsh. Clem looked towards the sound.

"Right."

"Yeah."

"We should probably move."

"Probably."

I pushed myself up onto my knees. She sat up beside me. For a moment, we just looked at each other.

Then I glanced down at my feet.

Two muddy socks. No boots. I stared.

"Oh, brilliant."

Clem followed my gaze.

Then looked at me.

"What?"

I held up one foot.

"I've lost my boots."

She stared.

"Both of them?"

"Both."

She looked towards the dark patch of mud. Then back at my feet. Then she started laughing again.

I couldn't help joining in.

"They're in the swamp!"

"Marsh," she corrected.

I looked at her.

"Seriously?"

"Technically."

"Clem!"

She grinned.

"Sorry."

I shook my head.

"Those were my good boots."

"Not anymore."

I laughed manically.

"Dad's going to kill me."

"Probably."

"He's going to ask where they are."

"Tell him you donated them to the local wildlife."

I burst out laughing again.

"That's terrible."

"Thank you."

She reached for my hand.

"Come on, wet cat."

I looked at her.

"Don't call me that."

She smiled.

"All right."

Then she stood, pulling me carefully up beside her. I wobbled slightly on my muddy socks. The ground felt cold and uneven beneath my feet. Clem kept hold of my hand until I was steady.

"Can you walk?"

I nodded.

"Think so."

"Good."

She looked towards the distant lights. Her smile faded.

"We need to get away from here."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

I glanced once more at the patch of mud where my boots had disappeared. They were gone.

Completely.

There was no way I was going back for them. I looked at Clem. She was watching me, waiting. And despite the cold, the fear, the mud and the fact that I was now standing in the middle of nowhere wearing nothing but socks on my feet, I found myself smiling at her again.

She squeezed my hand.

"Ready?"

I took a breath.

"Ready."

Then we turned back towards the path, leaving my boots somewhere beneath the marsh, and started moving again.

Chapter Thirty

The first engine sounded as though it was right behind us. I turned so quickly that I nearly lost my balance.

Through the mist, two headlights appeared beyond the grass, bouncing up and down as a vehicle travelled along one of the hidden roads.

"Clem!"

"I see it!"

The engine roared. Whatever it was, it was moving fast. Clem grabbed my hand.

"Come on!"

We ran.

Or at least, Clem ran. I attempted something resembling running, but without my boots, it was considerably more difficult.

The ground was cold and wet beneath my socks. Every little stone seemed determined to stab me through the soles, and the gravel that had been perfectly harmless five minutes earlier had suddenly become my worst enemy.

"Ow! Ow! Bloody hell!"

Clem glanced back.

"All right?"

"NO!"

She almost smiled.

"Keep going!"

"I AM!"

We rounded the bend in the path, and the headlights disappeared behind a low bank. For a moment, I felt relieved. Then I heard another engine.

Closer.

Much closer.

"How many are there?" I gasped.

"Dunno!"

"Sounds like loads!"

"Probably two or three!"

"THAT'S LOADS!"

Clem pulled me along. The path was barely wide enough for us to run side by side, so she let go of my hand and moved ahead.

"Stay behind me!"

I followed as closely as I could. My torch beam bounced over the ground, catching puddles, stones and patches of mud. Every time the light moved away from my feet, I had a horrible urge to stop. I couldn't afford to step off the path again.

I absolutely couldn't.

Not after what had just happened. I glanced down at my muddy socks. One had a hole developing near the heel.

Brilliant.

I'd gone from having two perfectly good boots to being chased across a marsh in a pair of ruined socks.

Mum was going to have questions. Quite a lot of questions, actually. Assuming I ever got home to answer them.

A shout came from behind us.

"STOP!"

I looked back. A man was standing beside the headlights of a vehicle, holding a torch. He was some distance away, on the other side of a wide stretch of dark marsh. Another man appeared beside him.

The torch swept towards us.

"THERE THEY ARE!"

"Oh, God!"

Clem looked over her shoulder.

"Don't look at them!"

"They can see us!"

"Then run!"

I ran faster. For about three seconds. Then I stepped on something sharp.

"OW!"

My foot jerked upwards, and I stumbled.

Clem stopped immediately.

"What?"

"Stone!"

She looked down at my feet.

"Can you keep going?"

"Yes!"

"Sure?"

"YES!"

She turned and ran again. I followed.

The pain faded after a few steps, replaced by the horrible cold of the wet path.

Behind us, one of the men shouted something I couldn't understand. Then a vehicle door slammed.

The engine revved. They were moving again. The worst part was that we couldn't simply run in a straight line.

The village was somewhere ahead and to our left. I knew that much. But the path twisted around pools of water and patches of soft ground, sometimes taking us away from where we wanted to go.

Every time it curved, I wanted to cut across the grass. Just a few metres. Just enough to save time.

Then I'd remember the mud closing around my legs. And the feeling of my boots being pulled off my feet. And I'd stay exactly where Clem was leading me.

We reached a fork. Clem stopped so suddenly that I almost ran into her.

"Which way?" I gasped.

She looked left.

Then right.

For one horrible second, she seemed uncertain.

"Clem?"

"Hang on."

The engines were getting louder.

"Clem!"

"LEFT!"

She turned sharply. I followed.

The path dropped down a little, crossing a narrow strip of gravel between two shallow channels. Water glimmered on either side.

"Careful!" she shouted.

I slowed. My socks slid over the wet gravel. I could feel every stone.

"Ow, ow, ow!"

"Nearly across!"

I reached the other side and scrambled up the small rise. Clem caught my hand and helped me onto firmer ground.

"Good?"

I nodded, breathing hard.

"Yeah."

She looked behind us. Then her face changed.

"Down!"

She pulled me towards the grass. We crouched. A powerful beam of light swept across the marsh behind us.

It passed over the path we'd just crossed.

Then moved slowly towards us.

I dropped flat onto my stomach. The grass was wet against my face. Clem lay beside me. Neither of us moved. The beam passed over our heads.

For a moment, everything around us was white. The grass. The mist. The edge of Clem's coat. I squeezed my eyes shut.

Please.

Please keep moving.

The light stopped. I held my breath. A man's voice carried across the marsh.

"CAN YOU SEE THEM?"

Another voice answered.

"NOT FROM HERE!"

The beam moved back. I pressed myself lower.

My heart was thumping so hard I was convinced they could hear it. Then the light swung away.

An engine revved. The headlights moved further along the distant track.

Clem lifted her head.

"Come on."

I stared at her.

"Already?"

"Yes."

"What if they come back?"

"They will if we stay here."

Fair point. I pushed myself up.

My hands were covered in mud. My coat was soaked along the front. And my socks were now so wet that I could feel the fabric sliding around my feet.

Clem helped me stand.

"Ready?"

I nodded.

She looked at my feet.

"Sorry."

I blinked.

"What?"

"About your boots."

I almost laughed.

"Clem, I think we've got bigger problems."

"Yeah."

She gave me a quick smile.

"Come on."

We ran again. I was beginning to hate running. I'd never particularly liked it, but tonight had confirmed that it was an absolutely dreadful activity.

Especially in socks. Especially in November.

Especially when being chased by men who probably had vehicles, radios and perfectly adequate footwear.

The path climbed onto slightly higher ground. The surface changed from gravel to packed earth, and for a few wonderful seconds, running became easier.

My feet still hurt, but at least there weren't stones stabbing me with every step. I managed to catch up with Clem.

"How far?"

"To the village?"

"Yeah!"

"Still a way!"

"How much of a way?"

"Ten minutes, maybe!"

I stared at her.

"TEN?"

"If we keep moving!"

I wanted to cry.

Ten minutes. I could barely imagine running for another ten seconds. My lungs hurt. My legs were shaking and my feet were freezing. And somewhere behind us, engines were roaring through the darkness.

But Clem was still running. So I kept going.

The mist grew thicker as we moved away from the work area. At first, I thought that might help us. If we couldn't see the men, perhaps they couldn't see us. Then I realised I could barely see Clem. She was only a few metres ahead, but her dark green coat kept disappearing into the grey.

"Clem!"

"Here!"

"Slow down!"

She did.

I caught up.

"Sorry," she said.

"Don't leave me!"

"I won't."

She reached for my hand.

I grabbed it.

Her fingers were cold, but her grip was firm.

We continued together.

The path curved around a patch of reeds. I could hear water moving somewhere nearby. Not much really, just a quiet trickling sound. But it made me nervous. Everything made me nervous now. Every dark patch. Every puddle. Every little change in the ground.

I kept staring at my feet, terrified of stepping off the path again. Clem noticed.

"Look ahead as well," she said.

"I am."

"You're staring at the ground."

"Because the ground tried to eat me!"

She laughed breathlessly.

"Fair enough."

We reached another bend and Clem slowed. I could hear an engine approaching from the right. Not behind us. To the right.

She stopped.

"Oh, no."

"What?"

"There's a track over there."

I looked. Through the mist, a pair of headlights appeared. They were moving along a road that seemed to run roughly parallel to our path.

The vehicle was close enough now that I could hear the tyres crunching over gravel. It looked like a four-wheel drive. A dark one. I couldn't make out the colour. The headlights swept across the marsh, illuminating a patch of reeds and a shallow pool.

Then they turned. Towards us.

"Clem..."

"I know."

The vehicle slowed.

For a second, I thought it was going to stop. Then it continued along the road. The headlights moved away.

I let out a breath.

"They didn't see us."

"Maybe."

We waited until the vehicle disappeared behind the mist. Then Clem pulled me forward.

"Quick."

We ran.

My feet were becoming a serious problem. The socks were slipping around my heels, and every time I landed on gravel, pain shot through my soles. I tried running on the balls of my feet. That helped for about five steps.

Then I stepped on another stone.

"Ow!"

Clem looked back.

"Again?"

"YES!"

She stopped. I nearly collided with her.

"Let me see."

"There's no time!"

"Just a second."

She crouched and shone her torch at my feet.

Both socks were filthy.

One had torn near the heel.

The other was wearing through at the toes.

There was a dark mark on the sole of my right foot.

Clem frowned.

"You're bleeding."

I looked down.

"Oh."

It wasn't much. At least, I didn't think it was. Hard to tell with all the mud.

"Can you walk?"

"Yes."

"Run?"

I hesitated.

"Probably."

She looked towards the distant engine noise.

Then back at me.

"Right. We'll go as fast as you can."

I shook my head.

"No. We have to run."

"Maya..."

"We have to."

She looked at me for a moment.

Then nodded.

"Okay."

She stood. I took a breath.

And we started running again.

The next section of path was worse. Much worse. It was narrow, uneven and bordered by dark water on one side. On the other, the ground sloped into a wide patch of mud. Clem slowed immediately.

"Single file."

I followed.

"Don't rush this bit."

I almost laughed.

"Really?"

"Seriously."

"I know!"

She moved carefully along the path. I watched exactly where she put her feet.

Left. Right. Left. Right. Every step mattered.

The engines were still audible, but I forced myself not to look back. I couldn't. Not here. Not with the mud waiting on either side.

The path curved. Clem followed it. I followed her.

A torch beam swept across the mist behind us. I heard a shout. My whole body wanted to run. But Clem was walking.

Carefully. Deliberately. And I knew why. I kept my eyes on her boots. One step. Another.

And another. Then we reached firmer ground.

"Now!" she said.

And we ran. I don't know how long we kept going. Time had stopped making sense. It might have been five minutes. It might have been fifteen. All I knew was that we were moving through darkness, following a narrow path while engines roared somewhere behind us.

Sometimes the noise faded. Sometimes it grew louder. Every time it did, my stomach tightened.

At one point, we heard men shouting to one another. At another, a vehicle seemed to be travelling along a road somewhere beyond the reeds. But they couldn't reach us directly.

The marsh kept getting in their way.

Which was probably the only reason we hadn't been caught already.

Clem knew where to go. The men, apparently, didn't. At least not on foot. And the roads didn't lead everywhere. I clung to that thought. It was the only comforting thing I had. Then I saw something familiar.

A weathered wooden post. The one we'd stopped beside that afternoon. I almost cried.

"Clem!"

"I see it!"

"That's the post!"

"Yep!"

"We're nearly back!"

"Nearly!"

I could have hugged it. The stupid old wooden post. I'd never been so pleased to see a piece of rotten wood in my life.

Then we ran past it.

The path widened slightly. The ground became firmer. And somewhere ahead, through the mist, I could see a faint orange glow. Streetlights. The village.

"Oh, thank God."

Clem glanced back at me.

"Not far now."

I nodded. I couldn't speak. My lungs were burning. My feet hurt so much I was barely aware of the cold anymore. But I could see the lights.

Actual lights.

Not the strange moving ones in the marsh. Not the floodlights at CES. The ordinary streetlights near the

village. I wanted to run straight towards them. Instead, Clem suddenly grabbed my arm.

"Wait!"

I stopped.

"What?"

She was looking back towards the marsh.

I followed her gaze.

The engines had grown louder again. Very loud. A pair of headlights appeared through the mist behind us.

Then another.

They were moving quickly along a road that ran towards the village. For a moment, I thought they were coming straight at us. I stepped backwards.

"Clem..."

She looked from the headlights to the path ahead.

Then back again.

"They're going round."

"What?"

"Trying to get ahead of us."

I stared at her.

"Can they?"

"There's a road that comes out near the old drainage cut."

"Where's that?"

"Between here and the village."

My stomach dropped. The headlights disappeared behind the reeds. The engines roared. They were moving fast. Much faster than we could.

Clem took my hand.

"Come on!"

We ran again. My feet slapped against the cold ground. I could barely feel my toes and every step hurt. But the village lights were ahead. And the engines were behind. And there was absolutely no way I was going to let those men catch us now.

Not after the mud. Not after losing my boots.

Not after everything.

We rounded another bend and the path began to slope down towards the drainage cut. Clem was still holding my hand. I could hear the engines moving somewhere to our right.

Closer.

Closer.

Then a sudden burst of headlights lit up the mist ahead of us. Clem stopped dead. I almost ran into her.

For a second, neither of us moved. The light was coming from beyond the drainage cut. Exactly where we needed to go.

Clem looked at me. Then towards the headlights. Then back along the path. Her face was pale.

"Shit," she whispered.

I stared at the lights. The village was so close. And now there were men between us and home.

Chapter Thirty-One

"Back!" Clem shouted.

I turned and we ran along the path we'd just come from, away from the headlights and the village lights beyond them. Which seemed like an absolutely terrible idea.

"Clem! We're going the wrong way!"

"I know!"

"Then why are we going this way?"

"Because they're over there!"

Fair point.

We reached a bend, and Clem pulled me off to the left, onto another narrow path that ran behind a bank of tall grass.

I followed her, trying not to look down at my feet. My socks were practically falling apart now. Every step was horrible. I could feel stones, bits of gravel and cold, wet earth through the fabric. But at least the ground was firm. And at least I was moving. That was something.

Behind us, the engines slowed. Then stopped. A car door slammed. I nearly screamed.

"They're getting out!"

"Keep going!"

We ran.

The path curved sharply, taking us around a wide patch of reeds. For a moment, the bank hid us from the headlights. Then Clem stopped. I nearly collided with her.

"What?"

She put a finger to her lips.

We listened.

The engines were still running, but I couldn't hear footsteps.

Then a man's voice carried across the marsh.

"THEY WENT THIS WAY!"

Another voice answered. I couldn't make out the words. Clem looked towards the village. My gaze followed hers. The streetlights were visible through the mist, glowing orange above the low roofs. We were so close.

I could practically imagine the warmth of our kitchen. Mum sitting at the table with her laptop. Dad making tea. The stupid little clock on the wall that ticked far too loudly. I wanted to be there more than anything.

"Come on," Clem whispered.

She turned towards the village. I followed.

We reached the wider gravel path that led back towards the houses. I almost cried with relief. No more narrow strips of ground between muddy pools. No more grass hiding things that might swallow my legs. Just gravel. Ordinary, horrible, painful gravel.

"Ow!"

Clem glanced back.

"Sorry."

"Not your fault."

"Nearly there."

I nodded. My lungs hurt too much to speak. My feet hurt. Everything hurt. But the village was ahead.

We ran past the first low stone wall. Then a cottage with a little wooden gate. Then another. The streetlights made everything look strangely normal. As though nothing had happened. As though we hadn't just watched a company dumping waste underground. As though men weren't chasing us. As though I wasn't running through the village in wet socks with mud all over my clothes.

I looked towards the houses. Most of the windows were

dark. A few had curtains drawn with lights glowing behind them. There was nobody outside. Not a single person.

"Where is everyone?" I gasped.

Clem looked at me.

"It's late."

"I know, but..."

I glanced towards the pub. We were too far away to see it properly. Perhaps there were people there. Perhaps someone could help.

"Could we go to the pub?"

Clem shook her head.

"Too far round."

"The shop?"

"Closed."

"Someone's house?"

She didn't answer immediately.

We kept running.

Then she said, "Maybe."

I looked at her.

"Maybe?"

"Don't know who'd answer quickly."

I stared at the dark cottages. She was right. It was late on a Friday night. Most people were probably in bed.

And even if we knocked on someone's door, what then? We'd have to explain. They'd have to believe us. They'd have to find a phone. And the men might catch up before any of that happened.

I looked towards the streetlights again. They seemed so welcoming. So safe. But they weren't really protecting us from anything. They just made us easier to see.

A vehicle engine roared somewhere behind the houses. Clem looked back.

"Shit."

"What?"

"They've got onto the village road."

I turned. Through a gap between two cottages, I saw headlights moving along a lane. Fast. Too fast for the narrow road.

"They're coming!"

"Yeah."

I looked ahead. The streetlights suddenly seemed much too bright. If we stayed on the main road, they'd spot us immediately. I grabbed Clem's arm.

"We can't stay here!"

"I know."

She looked around.

Then she pulled me towards a narrow passage between two stone walls.

"This way."

We ran into the darkness. The passage was barely wide enough for two people. Clem went first and I followed, trying to keep my feet on the smoother stones in the middle.

My torch was still in my hand, but I didn't dare switch it on. The streetlight behind us provided enough light to see the ground.

We came out into a little lane behind the cottages. There were gardens on one side and a low hedge on the other. A washing line stretched between two posts. Someone had left a plastic garden chair outside. It all looked so ordinary that I almost laughed.

People were sleeping in these houses. Probably

dreaming about normal things. Work. School. What to have for breakfast.

And here we were, sneaking past their gardens while men hunted us through the village.

"Where are we going?" I whispered.

Clem looked ahead.

"Your end of the village."

"My house?"

"Near it."

"Why not just go inside?"

She hesitated.

"We might."

I stared at her back.

"Might?"

"Depends if they're following."

I looked over my shoulder.

The headlights had disappeared.

But I could still hear the engine. It sounded as though it was moving slowly now. Searching.

We reached another lane. I recognised it immediately. My house was just around the corner. My actual house. I felt a ridiculous rush of happiness.

"That's our road!"

"I know."

"Come on!"

I started to move ahead, but Clem caught my sleeve.

"Wait."

I stopped.

She looked towards the road.

There was a streetlight near the corner, illuminating the stone wall and the little patch of pavement outside our house. Our front windows were dark. Except for the kitchen.

A faint light was glowing behind the curtains. Mum or Dad must still be awake. My chest tightened.

"They're home," I whispered.

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

"Let's go in."

She looked behind us.

The engine noise was getting louder.

Then headlights swept across the far end of the lane.

Clem pulled me back into the shadows.

"Not yet."

I stared at her.

"What?"

"They're still looking."

"So?"

"If they see us go into your house..."

She didn't finish. She didn't need to. I looked towards our front door. I imagined the men stopping outside. Knocking.

Or worse. Mum opening the door. Dad coming downstairs. Neither of them having the slightest idea what was happening.

I felt sick.

"They wouldn't..."

"I don't know," Clem whispered.

I looked at her.

She looked frightened again.

Not panicking.

Just frightened.

And that was enough.

I nodded.

"Okay."

We waited until the headlights moved away.

Then Clem grabbed my hand.

"Come on."

We ran across the road. Straight past my house. I turned my head as we passed. The kitchen light was still on. For one second, I thought I saw someone moving behind the curtain. Mum, perhaps. Or Dad. I wanted to shout. I wanted to run up the path and bang on the door.

But Clem was pulling me along, and I knew she was right. We couldn't lead those men straight to my parents. So I kept running.

Past the garden wall. Past the little gate. Past the place where Dad had planted some bulbs the previous weekend. Then the house was behind us. I felt a

horrible little ache in my chest. We'd been so close.

"Where are we going?" I whispered.

Clem didn't answer immediately.

She was looking towards the end of the lane. Beyond the last houses, the ground sloped gently towards a narrow tidal cut. I remembered seeing it during one of my walks with Dad. A strip of water that ran inland from the marsh, with muddy banks and a few small boats tied up along the edge.

There were several wooden sheds down there. Some looked like storage buildings. Others were little boathouses.

Clem pointed.

"Down there."

I stared.

"The water?"

"The boathouses."

"Why?"

"Somewhere to hide."

I looked back towards the village.

"Can't we just call someone?"

"With what?"

"My phone."

"No signal."

"Someone must have internet!"

"Maybe. But we've got to find somewhere safe first."

I hated that she was right. Again. I was beginning to think being right was one of her more annoying habits.

We left the lane and followed a narrow track downhill. The gravel was rougher here. I winced with every step. Clem noticed.

"Nearly there."

"You keep saying that."

"Because we are."

"That's what you said about ten minutes ago."

She smiled faintly.

"Different nearly."

I almost laughed. Then I stepped on another sharp stone.

"Ow! Bloody hell!"

Clem stopped.

"Can you manage?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She looked at my feet.

"You're going to need new socks."

"New feet, preferably."

She gave me a quick smile. Then we continued. The cut appeared ahead of us. It was wider than I'd remembered. Dark water lay between steep muddy banks, reflecting a few distant lights from the village.

Several small boats were moored along the edge. They moved gently against their ropes. I could hear the quiet knocking of wood against wood. The tide must have been coming in.

There was a damp, salty smell in the air. Not the horrible chemical smell from the marsh. Just ordinary sea air. I was ridiculously grateful for it.

Clem led me towards a row of wooden buildings.Most were small and weathered, with peeling paint and corrugated roofs. One had a blue door. Another had a broken window.

The largest stood a little apart from the others, close to the water. It was made of dark wooden boards, with a sloping roof and a wide door facing the cut. Clem headed straight towards it.

"Here."

I stared.

"What is it?"

"Old boathouse."

"Whose?"

"Dunno."

"Very reassuring."

She ignored me.

The door was held shut by a simple metal latch. Clem tried it. It rattled. Then lifted.

The door opened with a long, horrible creak. We both froze. I looked over my shoulder. The village was quiet. No headlights. No voices. Just the distant hum of an engine somewhere beyond the houses.

Clem pushed the door open a little further.

"Come on."

I followed her inside. It was dark. Completely dark.

And it smelled of old wood, damp rope and something faintly fishy. Clem closed the door behind us and for a moment, I couldn't see anything.

Then she switched on her torch, keeping the beam pointed at the floor.

The boathouse was bigger than I'd expected. There were shelves along one wall, filled with old tins, coils of rope and bits of equipment I didn't recognise. A small wooden boat sat upside down on two supports.

There were fishing nets hanging from hooks. A stack of plastic crates stood near the far wall. The floor was made of rough wooden boards, with gaps between some of them. Through those gaps, I could hear water moving underneath.

I stared down.

"Are we over the water?"

"Partly."

"Lovely."

Clem smiled faintly.

"Don't fall through."

I looked at her.

"You're enjoying this."

"Not particularly."

She moved towards the far wall and crouched behind the upside-down boat.

"Here."

I followed. The floorboards were cold beneath my socks. But at least they were dry. Mostly. I lowered myself beside her. For the first time in what felt like hours, I stopped moving.

I was exhausted. Absolutely exhausted. My legs were shaking, my feet hurt, and my coat was soaked and muddy. My trousers were cold and damp - a miserable reminder of what had happened earlier.

And I was pretty sure I'd lost most of the skin from the bottom of my right foot. I leaned back against the wall.

"Oh, God."

Clem sat beside me.

"Yeah."

We looked at each other. Then, for some completely stupid reason, we both started laughing.

Not loudly. Just little breathless laughs. The kind you make when something has been so horrible that your brain doesn't quite know what else to do.

"I lost my boots," I whispered.

Clem nodded.

"Yep."

"In a swamp."

"Marsh."

"And we just ran through the entire village."

"Pretty much."

"In socks."

She looked down at my feet.

"Very fashionable."

I laughed again.

"Shut up."

She grinned.

Then the laughter faded. We sat quietly for a moment. I could hear water moving beneath the floor. Somewhere outside, a rope knocked against a wooden post. And beyond the boathouse, the village was silent. I looked at Clem.

"What do we do now?"

She didn't answer immediately.

She was listening.

Then she reached over and switched off her torch.

"First," she whispered, "we make sure nobody followed us."

I nodded and we sat in the darkness. And listened. At first, there was nothing. Just the water. The faint creaking of the building. My own breathing, which still hadn't quite returned to normal. Then, somewhere up the track, an engine slowed.

I froze.

Clem turned towards the door. The engine stopped and a car door slammed. Then another. I stared at her. She put a finger to her lips.

Outside, a man's voice said something. Too far away to understand. Another voice answered.

Footsteps crunched on gravel. Coming down towards the hut. Clem reached for my hand. I grabbed it. And we sat perfectly still behind the old wooden boat, listening as the footsteps came closer.

Chapter Thirty-Two

The footsteps stopped outside. I squeezed Clem's hand so tightly that she probably lost feeling in her fingers.

A man said something. Another answered. I couldn't make out the words, but they were close. Far too close. The wooden wall of the boathouse was the only thing separating us from them. I stared at the door.

Please don't open it.

Please don't open it.

There was a metallic clunk outside. I flinched. Clem squeezed my hand back. Then an engine started.

The sound was so sudden that I nearly jumped.

A vehicle moved slowly along the track, its tyres crunching over gravel. The men said something else. One laughed. Then their footsteps began moving away.

I held my breath until I couldn't anymore. When I finally let it out, it came in a shaky little rush. Clem leaned towards me.

"Think they're going."

I nodded.

I didn't trust myself to speak.

We listened as the engine grew quieter.

Then, finally, it disappeared.

"God," I whispered.

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

I leaned my head back against the wooden wall. My heart was still pounding. For a few moments, neither of us said anything.

Then I whispered, "Do you think they know we're here?"

"Don't think so."

"They came right down the track."

"Could've been checking the boats."

I looked towards the door.

"Or checking the boathouses."

"Yeah."

That wasn't comforting.

I rubbed my face with both hands.

"We can't stay here."

Clem looked at me.

"Where else are we going to go?"

I opened my mouth. Then closed it again. She had a point. Outside, the men had vehicles. They knew the roads. And they were looking for us. At least here, we were hidden. For now.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket. The screen lit up. Eleven forty-seven. No signal. Still. I stared at it.

"Nearly midnight."

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

"We've been out for over two hours."

"Feels longer."

"Feels like about three weeks."

She smiled faintly. I checked the little signal symbol again, as though it might have changed in the last five seconds. Nothing. I tried opening a message anyway. But it just sat there, refusing to send. I sighed.

"Useless."

"Save your battery."

I looked at the percentage.

Thirty-eight. Wonderful.

I switched the screen off. After a while, I realised I was shivering. Not just a little. Properly shivering. My wet clothes were starting to feel horribly cold, especially now that I wasn't moving.

My socks were still damp, and the floorboards beneath them weren't helping. Clem noticed.

"You're freezing."

"Bit."

"Your feet?"

I nodded.

"Can't really feel my toes."

She switched her torch on briefly and looked down.

My socks were an absolute disaster. The left one was mostly mud. The right one had a hole near the heel, and there was a dark stain where I'd cut my foot. Clem frowned.

"Those need to come off."

I stared at her.

"What?"

"Your socks. They're soaking."

"But then I'll be barefoot."

"Better than keeping wet socks on."

I looked down. She was probably right. I hated that she was always probably right. I pulled the socks off. They made unpleasant little squelching noises. Clem gave me a sympathetic look.

"Lovely."

"Don't."

She smiled.

I set them on the floor beside me, then immediately regretted it when my bare feet touched the cold boards.

"Oh, that's worse."

Clem looked around.

"Hang on."

She crawled towards the shelves and began examining the things stored there. I watched her torch beam move across coils of rope, old tins and plastic containers.

Then she found something. An old folded tarpaulin. She brought it back.

"Here."

She spread it over the floor beside the overturned boat. It smelled faintly of salt and old plastic. But it was dry. Mostly.

"Luxury accommodation," she said.

I smiled.

"Five stars."

"Sea view."

"En-suite?"

She glanced towards the dark water beneath the floorboards and shrugged.

"Sort of."

I laughed quietly.

We sat on the tarpaulin, with our backs against the wall. Clem pulled part of it over my feet. It wasn't warm, exactly. But it was better than nothing.

"What's the tide doing?" I asked.

Clem looked towards the water.

"Coming in."

"Can we get off the island?"

"Not now."

I stared at her.

"What?"

"The causeway'll be under."

"But we were going to the mainland."

"I know."

"So when can we cross?"

She thought for a moment.

"Not until the tide goes back out."

"When?"

"Morning, probably. Depends how high it is."

I stared at the darkness. Morning. That seemed impossibly far away.

"Can't we go another way?"

"Not on foot."

"There's no bridge."

"Nope."

I sighed.

"Of course there isn't."

Clem gave me a small smile.

"CES keeps promising one."

I looked at her.

"Not exactly feeling grateful to them right now."

"Me neither."

We sat quietly. The water beneath the boathouse made a soft slapping noise against the supports. I tried to picture the causeway. The narrow road we'd driven over when we first arrived. Water covering it. The island cut off from the mainland. I hadn't liked the causeway then.

Now I liked it even less.

"Do you think your dad's still awake?" I asked.

Clem shrugged.

"Probably not."

"Mine might be."

"Yeah?"

"He stays up late sometimes."

I looked at my phone again. Still no signal.

I wondered whether Mum and Dad had noticed I wasn't home. Of course they had. I'd told them I'd be back at a

reasonable hour. It was nearly midnight. There was absolutely nothing reasonable about that. Mum would be worried. Dad would be worried. They might even be out looking for me. I felt sick.

"Oh, God."

Clem looked at me.

"What?"

"My parents."

She nodded slowly.

"Yeah."

"They're going to be terrified."

"Probably."

I stared at the floor.

"I should've told them where we were going."

"Yeah."

I looked at her.

"Thanks."

She smiled faintly.

"Sorry."

I rubbed my forehead.

"I just thought we'd go out, look at the lights and come back."

"Me too."

"I didn't think we'd find..."

I stopped. Clem looked at me.

"The hole?"

I nodded.

"The rubbish. All of it."

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "Neither did I."

We sat quietly for a while. Each in our own thoughts I guess.

Sometime after midnight, we heard another engine. It came from the village road. At first, it was distant. Then it grew louder. Clem switched off her torch. We both went still. The vehicle moved slowly past the track leading down to the cut. For a moment, I thought it was going to continue. Then it stopped. I felt my stomach drop. A door opened. Footsteps. Gravel crunching.

I looked at Clem. She shook her head slightly. Don't

move. We waited. The footsteps came closer. Then stopped. A man coughed. I stared towards the door. There was a narrow gap between two boards, and through it I could see a faint patch of light moving across the ground outside.

A torch.

The beam passed over the wall. Then the door. I held my breath. The latch rattled. I nearly screamed.

Clem's hand found mine.

The latch rattled again.

Then stopped. A man muttered something. I couldn't hear what. For a moment, I was absolutely certain the door was about to open. I imagined the torch shining straight into our faces. The men seeing us. Taking my phone. Everything we'd done becoming pointless.

Then footsteps moved away. A car door slammed. The engine started. And the vehicle drove off.

I stayed completely still for another minute. Perhaps two. Then I whispered, "I think I might actually die of fright."

Clem let out a tiny laugh.

"Please don't."

"Trying not to."

"Good."

I looked at her.

"Did he try the door?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, God."

"Didn't come in."

"No."

I swallowed.

"But he could've."

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

We didn't say anything for a while after that. The hours passed very slowly. We heard engines several times. Sometimes they were close enough that I could make out the tyres on gravel. Sometimes they were distant, just a low rumbling somewhere across the island. Every time, we stopped talking. Every time, I wondered whether this would be the one that found us. But the engines always moved away again.

Eventually, the sounds became almost familiar. Not comforting. Never comforting. Just something I began

to recognise. A vehicle approaching. Slowing. Stopping. Moving away. Then silence.

Until the next one.

At some point, Clem pulled her knees up and rested her head against the wall. I was sitting beside her, wrapped in part of the tarpaulin. My feet were tucked underneath it. I was still cold. But at least I wasn't shivering quite so badly.

"Can I ask you something?" I whispered.

Clem turned her head.

"Yeah."

"Are we in serious trouble?"

She looked at me for a moment.

"With your parents?"

I almost laughed.

"Well, that too."

She smiled faintly.

Then she looked towards the door.

"I don't know."

I nodded.

I appreciated that she didn't pretend. It would have been easy for her to say everything was fine. That the men wouldn't hurt us. That we'd be home by breakfast. But she didn't.

She just sat beside me. And somehow, that helped more. I leaned my head against her shoulder. She didn't move away. After a moment, she rested her head lightly against mine. We sat like that for a while.

Listening to the water. Listening to the wind. Listening for engines. I must have dozed off. Not properly. Just for a few minutes. Because the next thing I knew, I was waking with a start.

My neck hurt. My legs were stiff. And I had absolutely no idea where I was. For one wonderful second, I thought I was in bed. Then I smelled the damp wood. And felt the cold floor beneath me. And remembered everything.

"Oh, God."

Clem stirred beside me.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She looked at me sleepily.

"All right?"

"Yeah."

She nodded. Then closed her eyes again. I checked my phone. Three seventeen. Twenty-one per cent battery. No signal. I sighed. The night was never going to end.

I tried not to think about what would happen in the morning. Would we be able to get across the causeway? Would the men still be searching? Would Mum and Dad be waiting at home, furious and terrified? Would anyone believe what we'd seen?

I thought about the video on my phone. The lorry. The CES logo. The waste disappearing underground. It was all there. Proof. Real proof. I touched the phone through my pocket. As long as we could get it to someone. That was what mattered.

I thought about Dad's birds. The empty eastern marsh. The way he'd been trying to work out why they'd disappeared. He'd been looking at numbers. Population changes. Migration patterns. And all the time, there had been people dumping waste beneath the ground.

I wondered how much damage they'd done.

How long they'd been doing it. Whether anyone else knew. I closed my eyes. I couldn't solve any of that tonight. First, we had to get off the island.

By the time the first grey light appeared through the

gaps in the wooden walls, I felt as though I'd been awake for a week. I checked my phone. Six fourteen. The battery was down to twelve per cent. I switched it off completely. Outside, the world was slowly becoming visible again.

The water in the cut was a dull grey. The boats moved gently against their ropes. Mist hung over the banks. And somewhere beyond the village, a bird was calling. Just one.

I listened to it for a moment. It was such an ordinary sound. After everything we'd heard during the night, it seemed almost strange. Clem was awake too. She was sitting with her knees pulled up, looking towards the door.

"Morning," I whispered.

She turned.

"Morning."

I smiled weakly.

"I can’t give this more than one out of five stars, I’m afraid." she muttered.

That made me smile and she smiled back.

"Sleep well?"

"Like a baby."

"Good."

"One that wakes up every ten minutes and thinks someone's going to murder it."

She laughed quietly.

"Yeah. Same."

We stayed where we were. Neither of us wanted to be the first to suggest going outside. The engines had become less frequent during the last hour. Perhaps the men had given up. Perhaps they'd gone back to work. Perhaps they were waiting somewhere. I had no idea.

The light grew stronger.

I could see Clem's face properly now.

She looked exhausted. Her hair was a mess, and there was still mud on her cheek. I wondered what I looked like. Probably worse. Much worse. I glanced down at my trousers. The mud had dried in patches. I tried not to think about the rest.

Clem noticed me looking. She gave me a small smile.

"Don't worry about it."

I looked up.

"What?"

She shrugged.

"Your clothes."

My face went warm.

"Oh."

She smiled.

"Seriously."

I nodded.

"Thanks."

Then she looked towards the door again. Voices. We both froze. They were coming from outside. Not distant voices from the village. Close voices.

Men.

Clem immediately lowered herself behind the overturned boat. I followed. The floorboards creaked beneath us. I winced. Outside, footsteps crunched on gravel. Two men were talking. I could hear them clearly now.

"...waste of bloody time," one said.

Another answered something I couldn't make out.

The first man sounded irritated.

"We've been at this all night."

Footsteps stopped. I stared at Clem. She was watching the door.

The second man said, "They can't have gone far."

"Course they can."

"What about the footprints?"

"What about them?"

"The ones near the path."

There was a pause. Then the first man gave a short laugh.

"Those footprints were kids. They're probably at home hiding under the bed right now."

I felt Clem's hand tighten around mine. The second man didn't answer immediately.

Then he said, "You reckon?"

"Yeah. Two stupid kids out where they shouldn't be. Scared themselves half to death when we shouted at them."

I stared at the wooden wall. He was talking about us. He thought we'd gone home. I felt a sudden, enormous rush of relief. Then the second man spoke again.

"Still, boss wants them found."

"Well, boss can come and look himself, then."

The first man sounded thoroughly fed up.

"We've checked every bloody road on this island."

"What if they saw something?"

There was a pause. Long enough that I stopped breathing.

Then the first man said, "Saw what? Some lorries working at night?"

The other didn't answer.

"Look, they'll have gone home. Their parents'll give them a bollocking, and that'll be the end of it."

I glanced at Clem. Her eyes were wide. We both knew it wasn't going to be the end of it. Not if we had anything to do with it.

The men started walking again. Their footsteps moved slowly past the boathouse. One of them stopped.

I heard him cough. Then spit onto the gravel. Lovely.

"Come on," the first man said. "Let's get back."

"Think they'll send us out again?"

"They can try."

The footsteps continued. A few seconds later, a car door slammed. Then another.

An engine started. We waited.

The vehicle moved away along the track. Its sound faded into the village. And finally, there was silence.

Clem stayed perfectly still for another minute. Then she slowly sat up. I looked at her.

"They think we've gone home."

She nodded.

"Yeah."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Very."

I let out a breath I felt as though I'd been holding all night. For the first time since we'd seen the men at CES, I felt something other than fear. Hope. A little bit, anyway.

I looked towards the door. The morning light was coming through the gaps now. The village was waking up. People would be making breakfast. Walking dogs. Opening the shop. Doing ordinary Saturday morning things.And somewhere beyond the island, there were

phones that worked.

Internet even. Police.

People who could actually do something about what we'd seen. I looked at Clem.

"We need to get to the mainland."

She nodded.

"Yeah."

I touched my phone through my pocket. The video was still there. Everything we'd seen. Everything we'd risked. I wasn't going to lose it now. Clem looked towards the water outside.

"First we need to find out when the causeway's clear."

I nodded.

"Right."

We sat quietly for another moment.

Then she looked at my bare feet. And smiled.

"Although we might need to sort those out first."

I looked down. Two filthy feet. One with a small cut. No socks. No boots. I sighed.

"Do you think the mainland has a shop that sells feet?"

Clem laughed.

"Probably."

"Good. I'll take two."

She grinned.

And for the first time all night, I actually believed we might get out of this.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Clem had been outside for about five minutes.

Which didn't sound like much, but when you were sitting alone in a dark boathouse, waiting for someone to come back, five minutes felt considerably longer.

I'd spent most of it listening. To the water. To the birds. To every little noise coming from the village. I was beginning to understand why people in films always looked so exhausted after spending a night hiding from someone. It wasn't just the running. It was the listening. Constantly listening. Wondering whether every sound meant someone was coming to get you.

I was sitting on the tarpaulin with my knees pulled up, trying to get some feeling back into my toes, when the door creaked open.

I jumped.

"Clem?"

"Yeah. It's me."

She slipped inside and closed the door.

Her hair was damp from the mist, and her cheeks were pink from the cold.

"Well?" I asked.

She crouched beside me.

"Almost time."

I stared at her.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Water's going down."

I sat up straighter.

"So we can cross?"

"Not quite yet. But soon."

I smiled. An actual smile.

Not the nervous sort I'd been producing all night.

A proper one.

"Oh, thank God."

Clem smiled back.

"Thought you'd like that."

"Like it? I might marry the causeway."

"Bit awkward. It's already attached to the island."

"Don't care. We can make it work."

She laughed and sat down beside me. The morning had become brighter while she'd been outside. Through the gaps between the wooden boards, I could see the grey water of the cut and the opposite bank. It was still misty, but not nearly as bad as during the night.

I could make out some of the boats now. A little blue one tied to a post. Another with a white hull and a faded red stripe. Everything looked so ordinary. I couldn't quite believe we'd spent the night hiding here. Or that there were men somewhere on the island who'd been searching for us.

I looked towards the door.

"Did you see anyone?"

Clem shook her head.

"Not really."

"Not really?"

"Old bloke walking a dog up by the lane."

"Did he see you?"

"Don't think so."

"What about CES?"

"Nothing."

I frowned.

"No cars?"

"Nope."

"No men?"

"Nope."

"Nothing?"

She looked at me.

"Maya, I did have a look."

"I know."

She smiled.

"Very thorough inspection."

"Good."

"Even checked behind a bush."

I gave her a look.

"You're hilarious."

"Thank you."

I leaned back against the wall. My legs were stiff, and my feet still hurt. I'd managed to pull my socks back on, although calling them socks was being generous. They were mostly holes and dried mud. Clem had inspected the cut on my right foot earlier and decided it wasn't too bad.I hoped she was right.

It certainly didn't feel particularly good.

"How far is the causeway from here?" I asked.

"Not far. Maybe ten minutes walking."

I looked at my feet.

"Twenty minutes for me."

She smiled.

"Probably."

"Could be thirty."

"We'll manage."

I nodded. Then I thought of something. Something so obvious that I couldn't believe I hadn't thought of it before.

"Oh, God."

Clem turned towards me.

"What?"

"The causeway."

"Yeah?"

I stared at her.

"That's where they'll be waiting."

She frowned.

"Who?"

"The men!"

Clem looked towards the door. Then back at me. For a moment, she didn't say anything. I could practically see the thought arriving.

"Oh."

"Exactly!"

She sat up straighter.

"Shit."

"Yes!"

We stared at each other. Then I covered my face with my hands.

"We're idiots."

Clem gave a small, unhappy laugh.

"Bit."

"We've spent all night thinking about getting to the mainland."

"Yeah."

"And there's only one road off the island."

"Yeah."

"And everyone knows when the tide goes out."

She nodded.

"Yeah."

I lowered my hands.

"So if they want to catch us, all they have to do is wait there."

Clem looked thoroughly annoyed with herself.

"Hadn't thought of that."

"Neither had I."

"Should've."

"Definitely should've."

We sat in silence for a moment.

Then I sighed.

"Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant."

I tried to think it through. The men knew we'd been in the marsh. They knew we'd run towards the village. They'd spent hours searching. And they knew we couldn't leave the island until the tide went out. Surely someone at CES would have worked that out.

It wasn't exactly complicated. I could work it out. And I'd just spent the night sitting in a shed with no shoes and no socks.

"What if they're already there?" I asked.

Clem looked at me.

"Could be."

"Waiting in a car?"

"Maybe."

"Watching everyone who crosses?"

She nodded slowly.

"Could be."

I stared at her.

"That's not helping."

"Sorry."

I rubbed my forehead.

"We can't just walk straight into them."

"No."

"But we have to get off the island."

"Yeah."

"So what do we do?"

Clem thought for a moment.

"Could wait."

"For what?"

"Until it's busier."

I considered that. People would be coming and going once the causeway opened. There might be cars. Deliveries. People going shopping on the mainland.

Perhaps the men wouldn't dare do anything with other people around.

"That's not a bad idea," I said.

Clem smiled faintly.

"Thanks."

"But what if they stop us?"

"They can't just stop everyone."

"Could pretend they're checking something."

"Maybe."

I sighed.

The more I thought about it, the worse it became.

"Do you think they know who we are?" I asked.

Clem looked at me.

"What do you mean?"

"Like, actually know. Our names."

She shook her head.

"Don't see how."

"Your dad works there."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean they know me."

"Could've recognised you."

"From that distance?"

I thought about the floodlights. The shouting. The torches. But it was very dark. We'd been a fair way

from the men when they spotted us. And we'd run almost immediately.

"I suppose not."

"Plus, they were looking for two kids," Clem said.

"That's what the bloke said."

"Yeah."

I remembered the voices outside the boathouse. Those footprints were kids. They're probably at home hiding under the bed right now. I frowned.

"He really thought we'd gone home."

"Sounded like it."

"But the other one said their boss wanted us found."

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

She looked at me.

"Because we saw what they were doing."

"But they don't know about the video."

"Hopefully."

I touched my phone through my pocket.

It was switched off now, saving the last little bit of battery. The video was still there. That was what mattered. I just had to get it somewhere useful.

"What if we went to the police here?" I asked.

Clem looked at me.

"Here?"

"On the island."

"There's no police station."

"Of course there isn't."

She smiled faintly.

"Could ask someone to call."

I thought about it. That had been the obvious thing to do last night. Go home. Tell our parents. Call the police. Except the internet was down, mobile reception was rubbish, and the men had been driving around the village looking for us. And now, with daylight coming, I wasn't sure whether going back to my house was any safer.

"What about CES's phone system?" I asked.

Clem raised an eyebrow.

"What about it?"

"They've got their own lines."

"Yeah."

"So technically, they could call the police."

She stared at me.

Then I realised what I'd said.

"Oh, God. Never mind."

Clem laughed.

"Wasn't going to suggest popping in and asking."

"Hello, yes, we've got a video of your illegal dumping. Could we borrow your telephone?"

She grinned.

"Please hold while we fetch the manager."

I laughed.

Then immediately felt guilty for laughing. Because it wasn't funny. Not really. But I was tired, frightened and cold, and making stupid jokes was considerably easier than thinking about what might happen if the men caught us.

Clem stood and moved towards one of the gaps in the

wall. She looked out. I watched her.

"What?"

"Nothing. Just checking."

I waited. She stayed there for a moment. Then moved to another gap.

"Still nobody?"

"Nope."

I frowned.

"That's weird, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Last night they were everywhere."

"Yeah."

"Cars. Men. Torches. Shouting."

She nodded.

"And now there's nobody."

"Maybe they've given up."

I thought about the conversation we'd overheard. One man had certainly sounded fed up. He'd practically said they were wasting their time. Perhaps he'd convinced

the others. Perhaps they'd decided we really were just two stupid kids who'd gone home.

"Maybe," I said.

Clem came back and sat beside me.

"Or they've gone back to work."

"At CES?"

"Yeah."

I looked towards the eastern side of the island. We couldn't see the factory from here. But I knew it was there. The big sheds. The fences. The lorries. And somewhere beyond them, hidden in the marsh, the enormous opening in the ground. I shivered.

"Do you think they're still dumping stuff?"

Clem shrugged.

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"Even after we saw them?"

"They might not know what we saw."

I considered that. The men had spotted us on the rise. They'd shouted. We'd run. Perhaps they'd assumed we were just trespassing. Perhaps they didn't know we'd been close enough to see the opening. Or that I'd filmed

everything. I hoped so. I really hoped so.

A vehicle passed along the road above the cut. We both stopped talking. I held my breath.

The engine sounded different from the ones we'd heard during the night. Smaller. Quieter. A normal car. It continued past without slowing. Clem looked at me.

"See?"

"See what?"

"Ordinary people."

I smiled weakly.

"Love ordinary people."

"Me too."

"Big fan."

A few moments later, we heard another vehicle. Then, somewhere further away, a dog barked. The island was waking up. It was Saturday morning. People were getting out of bed, making breakfast and probably complaining about the weather. And nobody had any idea what we'd seen. I found that strangely frustrating.

I wanted to tell someone. Immediately.

I wanted to burst into the shop and announce that CES

was dumping rubbish beneath the marsh.

I wanted to show everyone the video. I wanted Dad to see it. Mostly, I wanted someone older and sensible to take over. Someone who knew what to do. Because I was beginning to think we'd done quite enough for one night.

"Maybe we should go to your dad," I said.

Clem looked at me.

"Dad?"

"Yeah."

"He'll be worried."

"I know."

"Yours too."

I nodded. The thought made my stomach hurt. Mum and Dad must have spent the entire night wondering where I was. I couldn't imagine what they were thinking. Perhaps they'd called Clem's house. Perhaps Tom had gone looking for us. Perhaps everyone was searching.

I looked at Clem.

"Do you think they've reported us missing?"

She thought for a moment.

"Maybe."

"Oh, God."

"Probably."

I stared at her.

"You're really not helping."

She smiled apologetically.

"Sorry. But kids missing on the Mudpack usually leads to searching with boats. Because water."

I pulled my knees closer.

"I feel awful."

"Yeah."

"Not just physically."

"I know."

"I should've told them."

Clem nodded.

"Me too."

We sat quietly for a while.

Then she said, "We can tell them everything when we're safe."

I looked at her.

"Everything?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

I thought about the video. The men. The dumping. The chase. The mud. The boots. And the accident. I winced.

"Maybe not absolutely everything."

Clem smiled.

"Fair enough."

A little later, Clem went to the door again. She opened it just enough to look outside. I watched her. The morning light spilled across the floorboards.

I could see the tarpaulin, the overturned boat and the little pile of filthy socks and mud we'd left behind. It looked even less impressive in daylight. Clem stood there for a moment. Then closed the door.

"Still clear."

I nodded.

"Good."

She came back.

"The tide's going out properly now."

"So how long?"

"Not long."

I looked at her.

"Are we actually going to try?"

She sat down beside me.

"Think we have to."

I nodded slowly.

She was right.

We couldn't stay in the boathouse forever. And if the men really had given up, this might be our best chance. I thought about the causeway. The narrow road across the water. The mainland on the other side. Which meant safety. Internet. Police. All the things that suddenly seemed impossibly important.

Then I thought about the men waiting there. Mayhaps. Mayhaps not. We didn't know. I looked at Clem.

"What if they're there?"

She was quiet for a moment.

Then she said, "We'll have to be careful."

I nodded.

"Right."

She looked towards the door.

"But I haven't seen a single CES vehicle this morning."

"Neither have I."

"And those blokes last night sounded like they wanted to go home."

I thought about that. They really had. One of them had practically told his boss to do the searching himself.

Perhaps they'd all gone home. Perhaps nobody was looking anymore. Perhaps, for once, something was going our way. I smiled faintly.

"Maybe they've given up."

Clem smiled back.

"Maybe."

Outside, another ordinary car passed along the road. No shouting. No roaring engines. No torches sweeping across the marsh. Just a normal Saturday morning. I looked at Clem.

"Do you think we're being paranoid?"

She considered it.

"After last night?"

"Yeah."

She shook her head.

"No."

I nodded.

"Me neither."

We sat together in the quiet boathouse, listening to the water recede beneath the floorboards.

The tide was going out. The causeway would soon be open. And somewhere beyond it was the mainland, where we could finally show someone what we'd found. For the first time since the chase, there didn't seem to be anyone from CES nearby. Which was good. Obviously. But I couldn't quite stop wondering why.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Clem opened the boathouse door a few inches and peered outside. I stood behind her, trying not to put too much weight on my right foot.

"Anything?" I whispered.

She shook her head.

"Looks clear."

"Looks clear or is clear?"

She glanced back at me.

"Want me to go and ask everyone?"

"Very funny."

She smiled, then opened the door a little wider. Cold morning air rushed inside. It smelled of salt water and wet wood, which was a considerable improvement over the inside of the boathouse. I hadn't realised quite how horrible it smelled in there until the door opened.

We'd spent the night surrounded by damp fishing nets, old rope and what I suspected was a dead crab somewhere beneath the floorboards. I was not going to miss it.

"Come on," Clem whispered.

I followed her outside. The world looked almost offensively normal. It was a grey morning, with low clouds hanging over the island and a thin layer of mist drifting above the water. A few gulls were making a racket further along the cut. One of the little boats was knocking gently against its mooring. And somewhere in the village, a dog was barking.

Nothing about it suggested that two girls had spent the night hiding from men who'd been chasing them across the marsh. I looked towards the houses.

No cars. No men. No torches. Just a row of quiet cottages and the narrow lane leading back towards the village.

I let out a breath.

"Maybe they really have gone."

Clem looked around.

"Maybe."

She closed the boathouse door carefully behind us. The latch clicked into place. I flinched. She looked at me.

"Sorry."

"It's fine."

I was beginning to think I'd spend the rest of my life jumping whenever someone closed a door.

We started along the narrow track beside the cut. Clem walked ahead, keeping close to the wooden buildings. I followed.

My feet were an absolute nightmare. I'd put my socks back on before we left, but they were still stiff with dried mud and full of holes. The gravel pressed through them with every step. I tried walking on the smoother patches of earth beside the track.

That helped a little. Not much.

"Ow."

Clem looked back.

"All right?"

"Living the dream."

She smiled.

"Want to stop?"

"No."

"You sure?"

"If I stop, I'll never start again."

"Fair enough."

She slowed so I could catch up. I looked down at my feet.

"I can't believe I lost both boots."

"At least you didn't lose your legs."

"That's a very low standard for a successful evening."

Clem laughed quietly.

"Still counts."

I looked at her. Her hair was a mess, her coat was filthy and there was a little scratch on her chin that I hadn't noticed before. She looked exhausted. But she was still Clem. Still calm. Still making stupid jokes. I was ridiculously glad she was there. And I had a sudden and weird urge to kiss her. I shook my head and continued.

We reached the end of the row of boathouses. From here, the track followed the cut towards the wider stretch of water where it joined the tidal channel. Beyond that lay the route towards the causeway. The tide was definitely going out. Mud was appearing along the banks, dark and shiny beneath the grey morning sky.

The boats were sitting lower in the water, their ropes hanging at slightly different angles. I looked towards the mainland. I couldn't see much of it through the mist. Just a vague darker line in the distance. But it was there. And somewhere on the other side were working

phones and police officers. People who could actually do something.

I touched my phone through my pocket. Still there. The video. The photographs. Everything.

"How much longer?" I whispered.

Clem looked at the water.

"Shouldn't be long."

"Until we can cross?"

"Yeah."

I smiled.

"Good."

She glanced towards the track ahead.

"Let's get a bit closer and see."

We continued.

The ground became firmer as we moved away from the boathouses. There were patches of gravel mixed with packed earth, and the track widened enough for us to walk side by side.

I was just beginning to think things might actually be all right when Clem suddenly stopped. I nearly walked into her.

"What?"

She put a finger to her lips. I froze. Then I heard it. Voices. Men talking. Not shouting. Just ordinary conversation. Somewhere ahead.

Clem gently took my arm and pulled me towards a low wooden fence beside the track. We crouched behind it. I looked at her. She pointed towards the water. I leaned forward slightly. There were two men standing further along the shore. Perhaps thirty or forty metres away. One was wearing a dark jacket and jeans. The other had a navy coat and a baseball cap.They were standing near a small concrete landing, looking out towards the tidal channel. One had a paper cup in his hand. The other was smoking. They looked completely ordinary. Which somehow made them more frightening.

I couldn't see any CES logos. No reflective jackets. No hard hats. Just two men having a conversation on a Saturday morning. I leaned towards Clem.

"Do you know them?"

She shook her head.

"Don't think so."

"Could just be locals."

"Could be."

I looked again. The man with the cup said something.

The other laughed. For a moment, I wondered whether we were being ridiculous. Perhaps they were fishermen. Perhaps they were waiting for the tide. Perhaps they were just two blokes having a chat. Then the man in the baseball cap spoke again. And I heard the word CES.

I went completely still.

Clem looked at me. She'd heard it too. We crouched lower behind the fence. The wind was coming towards us from the water, carrying their voices surprisingly clearly.

"...not going to find them standing around here," the man with the cup said.

The other took a drag from his cigarette.

"That's not what we're doing."

"Feels like it."

"We've got instructions."

"Yeah, well, so has everyone else."

I looked at Clem.

She was watching the men. The one with the cup sighed.

"Whole bloody island, and we're supposed to find two kids."

My stomach dropped. Two kids. Us. They were talking about us. I lowered myself a little further. The man in the cap looked towards the village.

"They're checking the houses."

"What, all of them?"

"That's what I heard."

The other man gave a short laugh.

"Good luck with that."

"Teams going round. Asking questions. Seeing if anyone's got a couple of kids who came home late."

I felt cold all over. Clem turned towards me. Her face had changed. She'd understood exactly what that meant. They hadn't given up. Not even close. The man with the cup shook his head.

"That's going to take forever."

"Not our problem."

"Bet half the island tells them to piss off."

"Probably."

He laughed. Then took another sip from his cup. I stared at the fence in front of me. They were searching the houses. All of them. Not just the roads. Not just the

marsh. The houses. My house. Clem's cottage.

I imagined someone knocking on our front door. Mum answering. A man asking whether her daughter had been out last night. Whether she'd come home. Whether she'd been near CES. My stomach tightened.

What if Mum told them I was missing? What if she told them about Clem? What if they worked out who we were?

I looked at Clem. She was staring at the men, but I could see the worry in her face. Her dad. Tom. He worked at CES. If anyone came to his cottage asking questions, he'd probably know them. Or they'd know him. I wanted to say something. Anything. But I didn't dare make a sound. The man in the cap flicked ash from his cigarette.

"Anyway, they can't get off the island."

The other man shrugged.

"Not yet."

"Exactly."

He nodded towards the tidal channel.

"Only one way across once the water drops."

I felt Clem go very still beside me.

The man continued.

"And nobody's getting over here without us knowing about it."

I stared at him. There it was. The exact thing we'd been worrying about. They knew. Of course they knew. The causeway. The tide. The fact that anyone trying to leave the island would have to cross at the same place.

It was obvious. So obvious.

And we'd been sitting in the boathouse hoping the men had gone home. I felt like an idiot. The man with the cup looked towards the channel.

"Suppose they could've got a boat."

"From where?"

"Dunno. One of these."

He gestured towards the moored boats.

The other man shook his head.

"Two kids? In the dark? With that tide?"

"Fair point."

"Besides, we'd have heard about it."

The man with the cup nodded.

"Yeah."

He finished his drink and crushed the paper cup in one hand.

"Still reckon they're hiding at home somewhere."

"Maybe."

"Or their parents have sent them to bed without supper."

The man in the cap laughed.

"Well, we'll know soon enough."

I looked at Clem. She was biting her lower lip. I'd never seen her do that before. I leaned closer.

"They're waiting for us," I whispered.

She nodded.

"Yeah."

"And they're checking houses."

Another nod.

I stared at her.

"What do we do?"

She didn't answer. Instead, she looked towards the men. Then towards the boathouses behind us. Then out

across the water. I could see her thinking. Trying to find another way. But there wasn't another way. Not an easy one. We were on an island. The causeway was the only proper road to the mainland.

And the men knew it.

I looked towards the distant shore. It seemed so close. Almost close enough to touch. Yet we couldn't get there.

Not without walking straight past the people looking for us.

The man with the cup started walking slowly along the concrete landing. I ducked. Clem pulled me lower. We crouched behind the fence, barely breathing. His footsteps scraped against the gravel. For a moment, I thought he was coming towards us.Then he stopped.

"How long are we supposed to stay here?"

The man in the cap answered.

"Until we're told otherwise."

"Brilliant."

"Could be worse."

"How?"

"Could be out knocking on doors."

The other laughed.

"True."

They continued talking, but their voices were quieter now.

I couldn't make out every word. Something about a supervisor. Something about the night shift.

Then the man in the cap said, "They want this sorted before the wrong people start asking questions."

I looked at Clem. She looked back at me. Neither of us needed to say anything. They weren't just looking for two kids who'd been trespassing. They were worried about what we'd seen. And they were determined to find us.

We stayed crouched for several minutes. My knees began to ache. My feet were freezing. A little trickle of cold water had worked its way through one of the holes in my sock, and I could feel it against my toes. I wanted to shift position.

I wanted to stand up. I wanted to run. But the men were still there. One had taken out his phone. He was looking at the screen while the other stared across the water. I wondered whether he was messaging someone at CES. Perhaps telling them everything was quiet. Perhaps asking for more instructions. I thought about my own phone. Twelve per cent battery when I'd switched it off.

Probably less now. And no signal, no internet.

And the only people with working communications seemed to be the very people we were trying to escape. Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. Clem leaned towards me.

"We need to go back."

I nodded.

"To the boathouse?"

"Yeah."

I looked towards the men. They were still talking. One had turned his back to us. The other was looking down at his phone. We could probably get away without being seen. Probably. I swallowed.

"Okay."

Clem pointed towards the track behind us.

"Stay low until we're round the corner."

I nodded. She moved first. Slowly. Carefully. Keeping behind the fence. I followed, trying not to make a sound. Which was surprisingly difficult when you were wearing socks instead of shoes.

Every little stone seemed to crunch beneath my feet. I winced. Clem glanced back.

I mouthed, "Sorry."

She shook her head. Keep going.

We reached the end of the fence. Beyond it, the track curved behind a low bank covered in grass. Clem slipped around it. I followed.

And suddenly the men were out of sight. I let out a breath. We kept moving until we reached the first boathouse. Then Clem stopped.

"Well," I whispered.

She looked at me.

"Yeah."

"That went well."

She gave a tired little laugh.

"Could've been worse."

"How?"

"They could've seen us."

I considered that.

"True."

We stood beside the wooden wall, hidden from the shore. I looked towards the village. The houses were

visible beyond the track. Some had smoke rising from their chimneys. A few cars were parked outside. Everything looked peaceful. But somewhere among those houses, CES men were going door to door. Looking for us.

And at the causeway, other men were waiting.

I looked at Clem.

"They're not going to let us leave."

She didn't answer immediately.

Then she said, "Not that way."

I stared at her.

"What do you mean?"

She looked towards the water.

Then back at me.

"There's got to be another way."

I followed her gaze. The cut stretched towards the tidal channel, its banks muddy and steep. A few little boats moved gently against their ropes. Beyond them, the water spread out towards the mainland. I thought about the man saying two kids couldn't have taken a boat in the dark. Perhaps he was right.

But it wasn't dark anymore. And the tide was going out. I looked at Clem. She was still studying the water. I wasn't sure what she was thinking. And for once, I didn't ask. Because I was beginning to suspect that whatever she came up with next was going to be another very bad idea.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Clem was still looking towards the water.

I watched her for a moment. She had that expression she sometimes got when she was thinking about something. Her eyebrows drawn together slightly, her mouth pressed into a straight line. Then she looked at me.

"Hang on."

"What?"

"My dad's boat."

I blinked.

"Your dad has a boat?"

"Yeah."

"Since when?"

"Since before I was born, I think."

I stared at her.

"And you're only mentioning this now?"

She gave me a look.

"Sorry. Been a bit busy."

"Fair."

She glanced towards the cut.

"It's an old rowing boat. He keeps it further up, near the trees."

I looked towards the water.

"Could we use it?"

"Maybe."

"To get to the mainland?"

She nodded.

"There's a landing on the other side."

I felt a sudden rush of hope.

"Seriously?"

"Yeah. Dad used to take me across sometimes when I was little."

"Then why didn't we think of that earlier?"

"Because we were trying not to get caught?"

"Also fair."

Clem smiled briefly.

Then she looked towards the shore again.

"We'd have to get to it first."

I followed her gaze. The two men were still somewhere beyond the boathouses, watching the tidal channel. And other men were apparently searching the village.

"Where is it?" I whispered.

"Further inland. There's a little landing where the cut bends."

"Can we get there without passing those men?"

"Think so."

I stared at her.

"You think so?"

She nodded.

"There's a way through the trees."

I looked towards the dark line of trees beyond the track. For the first time all morning, the idea of going somewhere other than the causeway didn't seem completely ridiculous.

A boat. An actual boat. Something that could take us off the island without walking straight past the men

waiting for us. I almost smiled. Then I remembered my feet.

"Oh, brilliant."

Clem looked down.

"Yeah."

"More walking."

"Afraid so."

I sighed.

"Couldn't your dad have parked it outside the boathouse?"

She grinned.

"I'll mention it to him."

We waited until the voices from the shore had faded, then slipped away from the boathouses. Clem led me along the back of the wooden buildings, keeping close to the walls. The ground was uneven here, with patches of grass growing between stones and old bits of gravel. I tried to step on the grass whenever possible. It was softer. And considerably less painful. But I couldn't always avoid the stones.Every few steps, something sharp pressed through my socks.

"Ow."

Clem glanced back.

"Sorry."

"Stop apologising."

"Sorry."

I looked at her.

She smiled.

I shook my head.

"You're impossible."

"Been told."

We reached the end of the buildings and stopped beside a low stone wall. Beyond it was a narrow strip of scrubby ground leading towards a little group of trees. Not a proper wood. Just a collection of old, twisted trees with bare branches and thick undergrowth beneath them.

Clem pointed.

"Through there."

I looked at the branches.

"Looks welcoming."

"Very popular with tourists."

"Five stars?"

"Six."

I smiled despite myself. Then we climbed over the wall. Well, Clem climbed. I sort of scrambled, caught my coat on a stone, nearly fell over and landed awkwardly on my sore right foot.

"Ow! Bloody hell!"

Clem caught my arm.

"Careful."

"That was careful."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Was it?"

"Compared with my usual standard, yes."

She laughed quietly. Then we moved into the trees. It was surprisingly dark beneath the branches. The morning sky was grey enough already, and the trees blocked what little light there was. The ground was covered in damp leaves, which felt wonderful compared with the gravel. For about ten seconds. Then I stepped on a hidden twig.

It snapped beneath my foot. I winced. Not just because it hurt. Because it was loud. Clem stopped immediately.

We listened. Nothing. She looked back.

"All right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Try to stay on the leaves."

"I was."

"Right."

She smiled faintly. We continued. The trees weren't very tall, but their branches spread out over the narrow track, creating a sort of tunnel. There were little gaps where I could see the water beyond.

The cut ran roughly parallel to us, hidden behind reeds and bushes. Every now and then, I heard the quiet movement of water against the bank.

Clem seemed to know exactly where she was going. I was grateful for that. Because I certainly didn't.

After a few minutes, I became painfully aware of my clothes. I'd been aware of them all night, obviously.

But while we were running from the men, I'd had more important things to think about. Now we were moving slowly, trying not to make noise. And there was nothing to distract me from how horrible I felt.

My coat was stiff with dried mud. My jeans were filthy- Cold and uncomfortable in a way that made me want to crawl out of my own skin. Every time I moved, the fabric rubbed against my legs. I tried not to think about it. Which, naturally, made me think about it even more. I wanted clean clothes. Desperately. A hot shower. Fresh underwear. Dry jeans. And boots.

Oh, God, I wanted boots. I'd never appreciated boots before. I'd always thought of them as something practical and slightly ugly that adults insisted you wear when the weather was horrible. Now I would have happily married a pair.

Any pair. Even Dad's ridiculous walking boots with the enormous soles. I looked down at my feet. My socks were barely recognisable. The left one had a large hole near the toes. The right one was torn at the heel. Both were covered in mud, and I could feel the cold ground through them with every step. My right foot hurt where I'd cut it.

Not terribly. Just enough to remind me about it constantly. I sighed.

Clem glanced back.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She looked at my feet.

"Still hurting?"

"Bit."

She stopped.

"Want to rest?"

I shook my head.

"No. Let's keep going."

She studied me for a moment.

Then nodded.

"Okay."

I appreciated that she didn't make a fuss. I really did. But I also wished she'd magically produce a pair of boots from her pocket. That would have been nice.

We came to a little clearing between the trees. Clem stopped and looked around.

"Should be just up here."

I stared at her.

"Should be?"

She smiled.

"Don't start."

"Just checking."

She pointed towards a narrow opening in the bushes.

"There's a path through there."

I looked.

It was barely visible.

Just a strip of flattened grass leading towards the water.

"How do you even know this exists?"

"Used to come here with Dad."

"When?"

"Years ago."

I gave her a look.

She laughed.

"Yes, Maya. When I was little."

"You're very confident about places you haven't visited since primary school."

"Well, they haven't moved."

"That's what you said about the marsh paths."

She looked at me.

Then at my feet.

"Fair point."

I smiled. We both knew I went off the safe path back then.

We continued. I was beginning to feel slightly better. Not physically. Physically, I felt like something that had been dragged out of a ditch. Which, to be fair, wasn't far from the truth. But mentally, I was starting to believe we might actually get away. The boat was a plan. A real plan. Not just running blindly through the marsh and hoping nobody caught us.

If we could reach it, we could row across to the mainland. Find somewhere with a phone. Call the police. Show them the video. Then someone else could deal with CES. Preferably someone wearing a uniform.

And proper shoes.

I liked that part. A lot.

I was just imagining the relief of handing my phone to a police officer when Clem suddenly stopped. So suddenly that I almost walked into her.

"What?"

She raised one hand.

I froze.

Then I heard it.

Voices.

Close. Very close.

"...down this way?"

A man's voice. Somewhere beyond the trees.

Another answered.

"Not yet."

I stared at Clem. She slowly lowered herself behind a thick bush. I followed.

The ground was damp, and my knees immediately got wet again. Wonderful. The voices came closer. I could hear footsteps on gravel. Not on our little path. Somewhere beyond the trees, nearer the lane. The first man spoke again.

"Thought they were checking the houses."

"They are."

"Then what are we doing out here?"

"Looking for anywhere they might've hidden."

I felt my stomach drop. Clem looked at me. Her eyes were wide. The men were searching here too.

Not just the houses. Not just the causeway. Everywhere. I crouched lower. A branch pressed against my shoulder. I didn't dare move it. The men were close enough now that I could hear one of them breathing. Or perhaps that was just my imagination. I wasn't sure anymore.

"There's a few sheds down by the water," one said.

"Been checked."

"All of them?"

"Supposedly."

There was a pause.

Then the first man said, "What about the old boats?"

The other gave a short laugh.

"What about them?"

"Could've hidden in one."

"Two kids hiding in a boat?"

"Why not?"

"Because they'd be bloody freezing."

I looked down at my filthy clothes. He had no idea. Absolutely no idea. The first man continued.

"Well, they were out in the marsh all night, weren't they?"

"Maybe."

"That's what they said."

"Yeah, and maybe they went home."

The other man sounded irritated.

"Look, we're checking. That's all."

Footsteps moved again. I held my breath. They were walking past us. On the other side of the trees. I could see movement through the branches. A dark jacket. A flash of blue fabric. Then nothing. I stared at the ground.

Please keep walking.

The men stopped. One of them coughed. Then I heard the click of a lighter. A moment later, the smell of cigarette smoke drifted through the trees.

I nearly groaned.

Of course.

Of course they'd stop for a cigarette. Right beside us. Why wouldn't they? It wasn't as though we had anywhere important to be. I glanced at Clem. She was crouched perfectly still, watching the gap between the

bushes. I wondered whether she was as frightened as I was. Probably. She just hid it better.

The first man spoke again.

"How many people have they got out?"

"Dunno. Quite a few."

"Seems a bit much for two kids."

"Boss is worried."

"About what?"

There was a pause.

Then the second man said, "You know what."

The first man didn't answer. I felt cold all over. They knew. Perhaps not exactly what we'd filmed. But they knew something had happened.

Something important enough to send people all over the island looking for us. The man with the cigarette sighed.

"Whole bloody place is awake looking for them."

"Pretty much."

I closed my eyes. That was exactly how it felt. Every road. Every house. Every path. Every little hiding place. People everywhere. Looking for us.

The island had seemed so quiet when we'd first arrived. So empty. I'd complained that there was nothing to do and nobody around. Now it felt as though there were people behind every wall and every tree. And all of them wanted to find us. I opened my eyes again.

Clem was watching me. She gave me a tiny nod. Stay still. I nodded back. The men finished their cigarettes. Or at least, I assumed they did. I heard something being crushed under a boot. Then footsteps.

"Come on," one said.

"Where next?"

"Further up the lane."

"Lovely."

Their voices began to fade. I stayed crouched. Clem stayed crouched. Neither of us moved until we couldn't hear them anymore. Even then, we waited. A full minute. Perhaps two. Finally, Clem leaned towards me.

"Think they're gone."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She looked towards the path ahead.

"We're close."

"To the boat?"

"Yeah."

I swallowed.

"Good."

She reached for my hand. I took it. Her fingers were cold. Mine probably were too. We stayed there for another moment.

Then I whispered, "Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you think there's anyone on this island who isn't looking for us?"

She considered it.

"Probably Mrs Pritchard."

"Who's Mrs Pritchard?"

"About ninety. Lives near the church. Doesn't like going out."

I almost laughed.

"Good for her."

"Yeah."

"Can we go and live with her?"

Clem smiled.

"Maybe later."

I shook my head. Then looked towards the opening in the bushes. The path to the boat was just ahead. Somewhere beyond those trees was our best chance of getting off the island.

I took a breath.

"Okay."

Clem squeezed my hand. "Ready?"

I nodded.

"Ready."

We stood carefully, trying not to disturb the branches. Then we slipped further into the trees, away from the lane and the voices, towards the water. I followed Clem, placing my sore feet as carefully as I could.

Every step hurt. Every sound made me flinch. And every few seconds, I found myself looking over my shoulder. The men had gone. For now. But I couldn't shake the feeling that the whole island was watching us.

And that somewhere, someone was getting closer.

Chapter Thirty-Six

The path through the trees became narrower. Clem pushed a branch aside and held it for me.

"Careful. There's a bit of a drop."

I looked down.

The ground fell away towards the water, perhaps half a metre below us. There were some old wooden steps built into the bank, although most of them were covered in moss.

"Those look safe," I whispered.

"Used to be."

"Comforting."

She smiled and stepped down first.

I followed, holding on to a tree trunk while I lowered my sore feet onto the first step. The wood was slippery and my socks were absolutely useless. I nearly went straight onto my backside. Clem caught my arm.

"Got you."

"Thanks."

"One more."

I managed the next step, then the last, and finally reached a narrow strip of firmer ground beside the cut.

I looked around. The water was much shallower here. Muddy banks sloped towards a little wooden landing, and a few small boats were tied up along the edge.

Most looked as though they hadn't moved in years. One was full of leaves. Another was lying upside down on the bank. Clem pointed towards the landing.

"That's it."

I followed her finger. A little green rowing boat was tied to a wooden post, sitting low in the water. It had a white stripe along the side and a pair of wooden seats.

I stared at it.

"That's your dad's?"

"Yep."

"It's tiny."

"It's a rowing boat."

"I know, but..."

I looked at the water beyond it.

Then back at the boat.

"Is it actually safe?"

Clem gave me a look.

"He's had it for years."

"That wasn't quite the question."

She smiled.

"It's fine."

I was about to ask whether it had ever sunk when she suddenly grabbed my sleeve.

"Down."

I crouched immediately.

"What?"

She pointed towards the landing. Then I heard them.

Voices.

Several voices. Coming from somewhere just beyond the boats. Clem pulled me behind a thick clump of bushes. We crouched on the damp ground. I could see part of the landing through the branches.

At first, I spotted two men standing near the water. Then another appeared. And another. There were at least five. Possibly more.

One was wearing a dark blue jacket with the CES logo on the chest. Another had a high-visibility vest over his coat. The others were dressed in ordinary clothes.

I stared at them.

"Oh, you've got to be joking," I whispered.

Clem didn't answer. She was looking at the men. One of them was holding a radio. Another was examining something on his phone. A third stood beside a white van parked on the track above the landing.

I hadn't seen the van through the trees. There was another vehicle behind it. A dark four-wheel drive. My stomach dropped. They were everywhere.

"...checked the boats?" one man asked.

"Most of them."

"Most?"

"There's a couple further along."

"Then check them."

The man with the radio sounded irritated. Someone else laughed.

"Want us to look under the water as well?"

"Just do what you're told."

I glanced at Clem. She was staring at her dad's boat. The little green one was only about twenty metres away.

Twenty metres. That was all. We could practically reach it. Except there were five men between us and it. Five men with radios and vehicles.

I wanted to scream.

One of the men walked towards the green boat. Clem stiffened beside me. He leaned over and looked inside. Then he pulled at the rope securing it to the post. For one horrible second, I thought he was going to untie it. Instead, he let go.

"Nothing in this one."

Another man called, "Check underneath."

The first man bent down and looked along the side. Then he straightened.

"Nothing."

I let out a tiny breath. The boat was still there. Still tied up. Still perfectly usable. And completely impossible to reach.

"Could wait until they leave," I whispered.

Clem shook her head.

"Too many."

"They might go."

"Maybe."

We watched the men.

One had opened the back of the van. Another was talking into his radio. They didn't look as though they were going anywhere. I looked towards the green boat again. It was so close. I could see a pair of oars lying across the seats. The paint was chipped near the bow. There was even a little red bucket sitting inside.

I could imagine us climbing in. Pushing away from the landing. Rowing across the channel. Getting to the mainland.

All we needed was about thirty seconds without anyone looking. But there was no way. Not with that many men. Not in broad daylight. Not with me limping around in ruined socks.

Clem looked at me.

"We can't."

I stared at her.

"What?"

"The boat. We can't get to it."

I knew she was right. I absolutely hated that she was right. Again.

One of the men started walking along the bank. Towards us. Clem immediately lowered herself behind the bushes. I followed. The ground was cold and damp beneath my knees.

The man came closer. I could hear his boots on the gravel. Then he stopped.

"Nothing down here!" he shouted.

Someone answered from the landing.

"Right. Come back."

He stood there for another moment. I stared at the mud between my hands. A small beetle was crawling over a leaf. I watched it move. One little leg after another. Completely unaware that I was about to have a nervous breakdown about a metre away.

Then the man turned. His footsteps moved back towards the landing. Clem leaned closer.

"We need to go."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She pointed towards the steps.

"Back the way we came."

I looked at the green boat one last time.

Then followed her.

Climbing the steps was worse than coming down. My right foot hurt every time I put weight on it. The wet socks slipped against the wood. And my legs were beginning to feel as though they'd simply had enough.

Clem climbed ahead and reached back to help me. I took her hand. She pulled me up the last step.

"Thanks."

"All right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

Which was a lie. A fairly obvious one. But I didn't have the energy to explain.

We slipped back into the trees. For a while, neither of us spoke. Clem led the way, pushing branches aside and choosing the quieter patches of ground. I followed. Step after step. My feet hurt. My legs hurt. My clothes were cold and filthy. And the one thing we'd thought might get us off the island had just disappeared as an option. Not literally. The boat was still there. Which somehow made it worse.

We reached a small clearing and stopped. Clem looked around, listening. No voices or engines here. Just the wind moving through the branches. She turned towards me.

"Need a minute?"

I nodded.

"Please."

I lowered myself onto a fallen tree trunk. The wood was damp, but I didn't care. I was past caring about damp. I was past caring about quite a lot of things.

Clem sat beside me. For a moment, we just listened to the wind. Then I looked at her.

"That's it, isn't it?"

She frowned.

"What?"

"We can't get off."

"Course we can."

"How?"

She didn't answer immediately. I stared at my feet. My socks were falling apart. The little cut on my right foot had started bleeding again. There was mud dried all

over my legs.

I wanted to go home. I wanted a shower. I wanted clean clothes and a warm bed.

I wanted Mum. I wanted Dad. I wanted someone to tell me what to do. And I was so tired of being frightened.

"I can't keep doing this," I said quietly.

Clem looked at me.

"Maya..."

"No, seriously."

I rubbed my face.

"We've been running around all night. Every time we think we've found a way out, there are more men."

She was quiet.

"They're at the causeway. They're at the boats. They're searching the houses. They're everywhere."

I looked towards the trees.

"And I can't even bloody walk properly."

Clem glanced at my feet.

"I know."

"I just want to go home."

My voice cracked slightly. I hated that. I looked away.

"I know we can't. I know they'd probably find us. But I just..."

I stopped. There wasn't really anything else to say. Clem moved a little closer. Her shoulder touched mine.

"Hey."

I looked at her.

"We're not giving up."

I gave a tired little laugh.

"Easy for you to say. You've got boots."

She looked down at her muddy boots.

Then back at me.

"True."

I almost smiled.

She nudged my shoulder gently.

"But we're not giving up."

I stared at her.

"How can you be so sure?"

She thought about it.

Then shrugged.

"Because we're not caught yet."

I looked at her.

She gave me a small smile.

"That's something."

I sighed.

"Not much."

"Still something."

We sat there for another minute.

Then Clem stood.

I looked up.

"What?"

She was looking through the trees towards the south.

"There's another way."

I stared at her.

"Another boat?"

"No."

"Please tell me it's a helicopter."

She smiled.

"Not quite."

"Disappointing."

She crouched in front of me.

"Listen. The causeway everyone uses is the main one. The road."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"But it's not the only way across."

I frowned.

"What do you mean?"

She pointed towards the mainland.

"There's loads of little causeways along this coast. Old paths across the mud. Some are just raised banks. Some have stones laid down."

I stared at her.

"Between the island and the mainland?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"People used them before the road was built. Farmers, fishermen, whoever."

I thought about the mudflats we'd seen from the car when we arrived. The enormous stretches of grey mud. The channels. The water. The places that looked solid until you stepped on them. I wasn't particularly keen on going anywhere near them again.

"Are they safe?"

Clem hesitated.

"Some are."

I gave her a look.

"That's not reassuring."

"I know."

She sat beside me again.

"But there's one further south. Dad showed me years ago."

I looked at her.

"Another one you haven't used since primary school?"

She smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

"Brilliant."

"Just listen."

I sighed.

"Okay."

"The main causeway goes straight towards the road on the mainland," she said. "That's where CES will be watching."

I nodded.

"Right."

"But the southern one comes out further along the coast."

"How much further?"

"Quite a bit."

I tried to picture it. The island. The mainland. The narrow stretch of water and mud between them.

"And we can walk across?"

"When the tide's low enough."

"Which it nearly is."

"Yeah."

I looked at her.

"But won't they just follow us?"

"Not directly."

I frowned.

"What?"

She pointed towards the trees, as though the mainland was visible through them.

"The southern crossing comes out on the other side of a tidal channel. There's no road straight across from the main causeway."

I stared at her.

"So?"

"So if they're waiting at the main road and see us heading south, they can't just drive straight towards us."

I thought about that.

"They'd have to go back along the mainland road?"

"Yeah. Follow the shoreline until they find a way round."

"And that takes longer?"

"Should do."

I looked at her. She was getting more animated now. Not excited exactly. But focused. As though she'd finally found something that made sense.

"And if we're already across..." I began.

"We can get somewhere with people."

"Or a phone."

"Exactly."

I sat up straighter. That actually sounded possible. Not easy. Not safe. But possible.

"How far is this other causeway?" I asked.

Clem looked south.

"Maybe half an hour from here."

I stared at her.

"Walking?"

"Yeah."

I looked at my feet.

Then at her.

Then back at my feet.

She winced.

"Sorry."

I let out a long sigh.

"Of course it is."

"We can go slowly."

"With men searching the whole island?"

"We'll stay off the roads."

I looked towards the trees.

"And go through more of this?"

"Some of it."

I closed my eyes. I was so tired. So cold. And I really, really wanted to stop moving. But I thought about the video on my phone. The men dumping waste. The lorries. The enormous hole in the ground. The things Dad had been trying to understand for months.

We couldn't just give up. Not now.

I opened my eyes.

"Are you sure this path exists?"

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

"And you're sure it goes to the mainland?"

"Yeah."

"And you're sure it's safe?"

She hesitated.

I stared at her.

"Clem."

"It's a proper old crossing," she said. "Not just walking over random mud."

I thought about that.

"Marked?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of?"

"There's posts. Or there used to be."

I gave her a long look.

She smiled apologetically.

"I know."

I sighed.

"You're going to get us killed."

"Trying not to."

"Appreciated."

A distant engine started somewhere beyond the trees. We both stopped talking. Clem stood and listened. The sound was coming from the north. Near the landing. Perhaps the men were leaving. Perhaps more were arriving. I didn't particularly want to find out.

Clem looked at me.

"We should move."

I nodded.

"Yeah."

I tried to stand. My legs protested immediately. I made a horrible little noise. Clem reached out.

"Here."

She helped me up and I stood for a moment, waiting for the stiffness to ease. Then I looked at her.

"Just so we're clear."

She raised an eyebrow.

"If this works, I'm never going for a walk with you again."

She smiled.

"Fair."

"Ever."

"Understood."

"Not even to the shop."

"Shame."

"Not even if you're buying chocolate."

She looked thoughtful.

"What if it's really good chocolate?"

I considered it.

"Depends."

She laughed. And somehow, despite everything, I found myself smiling too.

We started south.

Clem led us away from the cut and towards a narrow path running behind the trees. The ground was softer here, covered in grass and fallen leaves. My feet still hurt, but at least there were fewer stones. I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other. Not thinking about how far we had to go. Not thinking about the men. Not thinking about the mud. Just walking.

Clem glanced back.

"Doing all right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She slowed so we could walk together.

For a while, we moved in silence.

Then I looked at her.

"Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"How many of these causeways are there?"

She shrugged.

"Loads along the coast. Not all usable anymore."

"And people actually used to walk across them?"

"Yeah."

"Before cars?"

"Before the main road, anyway."

I thought about it. People crossing the mudflats. Carrying things. Walking between little islands and the mainland. Knowing exactly where to step.

It sounded terrifying. But then, so did pretty much everything at the moment. I looked south through the trees. Somewhere out there was another crossing. One the CES men might not be watching. One that could take us somewhere they couldn't reach quickly. I didn't know whether it would work. I didn't even know whether we'd be able to get there.

But for the first time since we'd found the men at the rowing boat, we had another plan.

And right now, that was enough to keep me walking.

Chapter thirty-Seven

The trees ended rather suddenly.

One moment we were walking along a narrow path between bushes and twisted branches, and the next we were standing at the edge of an enormous stretch of grey sand.

Beyond it, somewhere in the distance, was the mainland.

I stopped.

"Oh."

Clem looked back at me.

"Yeah."

I stared.

It didn't look anything like the causeway we'd driven across when we first arrived on the island. That had been a proper road. Narrow, admittedly, but solid, with tarmac and little marker posts along the edges.

This was different. Very different.

A strip of pale sand stretched away from us, curving slightly towards the distant shore. There were old

wooden posts at intervals, some leaning at odd angles, and shallow pools of water scattered across the surface.

In places, the sand was dark and wet.

In others, water covered it completely.

Beyond the strip on either side were wide expanses of mud, interrupted by little channels that caught the morning light.

I looked at Clem.

"That's it?"

She nodded.

"Yep."

"That's the causeway?"

"Old one."

I looked back at the sand.

"Are you absolutely sure?"

She gave me a tired little smile.

"Pretty sure."

I stared at her.

"Clem."

"Yes, Maya?"

"That's a beach."

"Sort of."

"With water on it."

"Yeah."

"And mud."

"Also yeah."

I folded my arms.

"Lovely."

We'd been walking for what felt like hours. In reality, it had probably been closer to forty minutes, but my feet had stopped keeping track of time. They were concentrating on hating me. Every step had become an argument between my brain and my legs.

My brain wanted to stop. My legs wanted to stop. My feet had submitted a formal complaint and were threatening legal action. The only reason I was still moving was that Clem kept going, and I couldn't bear the thought of being left behind.

Not that she would have left me.

She'd slowed down several times, checking whether I

was all right. And every time, I'd said yes. Which was becoming less convincing.

Now I stood at the edge of the sand, looking at the water stretching across the crossing. My socks were filthy, torn and damp. My right foot still hurt.

And the thought of walking across all that wet sand without boots made me want to sit down and cry.

"How far?" I asked.

Clem looked towards the mainland.

"Not sure exactly."

"Roughly?"

"Maybe a kilometre. Bit more, perhaps."

I stared at her.

"A kilometre?"

"Something like that."

"Across that?"

She nodded. I looked at the sand again.

"Can we not just swim?"

Clem smiled.

"Think you'd prefer the walking."

I wasn't entirely convinced.

We moved a little closer to the water. Clem crouched beside one of the old wooden posts and examined the ground. There was a narrow strip of slightly raised sand running between the markers. I hadn't noticed it at first.

Now that I knew what to look for, I could see it stretching away from the island. Not a road, exactly. More like a low ridge. The surrounding mud was darker and wetter, and in places, shallow channels cut across the surface.

Clem pointed.

"That's the old crossing."

I looked.

"That tiny bit?"

"Yeah."

"It doesn't look very solid."

"It's better than the stuff either side."

I remembered the marsh.

The mud closing around my legs. The horrible feeling of sinking. I looked down at my socks.

"I don't particularly trust mud anymore."

"Fair."

Clem stood.

"We need to be careful."

I laughed without much humour.

"That's becoming our catchphrase."

She smiled faintly. Then her expression turned serious.

"Listen. Once we start, we can't mess about."

I looked at her.

"What do you mean?"

"We need to keep moving."

"Obviously."

"No, I mean properly. No stopping in the soft bits."

I stared at the crossing.

"Why?"

She looked towards the wet sand.

"Because if you stand still too long, your feet can start sinking."

I swallowed.

"Oh."

"And some of the ground's softer than it looks."

I looked at her.

"How much softer?"

She hesitated.

"Depends."

"Clem."

"I don't know, Maya. I haven't been out here for ages."

That didn't help. At all.

She pointed towards the wooden posts.

"We follow those. Stay on the raised bit as much as possible."

I nodded.

"Right."

"And we need to leave some space between us."

I frowned.

"Why?"

"So we're not both putting weight on the same patch."

I looked at the narrow strip of sand.

"How much space?"

"Three or four metres. Maybe more where it's soft."

I stared at her.

"You want us to walk metres apart?"

"Yeah."

"What if something happens?"

"Then the other one can help."

I thought about the marsh. About Clem lying on the path, reaching towards me with the wooden rail. About how close she'd come to getting stuck herself.

I understood what she meant. I didn't like it.

But I understood.

"Okay," I said.

Clem looked at me.

"And don't try to run."

I gave her a look.

"Wasn't planning to."

"Just steady steps."

"Right."

"One after another. Keep moving."

I nodded.

She studied my face.

"Seriously, Maya."

"I know."

"If you feel yourself sinking, tell me. Don't just try to yank your foot out."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

She looked down at my feet.

"And try to keep your weight spread out."

I stared at her.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

"Just don't stamp about."

I looked at my ruined socks.

"Believe me, stamping is not on the agenda."

She smiled. For a moment, we stood in silence. The wind was coming in from the sea, cold enough to make my eyes water. A few gulls circled above the mudflats.

Far away, I could hear the faint sound of a vehicle. I turned towards the island. The trees we'd come through were behind us. Beyond them lay the village.

My house. Mum and Dad.

Everything that had seemed so safe and ordinary yesterday afternoon.

I couldn't see any CES vehicles from here. No men. No headlights. Just the empty shoreline. But I knew they were out there. Searching. Waiting. And if we went back, we'd have to face them again.

I looked towards the mainland.

It seemed impossibly far away.

"Do people still use this?" I asked.

Clem shook her head.

"No." She looked at me.

"Why not?"

"Main road's easier."

I looked at her.

"That's one reason."

She smiled faintly.

"Yeah."

"Any others?"

She glanced towards the water.

"Can be dangerous if you don't know where you're going."

I stared at her.

"Right."

"That's why we follow the posts."

I nodded. I wasn't going to argue. Not now.

Clem stepped onto the sand. Her boot sank slightly. She shifted her weight, testing it. Then took another step. And another. I watched her carefully.

She stopped after a few metres and turned.

"Come on."

I looked down at my feet. Then at the wet sand. Then back at Clem.

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

I took a breath. And stepped off the grass. The sand was cold. Very cold. It pressed against the bottom of my sock, damp and gritty. My foot sank a little. Not much. Just enough to make my stomach tighten. I immediately lifted it again.

"Oh, God."

Clem looked at me.

"You're fine."

"It moved."

"It's sand."

"I know what sand is!"

She smiled.

"Then keep walking."

I glared at her. Then took another step. The sand shifted beneath my foot. I tried not to panic.

Another step. Then another. I reached the first wooden post. Clem was several metres ahead now. She waited until I was following properly, then continued.

For the first little stretch, it wasn't too bad. The sand was wet but reasonably firm, and the old posts gave us something to follow. I concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

It was easier than walking on gravel. At least there weren't stones digging into my soles. But the cold was horrible. Water soaked through my socks immediately.

I could feel the fabric clinging to my toes. And the sand getting inside through the holes. I looked down. My feet were leaving dark prints behind me.

Not deep ones. Just shallow marks in the wet surface. I watched them for a moment. Then remembered what Clem had said. Don't stop. Keep moving. I looked up. Clem was ahead, following the posts. I kept walking.

We reached the first stretch of standing water. It covered the sand from one side of the crossing to the other. Not very deep. Perhaps a few centimetres. But enough that I couldn't see the ground beneath it. I stopped instinctively. Clem turned immediately.

"Keep moving, Maya."

I looked at the water.

"I can't see where I'm stepping."

"Follow me."

"You're four metres away!"

"Same line. Just follow my footprints."

I looked down. Her boot prints were visible in the sand leading up to the water. Then they disappeared beneath the surface.

Clem stepped into the pool. Water splashed around her boots. She took another step.

Then another.

"Feels all right," she said.

I swallowed.

"Good."

I stepped into the water. It was freezing. Actually freezing. Not literally, obviously. But close enough.

"Oh, bloody hell!"

Clem looked back.

"What?"

"It's cold!"

She laughed.

"Yeah."

"YOU'VE GOT BOOTS!"

"Sorry!"

I kept moving. The water reached just above my ankles in the deepest part. The sand beneath was soft but not terribly deep. I followed Clem's route as closely as possible.

My whole world narrowed to the sand beneath me and the back of Clem in front of me.

Then we were out of the water.

I looked down. My socks were dripping. I sighed.

"Fantastic."

Clem smiled over her shoulder.

"Nearly dry already."

I stared at her.

"You're enjoying this far too much."

"Not really."

"Could've fooled me."

The next section was worse. The sand was darker. Softer. And every step seemed to sink a little further than the last. Clem slowed.

"Careful here."

I looked down. My feet were sinking almost to the ankles. Not stuck. Not yet. But I could feel the sand closing around them. My stomach tightened.

"Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"This feels horrible."

"I know."

She took another step. Then another.

"Just keep going."

I followed. The sand made a soft sucking noise as I lifted my foot. I hated that sound. Absolutely hated it. It reminded me far too much of the marsh. I tried to move faster. My foot sank deeper. I stopped.

"Maya!"

I looked up.

Clem was staring at me.

"Don't rush."

I swallowed.

"Sorry."

"Steady steps."

I nodded and shifted my weight carefully. Lifted my foot. The sand released it with a wet little squelch. I placed it ahead. Then lifted the other. My heart was pounding. But I was moving. And that was what mattered.

After a while, the ground became firmer again. I let out a breath. Clem looked back.

"All right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Good."

I glanced behind us. The island was already some distance away. Not far enough. But further than I'd expected. The trees were smaller now. The shoreline looked low and grey. I couldn't see any people. No cars. Nothing.

I looked towards the mainland. It still seemed very far away. I sighed.

"How much further?"

Clem looked ahead.

"Bit."

I stared at her.

"That's not a distance."

She smiled.

"Halfway, maybe?"

I looked around.

"Really?"

"Something like that."

I wasn't sure whether to believe her. But I decided to. It was easier.

We continued along the old crossing. The posts were getting more widely spaced now. Some were leaning. One had fallen completely, lying half-buried in the sand. Clem paused beside it.

I stopped several metres behind her. She looked towards the next upright post. Then at the sand between them. For a moment, she seemed uncertain. I felt my stomach tighten.

"Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"You know where we're going, right?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

"Because you look like you're thinking."

"I am thinking."

"That's what worries me."

She smiled faintly.

Then pointed.

"Next post's over there."

I followed her finger. It was further to the left than I'd expected. The crossing seemed to curve around a wide patch of dark mud. I looked at it.

"Why does it go that way?"

"Probably avoiding a channel."

I stared at the dark patch.

"A channel?"

"Yeah."

"With water?"

"Usually."

I looked again.

There was a shallow depression in the mud, running across the flats. It looked almost dry but the sand around it was much darker. I swallowed.

"Right."

Clem started towards the next post and I followed.

The wind picked up. It blew across the open flats, tugging at my coat and making my wet clothes feel even colder. I pulled the collar up around my neck.

My legs were shaking. Not just from tiredness now. From cold. I looked down at my socks. They were completely soaked. Of course they were. And full of sand.

My toes had gone numb. I wondered whether I'd ever feel warm again. I imagined standing in our kitchen. Mum making tea. Dad asking what had happened to my boots. Me trying to explain that they'd been eaten by a marsh. It almost made me laugh.

Then my right foot sank unexpectedly. Not far. Just a little deeper than before. I gasped.

"Clem!"

She turned immediately.

"What?"

"My foot!"

"Keep moving."

I tried to lift it. It came free and I took another step. The ground was firmer. I let out a breath.

"Okay."

Clem watched me for a moment.

"All right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She waited until I was moving again, then turned and continued. I began to understand what she meant about not stopping. The sand wasn't solid in the way a road was solid. It shifted beneath us. Sometimes it held our weight. Sometimes it gave a little. And the longer I stood in one place, the more I could feel my feet settling into it.

It wasn't like the deep mud where I'd lost my boots. Not quite. But it was enough to frighten me. So I kept moving. One step at a time. I didn't look too far ahead. I didn't look too far behind. I just followed Clem. The old wooden posts. Her boot prints. The narrow strip of slightly raised sand.

That was my entire world.

At one point, Clem looked back and smiled.

"Doing well."

I stared at her.

"Am I?"

"Yeah."

"Because I feel like I'm doing terribly."

She laughed.

"Still moving, aren't you?"

I looked down at my feet.

"Unfortunately."

She grinned.

"That's the important bit."

I smiled despite myself. Then kept walking.

The next pool of water was wider. Much wider. It stretched across the crossing and beyond it, disappearing into the mud on either side. The surface was perfectly still. I couldn't tell how deep it was. Clem slowed as she approached. Then she looked back at me.

"Same as before."

I stared at the water.

"That's bigger."

"Yeah."

"How much bigger?"

She shrugged.

"Bit."

I gave her a look.

"Clem."

She smiled faintly.

"Just follow me."

I watched as she stepped into the water. It rose over the toes of her boots. Then to her ankles. She took another step.

The water reached a little higher. She paused just long enough to test the ground. Then continued.

I stood several metres behind her, watching. My stomach was tight. My hands and feet were cold and there was absolutely no reason to be frightened of getting them more wet. Except that I couldn't see what was underneath.

Clem reached the middle of the pool. She turned.

"Come on, Maya."

I swallowed and then stepped forward. The water closed around my feet. Cold and dark. And deeper than the last pool.

I took another step. Then another. The sand shifted beneath me. I looked up. Clem was ahead. Still moving. Still following the posts. I concentrated on her.

And kept going.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The water was getting deeper. Not dramatically. Not all at once. Just a little with every step. It had been around my ankles when I entered the pool. Now it was halfway up my shins, and I couldn't see my feet at all.

Clem was several metres ahead, moving carefully towards the next wooden post.

"Still all right?" she called.

"Yeah!"

I wasn't entirely sure that was true. The sand beneath the water felt different here. Softer, with little patches that shifted when I put my weight on them.

I lifted my right foot. For a horrible moment, it didn't move. Then it came free with a wet sucking noise. My heart jumped.

"Clem!"

She turned.

"What?"

"Nothing! It's fine!"

She looked at me for another second.

"Keep coming!"

I nodded.

The water was freezing, and my socks were so full of sand that they felt twice as heavy as they should. But I was moving. That was what mattered.

The pool finally ended.

I stepped onto wet sand and almost laughed with relief.

"Oh, thank God."

Clem looked back.

"Good?"

"Never been better."

She smiled and then continued towards the next post. I followed, concentrating on her footprints.

The mainland was closer now. I could make out a low grassy bank beyond the mudflats, with a line of trees further inland. There was a little building somewhere to the left, although I couldn't tell what it was. It looked like a shed. Or perhaps a barn. I didn't care. It was on the mainland. That made it the most beautiful building I'd ever seen.

I looked over my shoulder. The island was behind us, low and grey beneath the morning clouds. I could see

the trees we'd come through. The distant rooftops of the village. And, further north, the faint line of the main causeway. We'd come a long way.

A ridiculous distance, considering we'd started the evening planning to have a quick look at some lights. I was just beginning to feel hopeful when I heard a shout.

"Oi!"

I stopped.

Clem turned immediately.

"What?"

I looked towards the island.

At first, I couldn't see anything.

Then another shout came across the mudflats.

"HEY! YOU TWO!"

My stomach dropped.

"Oh, God."

Clem followed my gaze. Three figures had appeared near the southern shoreline. They were standing on the grassy bank we'd left behind. One was pointing towards us. Another had a phone or radio raised to his face.

For a moment, I simply stared. They looked tiny from

here. Just dark shapes against the pale grass. But I knew exactly who they were.

"Clem!"

"I see them!"

One of the men shouted again.

"STOP WHERE YOU ARE!"

I looked at Clem.

She looked towards the mainland. Then back at me.

"Keep going!"

We moved. I wanted to run. Every part of me wanted to run. But the sand wouldn't let me. When I tried to move faster, my feet sank deeper, and I had to struggle to lift them again.

Clem was ahead, taking quick, careful steps along the raised strip.

"Don't rush!" she called.

I stared at her.

"They're coming!"

"I know!"

"Then why aren't we running?"

"Because you'll get stuck!"

I hated that she was right. I hated it so much.

Behind us, another shout carried across the water.

"COME BACK!"

I didn't look. I kept walking. One foot. Then the other. The sand shifted beneath me. I lifted my foot. Placed it ahead. Lifted the other. My heart was racing.

My lungs were already working too hard, even though I wasn't moving particularly quickly. I could hear the men shouting behind us.

And somewhere beyond them, an engine started. Clem glanced over her shoulder.

"Don't look back!"

"I wasn't!"

"Good!"

I immediately looked back. I couldn't help it.

Two of the men had started moving along the shoreline, heading north. The third was still standing near the trees, talking into his radio. They weren't coming onto the causeway. Not yet. Instead, they seemed to be running along the island's edge. Trying to find a way to get ahead of us.

I remembered what Clem had said. They couldn't drive straight across from the main road. They'd have to follow the shoreline. Find another route.

That would take time. But how much time? Enough? I had no idea. I looked towards the mainland again. It was closer. Definitely closer. But there was still a horrible amount of wet sand between us and it.

We reached another stretch of soft ground.

Clem slowed.

"Careful here!"

I looked down. The sand was dark and shiny. There was a narrow line of water running across it, perhaps the remains of a little tidal channel. The wooden posts curved to the right. Clem followed them.

I followed her and behind us, the shouting continued.

"THEY'RE GOING ACROSS!"

"GET SOMEONE ROUND THERE!"

I felt cold all over. They were calling for help. More men. More vehicles. Probably heading towards the mainland.

I wanted to ask Clem how long it would take them. Whether they could get there before us. Whether she had any idea what we'd do once we reached the other

side. But I couldn't. I was breathing too hard. Every breath felt important. And I wasn't going to waste one asking questions she probably couldn't answer. So I kept moving.

The narrow channel was deeper than it looked. Clem stepped into it first. Water rose almost to her knees. She stopped for half a second, testing the ground. Then continued.

"Oh, you've got to be joking."

She turned.

"Come on!"

"That's deep!"

"It's all right!"

I looked at the water. Then back towards the island. The men were still moving along the shore. One had stopped and was pointing towards us. I didn't have a choice. I stepped into the channel.

The water was so cold that I gasped. It rose above my knees. My jeans immediately soaked it up.

"Oh, bloody hell!"

Clem looked back.

"Keep moving!"

I tried but the bottom was soft. My right foot sank. I pulled it free. My left followed. Then the right again. I could feel the water pushing against my legs, not strongly, but enough to make every step awkward.

I was terrified of falling. If I fell, I'd get soaked. If I got soaked, I'd be even colder. And if I got stuck…

I didn't finish that thought. I simply kept moving. One step at a time. Then the water became shallower. My knees emerged. Then my shins. Then I was back on wet sand.

I nearly sobbed with relief.

"Good!" Clem called.

I looked at her.

"GOOD?"

She smiled breathlessly.

"You're doing it!"

I wanted to throw something at her. Preferably a boot. If I still had one. Instead, I kept walking.

The men had reached the northern end of the shoreline now. I could hear them shouting to one another, although the words were becoming harder to understand.

One of them was running along the bank. Another had disappeared behind the trees. I assumed he was going for a vehicle. Or a radio. Or both.

I looked towards the mainland. The grassy bank was getting closer. I could see individual bushes now. A little wooden fence. A narrow track leading inland. And, further away, what looked like a road. A proper road. With tarmac.

I almost cried. Tarmac. I'd never loved anything so much. Clem suddenly stopped. I froze.

"What?"

She was looking down. The next wooden post was missing. Or rather, it was lying on its side, half-buried in the sand. The following one stood further ahead, but the raised strip between them wasn't obvious.

There were two possible routes. One slightly to the left. One to the right. Both looked wet. And both looked soft. Clem studied the ground. I stared at her.

"Clem?"

"Hang on."

Behind us, a man shouted.

"THEY'RE NEARLY ACROSS!"

My stomach twisted.

"Clem!"

"I know!"

She stepped carefully to the right. The sand gave beneath her boot. She immediately shifted back.

"Not that way."

I stared.

"Oh, God."

She tried the left. This time, the ground held and she took another step. Then another.

"Here!"

I followed.

The sand was softer than anything we'd crossed so far. My feet sank almost to the ankles. Every step made that horrible sucking noise. I tried not to panic. I tried not to remember the marsh.

But all I could think about was the mud closing around my legs. My boots disappearing. Clem pulling me free. I didn't have boots to lose this time. I didn't have anything. Just socks and sore feet. And a very strong desire not to spend the rest of my life stuck in a mudflat.

"Keep moving!" Clem called.

I nodded and moved forward one step at a time. The sand shifted. My left foot sank deeper. I gasped.

"Clem!"

She turned.

"Keep your weight moving forward!"

I tried. My foot came free. I stepped ahead. The ground was firmer. I nearly laughed.

"Okay!"

"Good!"

We kept going. The mainland was so close now that I could hear birds in the trees. I could see grass growing along the bank. Real grass. On solid ground. Not marsh grass hiding horrible things underneath. I wanted to run towards it.

But Clem was still ahead, moving carefully. The posts were getting closer together again. The sand was becoming firmer. I could feel the difference beneath my feet. Less sinking and less shifting. More resistance. I looked up.

Clem was approaching the next wooden post when she slowed down.

The mainland was so close now that I could hear birds in the trees. I could see grass growing along the bank.

Real grass. On solid ground. Not marsh grass hiding horrible things underneath.

I wanted to run towards it.

But Clem was still ahead, moving carefully. The posts were getting closer together again. The sand was becoming firmer. I could feel the difference beneath my feet. Less sinking and less shifting. More resistance.

"Maya!"

I looked up.

"Yeah?"

"Nearly there!"

I stared.

"Actually nearly?"

She grinned.

"Actually!"

A ridiculous little breathless laugh escaped me.

Then another shout came from behind us. Louder than before. I looked back. The men were no longer running along the island's shoreline. They'd stopped near the place where we'd entered the crossing. One was pointing towards us, while another appeared to be

talking into a radio.

Then two more figures emerged from behind the trees.

"Oh, God."

Clem followed my gaze.

"What?"

"There's more of them!"

She turned.

For a moment, neither of us moved.

Five men stood on the grassy bank, looking out across the mudflats. One of them stepped down onto the sand.

Then another followed.

I felt my stomach tighten.

"They're coming after us."

Clem looked towards the mainland.

"Keep moving."

"But they're coming!"

"I can see that!"

She started forward again, following the wooden posts.

I hurried after her. Behind us, someone shouted something I couldn't make out. Then another voice answered. I looked back.

The first man had reached the shallow water near the beginning of the crossing. He was moving quickly, lifting his feet high as he followed the line of posts.

The others were coming behind him.

"They're actually following us!"

"Then we'd best get a move on!"

I wanted to point out that I'd been suggesting exactly that for the past ten minutes. But I didn't have the breath.

The last stretch was exhausting. My legs were shaking. My feet were numb and sore at the same time, which seemed unfair. My wet jeans clung to my legs, and my lungs felt as though they'd been scraped out with a spoon.

Clem was only a few metres ahead. I tried to keep up.

The ground was better here, but I still couldn't run. Every time I tried to hurry, my feet sank a little deeper, forcing me to slow down again.

Behind us, the shouting continued.

I risked another glance.

The men were spreading out along the crossing, following the wooden posts. One was already struggling in a patch of soft sand, but the others kept coming. They were much heavier than us. That had to count for something. Didn't it?

I looked towards the mainland again. The grassy bank was close now. There was a narrow opening between two bushes, with what looked like a path leading inland.

We could make it. We had to.

"Clem!"

She glanced back.

"What?"

"What do we do when we get there?"

She looked towards the bank.

"Get away from the shore!"

"And then?"

"Find a phone!"

I nodded. A phone. Right. That was a plan. Not a particularly detailed one, but considerably better than anything I'd come up with.

I looked back once more. The men were still coming. And the worst part was that they didn't seem to be giving up. Not even when one of them stumbled and nearly fell. Not even when another sank so deeply that he had to stop and pull himself free.

They just kept following.

I turned towards the mainland.

Clem was moving faster now. I could see the grass ahead of her, the trees beyond it, and the narrow path that might finally lead us somewhere safe. We were so close. After everything we'd been through, after the marsh and the boathouse and the freezing water, the mainland was right there.

All we had to do was reach it. I took another step. Then another. And tried not to think about the men coming after us.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

The ground was getting firmer.

My feet weren't sinking quite so deeply anymore, and the horrible sucking noise that had followed almost every step was becoming less frequent.

For the first time since we'd started crossing, I could actually lift my feet without wondering whether they were going to come back up.

"Clem!"

She glanced over her shoulder.

"What?"

"It's getting better!"

She looked down.

"Yeah!"

"Actual ground!"

She smiled.

"Nearly!"

I would normally have complained about her using that

word again, but this time I could see what she meant.

The grassy bank was ahead of us. Not miles away. Not a vague grey line in the distance. Actually ahead. Close enough that I could see individual tufts of grass and the little stones scattered along the edge.

I wanted to run. Desperately. But Clem was still keeping a steady pace, and I knew better than to start charging across wet sand. So I followed. One step at a time. Trying not to think about how much my feet hurt.

Then I heard shouting behind us. Not the distant shouting we'd heard earlier. Closer. Much closer.

I looked back.

"Oh, God."

There were men on the crossing. Several of them. I counted five before I stopped trying.

They'd come out from the island and were following the line of wooden posts towards us. One was wearing a high-visibility jacket. Another had a dark coat. The others were too far away to make out properly. But they were definitely coming after us.

"CLEM!"

She turned. Then looked past me.

"Shit."

"They're following!"

"I can see!"

I stared at the men. They were moving quickly, or at least trying to. But the sand was giving them trouble. One of the larger men had sunk almost to his knees. He was leaning forward, struggling to pull one leg free while another man tried to help him.

A second man was moving very slowly, lifting his feet with obvious effort. I almost felt sorry for them. Almost. Then I remembered why they were chasing us.

And decided I didn't feel sorry at all.

"Come on!" Clem called.

We moved faster. Not running exactly. More like a horrible sort of hurried walking, with our arms out slightly for balance.

The sand was firmer here, and the water was shallower. I could feel little patches of gravel beneath my socks. Normally, that would have been painful. Actually, it was painful. But right now, I was delighted. Gravel meant solid ground. Solid ground meant we could move. And moving meant getting away from the men.

I looked back again. Two of them were still making good progress. One was tall and thin, wearing a dark jacket. The other was shorter, with a baseball cap. They were perhaps fifty metres behind us. Maybe more.

Distances were difficult to judge out here.

But they were definitely closer than I wanted them to be. The others were further back. One was still stuck. Another had stopped to help him.

The man in the high-visibility jacket was standing beside a wooden post, shouting something towards the island.

I couldn't hear what. I didn't care. I just wanted to get off the sand.

"How far?" I gasped.

Clem pointed.

"Just there!"

I looked ahead. The grassy bank was perhaps thirty metres away. Thirty metres. That was nothing. I could walk thirty metres in about twenty seconds on a normal day. Unfortunately, this wasn't a normal day. And I wasn't wearing shoes. And there were men chasing us. So thirty metres felt like approximately the distance between London and Scotland.

I tried to move faster. My right foot sank. I gasped.

Clem looked back.

"Steady!"

"I know!"

"Don't rush!"

"THEY'RE COMING!"

"I KNOW!"

I took another step. Then another. The ground held. I kept going. One of the men shouted.

"STOP!"

I looked back. The tall one was waving an arm.

"YOU TWO! STOP!"

I stared at him. Did he seriously think that was going to work? After everything? After chasing us through the marsh? After making us spend the night hiding in a boathouse? After I'd lost my boots and practically destroyed my feet?

He could shout until he was blue in the face.

I wasn't stopping.

"KEEP GOING!" Clem called.

I nodded. The man shouted again.

"WE JUST WANT TO TALK!"

I almost laughed. Of course they did. Just a friendly

little chat. Perhaps they'd offer us tea and biscuits. Ask how our evening had been. Discuss the weather. And then politely request that we delete the video of their illegal dumping. Very reasonable.

I turned back towards the mainland. The last stretch of sand was almost firm. Almost. My feet still sank a little, but I could move much more quickly now.

Clem was ahead, heading straight for a narrow opening in the grassy bank. There were some stones along the edge, and a little trickle of water running between them. She stepped over it. Then climbed onto the grass. I stared. She was on the mainland.

Actually on it. Not just near it. On it. She turned and held out her hand.

"Maya!"

I reached her.

My right foot landed on a stone.

"OW!"

Clem caught my arm.

"Come on!"

I scrambled up the bank.

My left foot slipped. She pulled. I grabbed her coat.

And suddenly I was standing beside her.

On grass.

Proper grass. Solid ground. I nearly collapsed.

"Oh, thank God."

Clem was breathing hard.

"Yeah."

I looked down. My socks were dripping. My jeans were soaked to the knees. My legs were shaking. But I was on the mainland. We'd done it. We'd actually done it.

Then a man shouted behind us.

"THEY'RE OUT!"

I turned. The two men who'd been following us were still coming. They were perhaps twenty or thirty metres from the bank now. The tall one was moving quickly. The man in the cap was a little further behind. The others were still struggling across the softer sand. One was sitting down. Actually sitting down. In the mud. I stared at him.

For a ridiculous moment, I wanted to shout advice. Don't struggle. Keep still. Find a piece of wood. Then I remembered he was trying to catch us. And decided he could work it out himself.

Clem grabbed my hand.

"Come on!"

We ran.

Running on grass felt wonderful. Not comfortable. Not painless. But wonderful compared with the mud.

My feet slapped against the damp ground, and I could actually move without having to pull them free every time.

We climbed a little slope and reached a narrow path between two hedges. Clem turned left and I followed. Behind us, the men were still shouting. But their voices were getting further away. For now.

I looked over my shoulder. The tall man had reached the grassy bank. He was climbing up. The man in the cap was only a few steps behind.

"Oh, God!"

Clem looked back.

"What?"

"They're coming up!"

"Keep running!"

We ran faster. The path was narrow and uneven. There

were little stones mixed into the dirt, and every one of them seemed determined to find the most painful part of my foot. I winced with every step. But I kept going.

The hedges gave way to a small lane. There was a wooden signpost at the corner, pointing towards somewhere I didn't recognise. A few houses stood further along the road. Beyond them, I could see what looked like a little village. Actual houses. A road. A telephone wire stretching between poles. I nearly cried.

"Clem!"

"I see it!"

"People!"

"Hopefully!"

I looked towards the houses. Most of the windows were dark. There was a little car parked outside one. A bicycle leaning against a wall. A wheelie bin beside a gate. Everything looked perfectly normal.

I wanted to knock on the first door we passed. I wanted to scream for help. But Clem kept running. And I followed.

We reached the first house. Then the second. A little terraced cottage with a blue door. There was a newspaper lying on the step. I stared at it. A newspaper. Someone had delivered a newspaper. While we'd been fighting our way across the mudflats, ordinary people

had been getting on with their ordinary lives. It seemed ridiculous.

Clem slowed slightly.

"Shop's up here."

I looked at her.

"Shop?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Phone."

I blinked.

"Oh."

Of course. A phone. That was what we needed. A working phone. Something connected to the outside world. Something that could get us help.

I looked ahead. There was a little row of buildings at the end of the lane. A post box. A bus stop. And a shop. A small village shop with a green sign above the window. I almost laughed. We'd done it. We'd actually found somewhere useful.

Then I noticed how quiet everything was. No cars moving. No people walking. No lights in the shop. I

looked towards the sky. It was morning, but still early. The sort of early when normal people were asleep. I felt my stomach tighten.

"Clem..."

She didn't answer. She was looking at the shop. We reached it. The front window was dark. A little sign hung on the door.

CLOSED

I stared.

"Oh, you've got to be joking."

Clem tried the handle. Locked. She pulled again. Still locked. I looked through the window. There were shelves of groceries. A little counter. A rack of newspapers. And, behind the counter, what looked like a telephone. An actual telephone. I pressed my hand against the glass.

"So close."

Clem looked at the sign beside the door.

"Opens at eight."

I stared at her. She looked back at me.

"What time is it?"

I pulled my phone out and turned it on. Looked at the screen. One percent battery left. I sighed.

"Just after seven."

She closed her eyes.

An hour.

We'd made it across the mudflats. We'd escaped the island. We'd outrun the men. We'd found a shop with a phone. And it was closed. Of course it was. My phone went out in my hand. Well, battery dead.

Why would anything be easy? I looked back along the lane. The houses were still quiet. No lights. No movement. And somewhere behind us, two men were making their way towards the village. I couldn't see them yet. But I knew they were coming.

Clem stood beside the locked shop door, looking through the glass. I could tell she was thinking. Trying to work something out. I wanted to ask what we were going to do. I wanted to tell her I couldn't run anymore. That my feet hurt. That I was freezing. That I was so tired I could barely think. But I didn't.

Instead, I leaned against the wall beside the shop and tried to catch my breath. Clem looked at me.

"You all right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She raised an eyebrow.

I sighed.

"No."

She smiled faintly.

"Fair."

I looked towards the dark shop window. The telephone was right there. Only a few metres away. Behind a locked door. I stared at it. Then at Clem.

Then back at the door. And wondered how much trouble you could get into for breaking into a shop when you were trying to save your own life.

Chapter Forty

I stared at the shop window. Behind the glass were shelves of biscuits, tins of beans, newspapers and a little display of birthday cards. Everything looked so normal.

It was difficult to believe that two girls could be standing outside a perfectly ordinary village shop, considering whether to commit a burglary.

Clem was looking at the door. I knew that look. She was thinking. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what about.

"Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"We can't wait an hour."

"I know."

"And those men are coming."

"I know."

She glanced along the empty street. Then at the shop window. Then back at me.

"We need that phone."

I nodded.

"Yes."

She looked down at the stones lining the little flowerbed beside the entrance. I followed her gaze.

"Oh, no."

She crouched and picked one up.

It was about the size of a grapefruit.

"Clem."

She weighed it in her hand.

"What?"

"You're not seriously..."

She looked at the glass. Then at me.

"Got another idea?"

I opened my mouth. Closed it again. I didn't. That was the problem. I hadn't had a good idea for about twelve hours.

"Breaking and entering," I said.

"Probably."

"Criminal damage."

"Definitely."

"Possibly theft, depending on how hungry I get."

She smiled.

"Come on, then."

I stepped back.

"Wait."

She paused. I looked towards the houses. The windows were dark. There was nobody in the street. But somewhere behind us, two men were following. And they weren't going to stop just because we'd reached the mainland.

"Do it," I whispered.

Clem threw the stone. The glass shattered with an enormous crash. For half a second, everything was silent.

Then the alarm started.

A horrible, shrieking noise that seemed to fill the entire village. I jumped so violently that I nearly fell over.

"OH, BLOODY HELL!"

Clem stared at the window.

"Didn't think of that."

"YOU DIDN'T THINK OF THE ALARM?"

She looked at me.

"Bit late now."

The alarm continued screaming. Somewhere nearby, a dog started barking. A light came on in an upstairs window across the road. I stared at Clem.

"Well, that's subtle."

"Come on!"

She pulled the sleeve of her coat over her hand and carefully cleared some of the remaining glass from the lower edge of the broken window. I watched her. There was glass everywhere. On the pavement. Inside the shop. Still hanging from the frame.

She climbed through first, awkwardly lifting one leg over the sill. Then she turned and held out her hands.

"Your turn."

I looked at my feet. My ruined socks. The broken glass.

"Seriously?"

"I'll help."

I took her hands. She guided me over the sill, making sure I didn't put my feet on the glass. For one horrible

moment, my coat caught on the frame.

I twisted. Something tore. Then I stumbled forward and landed against her. She caught me.

"Got you."

I looked down. My coat had another rip in it.

"Brilliant."

The alarm screamed above us. Clem grabbed my hand.

"Phone. Now."

The shop smelled of coffee, cardboard and cleaning products. I noticed that immediately. It was such an ordinary smell that it made the whole situation feel even more ridiculous. We'd broken into a shop. An actual shop. With a burglar alarm. And now we were standing beside a display of chocolate bars, trying not to get murdered.

I looked around. The shop was small. Three narrow aisles. A refrigerated section along one wall. A counter near the entrance. Behind it were cigarettes, lottery tickets and a rack of little bottles.I hurried towards the counter.

"There!"

A black telephone sat beside the till. I nearly cried. I pushed through the little swing gate and grabbed the

receiver.

Nothing.

I pressed the buttons. Still nothing. I stared at it.

"Clem!"

She came over.

"What?"

"It's not working!"

She looked at the phone. Then followed the cable behind the counter. It disappeared into a small box mounted on the wall. She picked up the receiver herself. Listened. Pressed a button. Then put it down.

"Dead."

I stared at her.

"No."

She looked around.

"Must be disconnected."

"No, no, no."

I grabbed the receiver again.

Nothing.

Not even a faint hiss. Just silence. I wanted to throw it across the shop. Instead, I put it down very carefully. Because apparently I still had some respect for other people's property. Despite the enormous hole we'd just made in their window.

"There's got to be another one," Clem said.

She looked towards the back of the shop. I followed her gaze. Beyond the shelves was a narrow corridor with a couple of doors.

One had a sign reading STAFF ONLY.

The other was marked OFFICE.

"Back there," Clem said.

We hurried down the aisle. I knocked over a little cardboard display of crisps. Packets scattered across the floor. I didn't stop to pick them up. The alarm was still going. I could barely hear myself think.

Clem reached the office door first. She tried the handle. Locked. Of course. Of course it was locked. Why would anything in our lives be simple?

She rattled it again.

"Come on."

I looked at the door. Solid wood. A metal handle. A proper lock. I stared at her.

"Now what?"

She stepped back.

"Break it."

I looked at her.

"With what?"

She glanced at the corridor. Then at the door.

"Us."

I stared.

"Us?"

"Yeah."

I looked at my feet. Then at her.

"Clem, I don't think I'm particularly useful as a battering ram."

She gave me a quick smile.

"Neither am I."

"Comforting."

She moved beside the door.

"Together."

I swallowed. The alarm continued shrieking. And then, beneath it, I heard something else. Voices. Outside. Clem heard them too. We both froze.

The voices were coming from the street. Men. At least two. I couldn't make out the words over the alarm. But they were close. Far too close.

I looked towards the front of the shop. Through the aisles, I could see the broken window. The street beyond. A figure moved past the opening. Then another. My stomach dropped.

"They're here."

Clem looked at the office door. Then back at me.

"Now."

I stared at her.

"Right."

She positioned herself beside me. We faced the door.

"On three," she said.

I nodded.

"One."

I took a breath.

"Two."

I braced myself.

"Three!"

We ran at it. My shoulder hit the door with a horrible thud. Pain shot down my arm. The door didn't move. Not even slightly.

I stumbled backwards.

"OW!"

Clem was rubbing her shoulder.

"Again."

I stared at her.

"Are you joking?"

"Come on!"

From the front of the shop, a man shouted.

"THEY'RE IN HERE!"

I froze. Clem grabbed my sleeve.

"Maya!"

I looked at the door. Then at her.

"Okay!"

We stepped back. Ran. Hit it again. Another horrible thud. The door rattled. Something cracked. But it stayed shut. I cried out.

My shoulder felt as though someone had hit it with a hammer. Clem staggered sideways.

"Again!"

I stared at her.

"IT'S NOT WORKING!"

"Nearly!"

"HOW DO YOU KNOW?"

She pointed at the frame. There was a thin split in the wood beside the lock. I looked at it. Then heard footsteps coming through the shop. Heavy. Fast. Getting closer.

I didn't argue. We backed up as far as the corridor allowed. Clem looked at me.

"Ready?"

I nodded. Not because I was ready. Because there wasn't time to be anything else.

"Go!"

We ran. I lowered my shoulder. Hit the door. For a

fraction of a second, it held. Then there was a loud crack.

The frame splintered. And the door flew open. We fell through together. I landed on my knees. Clem crashed into a filing cabinet. Something metal fell off a shelf. For a moment, neither of us moved.

Then Clem scrambled up.

"IN!"

I crawled forward. She grabbed the door and slammed it shut behind us. The broken frame meant it wouldn't latch properly.

I looked around. A desk. Two chairs. A filing cabinet. A little bookshelf. A computer. And there, beside the monitor, was a telephone. A proper landline. With a receiver. I stared at it.

"Clem!"

"I see it!"

She was already dragging one of the chairs towards the door.

"CALL!"

I grabbed the telephone. Lifted the receiver. And heard a dial tone. A beautiful, wonderful, actual dial tone. I nearly sobbed.

"YES!"

I pressed the buttons.

Nine. Nine. Nine.

My fingers were shaking so badly that I almost hit the wrong number. The line rang. Once.

Then a voice answered.

"Emergency. Which service do you require?"

"Police!"

My voice came out much louder than I intended.

"Police, please!"

"Connecting you now."

I pressed the receiver against my ear. Behind me, Clem was trying to move the desk. It scraped horribly across the floor. I turned. She had both hands against one end, pushing with all her strength. The desk barely moved.

I wanted to help. But the telephone was ringing. And then someone answered.

"Police emergency. What's your emergency?"

"Hello! We need help!"

I was practically shouting.

"All right. Tell me what's happened."

The woman's voice was calm. So calm. Too calm. I almost hated her for it.

"There's men chasing us! They've been chasing us all night and we can't get away and they're outside and we've broken into a shop because we needed a phone!"

I stopped to breathe. The woman didn't interrupt.

"Okay. Are you in the shop now?"

"Yes!"

"Are the men inside?"

I looked towards the door. Clem had managed to move the desk about half a metre. She was pushing it towards the entrance.

"I think so!"

"Are you somewhere you can lock yourself in?"

"An office! But the door's broken!"

"All right. I need to know where you are."

I stared at the wall. Where were we? I had absolutely no idea. Somewhere on the mainland. Somewhere near the island. Somewhere in Norfolk.

That wasn't particularly helpful.

"I don't know!"

"That's okay. Can you see the name of the shop?"

I looked around.

There was a calendar on the wall.

A photograph of a dog.

A little notice about staff holidays.

Nothing useful.

"Clem!"

She looked at me.

"What?"

"What's the shop called?"

She stared.

"Don't know!"

The woman spoke again.

"Can you tell me the nearest village?"

I swallowed.

"We came across from an island near Wells-next-the-Sea! We crossed the mud!"

"All right. Stay on the line."

There was a loud bang against the office door.

I screamed. Clem jumped back. The desk had reached the doorway, but she hadn't managed to turn it properly.

One corner was jammed against the wall. She pushed again. Another bang. The door moved inward slightly.

"CLEM!"

"I KNOW!"

A man's voice shouted from the other side.

"OPEN THE DOOR!"

Clem planted her boots against the floor and shoved. The desk scraped forward. Finally, it turned.

She pushed it against the door. The broken wood rattled. But the desk held. For now.

I stared at her. She was breathing hard.

Her face was pale. Her shoulder must have been killing her. But she didn't stop. She grabbed the office chair and wedged it between the desk and the filing cabinet.

Then she leaned her weight against the whole thing.

"Keep talking!" she shouted.

"Hello?" the woman said.

"I'm here!"

"What's your name?"

"Maya!"

"How old are you, Maya?"

"Sixteen!"

"Are you alone?"

"No! My friend Clem! She's fifteen!"

"All right. Are either of you injured?"

I looked down at my feet.

My socks were torn.

There was dried blood on one of them.

My shoulder hurt.

My legs hurt.

Everything hurt.

"Not badly! I don't think!"

"Okay. I need you to stay as calm as you can."

I nearly laughed. Calm. Of course. Very sensible. I looked at the office door. Someone was trying to force it open. Clem was holding the desk in place. And the burglar alarm was still screaming.

"THEY'RE TRYING TO GET IN!"

"I understand. Officers are being sent to help you. Stay on the line with me."

I gripped the receiver.

"Please hurry!"

"We're getting help to you. We have pinpointed your location now. Just stay where you are."

Another bang hit the door. The desk shifted. Clem shoved it back.

"GO AWAY!" she shouted.

A man's voice answered.

"OPEN UP!"

I stared at the door. I recognised the voice. I was almost certain it was one of the men from the causeway. The tall one. The one who'd shouted for us to stop.

He was here.

Inside the shop. Only a few metres away. And the only

thing between us was a broken door, a desk and Clem. I looked at her.

She was leaning against the desk with both hands. Her face was twisted with effort. I wanted to help her. I wanted to put the phone down and throw myself against the furniture.

But I couldn't. This was the first time we'd been able to reach anyone. The first time someone outside the island knew we were in trouble. I couldn't lose the call.

"Listen to me," I said into the receiver.

The woman answered immediately.

"I'm listening."

"There's something happening on the island. A company called CES. Cairn Eco-Solutions."

"All right."

"They're dumping stuff. Waste. Into these huge holes underground. In the marsh."

I was speaking too quickly. I knew I was.

But I couldn't stop.

"We saw them last night. Lorries and machines and loads of containers. They're putting it all underground and covering it up!"

"Okay, Maya."

"And we filmed it!"

There was a pause.

"You have a recording?"

"Yes! On my phone!"

I looked towards my coat pocket. The phone was still there. Switched off. Out of battery. But there.

"I've got the video! That's why they're chasing us!"

Another bang. The desk moved. Clem grunted and pushed it back. I looked at her.

"Please," I whispered into the phone.

"Please send someone."

The woman asked me to describe the men.

I tried. Dark jackets. A baseball cap. One tall. One shorter. There had been so many of them that I couldn't remember who was who anymore. I told her about the island. The hidden roads. The vehicles. The men searching the houses. The guards at the causeway.

I told her we'd spent the night hiding in a boathouse. That we'd crossed the mudflats to escape. That they were still following us. She listened.

Repeated things back to make sure she'd understood. And all the while, Clem was fighting to keep the office door shut.

The alarm suddenly stopped. The silence was so unexpected that I flinched. For a moment, all I could hear was my own breathing.

Then footsteps. Outside the office. A man spoke.

"Come on. Open it."

Clem didn't answer. Another voice said something quieter. I couldn't make out the words. Then the handle rattled. The door pushed against the desk.

Clem braced herself.

"NO!"

I stared at her. She looked terrified. Actually terrified. I'd seen her frightened before. In the marsh. In the boathouse. On the causeway. But she'd always managed to hide most of it. Now I could see it clearly.

And that frightened me more than anything.

"Maya?" the woman said.

I pressed the receiver tighter against my ear.

"Yes?"

"Are the men still outside the office?"

"Yes."

"All right. Don't open the door. Help is on its way."

I swallowed.

"How long?"

"We're getting officers to you as quickly as possible."

I looked at Clem. She was still holding the desk. Her boots were planted against the floor. Her shoulders were shaking. I wanted a number. Two minutes. Five minutes. Anything. But the woman didn't give me one.

And I knew she probably couldn't.

I looked around the office. There was a window behind the desk. Small. High up. It overlooked the back of the building. I couldn't tell whether it opened. Even if it did, I doubted I could climb through it. Not with my feet. Not with Clem trying to hold the door.

I looked back at her. She met my eyes. For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then she gave me a tiny smile. A ridiculous little smile. As though we were sitting in her kitchen and I'd just said something stupid.

I almost cried.

Another shove came against the door. The desk moved

an inch. Clem pushed it back. I could hear her breathing. Fast. Hard.

She wasn't going to be able to do this forever. I looked at the phone. Then at the desk. Then at Clem.

"Can you hear that?" I asked the woman.

"Yes, Maya."

"They're trying to get in."

"I understand."

"Clem's holding the door."

"All right."

"She's only fifteen."

My voice cracked.

I swallowed hard.

"Please."

The woman spoke gently.

"You're doing the right thing by staying on the line. Keep talking to me."

I nodded, even though she couldn't see me.

Clem shifted her weight. The chair creaked. The desk

scraped against the floor. I could see the broken doorframe through a narrow gap.

A man's hand appeared for a moment. Trying to push something through. Clem kicked the edge of the desk harder against the door. The hand disappeared.

"GO AWAY!" she shouted again.

There was a pause.

Then the man outside said, "You're making this worse for yourselves."

I felt something cold settle in my stomach. He sounded angry. Not desperate. Not frightened. Angry.

As though we were being difficult. As though this was all terribly inconvenient for him. I wanted to shout back. To tell him exactly what I thought of him. But I didn't.

I kept the phone against my ear. And listened to the woman asking me questions.

"Is there another way into the office?" she asked.

I looked around.

"No."

"Any windows?"

"One. At the back."

"Can you see anyone outside it?"

I looked.

The glass was cloudy, and the view was partly blocked by a stack of cardboard boxes.

"I don't think so."

"All right. Stay away from the window if you can."

I nodded.

"Okay."

Clem looked over.

"What?"

I covered the receiver.

"She says stay away from the window."

Clem glanced towards it.

Then nodded.

"Right."

She adjusted her position against the desk.

I watched her for a moment.

Then said quietly, "Clem?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

She looked at me. For a second, her expression softened. Then she smiled.

"You're welcome."

A bang hit the door. She turned back immediately. gripped the telephone. The woman was still there.

Still talking. Still calm.

And somewhere, police officers were coming. Actual police officers. With cars. And radios. And people who knew what they were doing. I tried to picture them arriving.

The men being arrested.

The office door opening. Someone telling us it was over. I wanted that so badly it hurt.

But the men were still outside. And the desk was still moving. And Clem was still holding it. I looked at her.

She was shaking with effort. Her face was pale. Her hair had fallen across her eyes. I wanted to go to her. To help. To do something. Anything.

Instead, I held the phone tighter. And kept talking. Because for the first time since we'd seen those lorries in the marsh, someone was listening.

And I wasn't going to let the line go dead.

Chapter Forty-One

The first siren was so faint that I thought I'd imagined it.

I was sitting on the floor behind the desk, holding the telephone against my ear. Clem was still braced against the furniture, her boots slipping slightly on the floor whenever they pushed against the office door.

My shoulder hurt. My feet hurt. Everything hurt.

And I was so tired that I was beginning to wonder whether I'd actually fallen asleep in the boathouse and dreamed the whole thing.

Then I heard it again. A siren. Somewhere outside.

I sat up.

"Clem?"

She didn't look round.

"What?"

"Can you hear that?"

She stopped pushing for a moment.

The men outside were talking.

One of them said something I couldn't understand.

Then the siren sounded again.

Closer.

Clem looked at me.

"Police?"

I stared at her.

"I think so."

The woman on the telephone was still speaking.

"Maya? Are you there?"

"Yes!"

"Are the men still trying to get into the room?"

I looked at the door.

"No. They've stopped."

"All right. Stay where you are."

I nodded.

Then realised she couldn't see me.

"Okay."

There was a sudden noise outside the office.

Footsteps. Fast. Moving away.

Someone shouted, "Come on!"

Another voice answered. Then more footsteps, running through the shop. Clem turned towards me.

"They're leaving."

I stared at her.

"What?"

"They're running."

We listened. The footsteps continued towards the front of the building. There was a crash as something was knocked over. Then silence.

Not complete silence. I could still hear the distant siren. But the men were gone. At least from the corridor. Clem slowly stepped away from the desk.

"Think they've scarpered."

I looked at the door.

"Really?"

"Sounds like it."

I waited. Nothing. No shouting. No banging. No one

trying to force the door open. Just the sound of a vehicle somewhere outside. Then another siren.

Closer still.

I pressed the receiver tighter against my ear.

"I think they're running away!"

The woman answered calmly.

"All right, Maya. The police are aware of your location. Please stay in the office until an officer identifies themselves."

I looked at Clem.

"She says stay here."

Clem nodded.

"Fine by me."

She leaned against the wall.

For the first time since we'd broken into the shop, she wasn't trying to hold anything shut.

Her hands were shaking. I noticed because she was staring at them. Then she tucked them into her coat pockets. The siren grew louder.

Much louder. Then it stopped. There was the sound of tyres on the road. A car door slammed. Another.

Voices outside. Different voices.

Someone shouted, "Police!"

I looked at Clem. She looked at me. Neither of us moved. Then we heard footsteps entering the shop.

"Police! Is anyone in here?"

A man's voice.

Clear. Firm. Not shouting angrily.

Just loud enough to be heard.

I nearly cried.

"YES!"

Clem jumped. I scrambled to my feet, still holding the telephone.

"WE'RE IN THE OFFICE!"

Footsteps approached.

"Where's that?"

"At the back!"

A moment later, someone tried the office door. The desk rattled. Clem stepped forward immediately.

"Wait!"

The man outside stopped.

"Police. Who's in there?"

"Two girls!" Clem called. "We've got the door blocked!"

"All right. Are you both safe?"

I stared at her.

Safe.

What a strange question.

I wasn't sure I remembered what safe felt like.

"YES!" I shouted.

Then reconsidered.

"I THINK SO!"

The officer spoke again.

"Can you move whatever's against the door?"

Clem looked at the desk. Then at me.

"Help?"

I put the receiver against my shoulder.

"Hang on," I told the woman.

"Take your time, Maya."

I placed the phone on the desk without hanging up.

Then joined Clem. Together, we dragged the office chair out of the way.

It caught on the filing cabinet. We pulled again. The chair came free with a horrible screech. Then we pushed the desk backwards. My shoulder protested immediately.

"Ow!"

Clem looked at me.

"All right?"

"Fine."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Mostly fine."

We managed to shift the desk far enough for the door to open. Clem stepped back.

"Okay!"

The door moved slowly inward.

A uniformed police officer appeared in the gap.

He was a man in his thirties, perhaps, with short dark

hair and a serious expression. He looked at the broken doorframe. Then at the desk. Then at us. His expression changed.

"Good grief."

I looked down.

I suddenly remembered what we looked like. Two filthy teenagers. One in muddy boots. The other in socks that had practically ceased to exist. Both with wet clothes, tangled hair and faces that probably appeared as if they hadn't seen soap in about a week.

"Hi," I said.

It was the only thing I could think of.

The officer opened the door wider.

"Are you two all right?"

Clem nodded.

"Yeah."

I nodded too.

Then said, "Not really."

He looked between us.

"Okay. What's happened?"

I opened my mouth. Then closed it. Where did I even begin? We'd gone for a walk. We'd seen something we shouldn't have. Men had chased us. We'd hidden all night. We'd crossed a dangerous old causeway. We'd broken into a shop.

And now we were standing in front of a policeman who looked as though he'd expected to find someone stealing cigarettes.

I looked at Clem. She looked at me.

Then she said, "We've been chased."

The officer's expression became more serious.

"By who?"

"Men from CES," I said.

He looked at me.

"CES?"

"Cairn Eco-Solutions. On the island."

"Right."

"They're doing something illegal. We filmed it. They've been chasing us since last night."

He looked towards the corridor.

"Are they here?"

"They were," Clem said. "They ran when they heard the sirens."

The officer turned his head slightly.

"Sarah?"

Another voice answered from the shop.

"Yeah?"

"Can you check outside? Couple of males may have just left the premises."

"On it."

He looked back at us.

"Right. Let's get you out of here."

I remembered the telephone.

"Wait!"

The officer stopped.

"What?"

"I'm on the phone to the police."

He looked at the desk.

"The police?"

"999."

He nodded.

"All right."

I picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

The woman answered immediately.

"I'm here, Maya."

"The police have arrived."

"That's good. Can you pass the phone to the officer, please?"

I held it out.

"She wants to talk to you."

He took it.

"Hello. PC Harris, Norfolk Constabulary."

He listened. Then glanced at us.

"Yes, I've got two teenage girls here. Both conscious and talking. No obvious serious injuries."

He listened again.

"Understood. I'll confirm the details with control."

He handed the receiver back. The woman spoke to me one last time.

"Maya, you're with the officers now. They're going to look after you."

I swallowed.

"Okay."

"You did the right thing calling."

I looked at the broken door. The smashed window. The desk we'd practically destroyed.

"Thanks."

Then the call ended.

I stood holding the receiver for a moment. I didn't quite know what to do with it. Finally, I put it down.

PC Harris led us through the corridor.

The shop looked even worse than I remembered. Packets of crisps were scattered across the floor. A display stand had been knocked over. There was broken glass near the front window.

Another police officer, a woman with blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, was standing near the

entrance.

She looked at us. Then at our clothes. Then at my feet.

"Bloody hell."

PC Harris glanced at her.

"Sarah."

"Sorry."

She looked at me.

"Are you hurt?"

I shrugged.

"My feet."

She crouched slightly to look.

"What happened to your shoes?"

"Lost them."

She stared.

"Both?"

I nodded.

"In the mud."

She looked towards her colleague. He looked at me.

I sighed. "It's a long story."

Outside, the village was beginning to wake up.

A couple of people stood across the road in dressing gowns. Someone had opened an upstairs window. A man with a dog was watching from the pavement.

I could see the police car parked outside the shop, its blue lights flashing silently. There was another vehicle further along the road. But no sign of the CES men.

I looked up and down the street. Nothing. They'd vanished. I wasn't sure whether that made me feel better. Part of me wanted them caught immediately. Another part was just relieved they weren't standing there waiting for us.

Clem moved closer. Her arm brushed mine.

"You okay?"

I looked at her.

"Ask me tomorrow."

She smiled faintly.

"Fair."

A small car pulled up outside.

A middle-aged man climbed out, wearing a jumper over what looked like pyjama trousers. He stared at the broken shop window.

Then at the police.

Then at us.

"What the hell's happened?"

PC Harris turned.

"Morning, sir. Are you the owner?"

"Yes!"

The man hurried towards the entrance.

"What happened to my window?"

I swallowed.

Oh, God. The shop owner. I'd almost forgotten about him. He looked through the broken glass. Then at the scattered crisps. Then at the office corridor. His face went red.

"Someone's broken in!"

"Yes, sir," PC Harris said. "We're dealing with an

incident."

The man stared at us.

"Was it them?"

I wanted the ground to open and swallow me. Although, considering my recent experiences, perhaps that wasn't the best thing to wish for.

"Yes," I said quietly.

He looked at me.

"What?"

"We broke the window."

His mouth fell open.

"YOU?"

I nodded.

"Sorry."

He stared at my feet.

Then at Clem.

Then back at me.

"Why?"

I opened my mouth. But PC Harris spoke first.

"Sir, these young ladies were apparently trying to escape a serious situation. We'll need to establish exactly what's happened."

The man looked at him. Then at us.

His expression changed slightly.

"Escape?"

Clem nodded.

"Some men were chasing us."

The shop owner stared. Then looked towards the street.

"Here?"

"Yes," I said.

He rubbed his forehead.

"Christ."

The alarm shrieked again.

The shop owner winced.

"Hang on."

He hurried behind the counter and opened a little cupboard. A moment later, the alarm stopped.

The silence was incredible. I hadn't realised how much the noise had been hurting my head. I closed my eyes and for a few seconds, all I could hear was the wind outside and the faint voices of people gathering in the street. Then the shop owner spoke.

"Right."

I opened my eyes. He was looking at the broken window. Then at us.

"Anyone hurt?"

I blinked.

"Um. Not badly."

He looked at my feet.

"Good Lord. Where are your shoes?"

I sighed.

"Everyone keeps asking that."

Clem made a small noise beside me.

I looked at her. She was trying not to laugh. I glared. She smiled. The shop owner shook his head.

"Well, you'd better sit down before you fall down."

He pulled two chairs from beside the little coffee machine.

"Here."

I stared at him.

"Are you sure?"

He looked at the window. Then at me.

"Bit late to worry about making a mess, isn't it?"

I smiled weakly.

"Sorry."

He sighed.

"Yes, well. Sit."

We sat.

PC Harris had stepped aside and was speaking into the radio attached to his uniform.

"Control, this is Harris. We've located two juvenile females at the premises."

There was a crackle.

Then a voice answered. He listened.

"Both appear to be approximately fifteen or sixteen. They're reporting being pursued by several males, possibly associated with Cairn Eco-Solutions."

Another crackle. I watched him. It was strange hearing someone else say it. Hearing our ridiculous, terrifying night described in an ordinary police voice.

As though it was something real. Something that could be written down. Investigated. Dealt with.

He continued.

"Can you confirm whether we've had a related emergency call?"

A pause. Then the radio crackled again.

I couldn't hear every word. But I heard enough.

"Affirmative. Nine-nine-nine call received from this address. Female caller, sixteen years old, identifying herself as Maya."

My stomach tightened. That was me.

The voice continued.

"Caller reports witnessing suspected illegal waste disposal on the island near Wells-next-the-Sea. States she has video evidence and that multiple males pursued her and another female overnight."

PC Harris looked towards us.

Then pressed the radio button.

"Received. That matches what they're telling us."

The shop owner had been standing behind the counter.

Now he stopped moving.

He looked at us.

"Overnight?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"You've been out all night?"

Clem nodded.

"Since about half nine yesterday."

He stared.

"Good God."

I looked down at my hands. They were filthy. There was dried mud beneath my nails. A little cut across one knuckle. I couldn't remember getting it.

The shop owner came round the counter.

"Would you like some water?"

I looked up.

"Yes, please."

He nodded.

Then looked at Clem.

"You too?"

"Please."

He disappeared towards the back.

I watched him go.

Then leaned towards Clem.

"I think he might forgive us."

She smiled.

"Maybe."

"Probably not the window."

"Probably not."

PC Harris was still speaking into his radio.

"Control, can you advise on the location and any associated incidents?"

There was a pause. He listened carefully.

Then looked at us again.

"Understood."

He lowered the radio. For a moment, he seemed to be thinking. Then he came over and crouched slightly in front of our chairs.

"Right, girls. I need to ask you a few questions."

I nodded.

"Okay."

"First, your full names."

I told him mine. Clem told him hers.

He wrote them down in a little notebook.

"Both sixteen?"

"I'm fifteen," Clem said. "Nearly sixteen."

He nodded.

"And you're both from the island?"

I shook my head.

"I live there now. We moved a few weeks ago."

"Clem?"

"Always lived there."

He nodded again.

"All right. Now, I understand you've got some video footage?"

I touched my coat pocket.

"Yes."

"On your phone?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Do you still have it?"

I pulled the phone out.

The screen was black.

The case was covered in mud.

But it was there.

I held it up.

"Yes."

PC Harris looked at it.

"Good. Keep hold of that for now."

I nodded.

"It's out of battery."

"That's fine. Don't delete anything."

I stared at him.

"Wasn't planning to."

He smiled faintly.

"Good."

The shop owner returned with two bottles of water. He handed one to each of us. I stared at mine. A bottle of water. Something so ordinary. So normal.

I almost cried.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

I unscrewed the cap and drank. The water was cold. Clean. Wonderful. I hadn't realised how thirsty I was.

Clem drank too. Then sat back in her chair. For the first time all morning, she looked as exhausted as I felt. Her shoulders had dropped. Her eyes were half closed.

I wanted to reach over and take her hand. But PC Harris was still asking questions.

"Now," he said, "I need you to tell me exactly what you saw last night."

I looked at Clem. She looked back. For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then I took a breath.

"We went out to the marsh."

He nodded.

"Why?"

"Because we'd seen lights there. At night. And my dad's been studying the birds on the island, and he thinks something's wrong."

PC Harris wrote something down.

"Go on."

"We wanted to see what was happening."

"And what did you see?"

I swallowed.

"Lorries. Machines. Men dumping waste into this enormous hole in the ground."

He looked up.

"An enormous hole?"

I nodded.

"Like a cave. Underground. They were tipping things into it."

"What sort of things?"

"Barrels. Bags. Containers. Loads of stuff."

Clem leaned forward.

"Industrial waste, we think. The lorries had CES logos."

PC Harris nodded.

"And you filmed this?"

"Yes."

"Then what happened?"

I looked at Clem. She looked at me. I thought about the men shouting. The vehicles. The marsh. The mud swallowing my boots. The boathouse. The long, freezing night. The causeway. The shop window.

I let out a slow breath.

"They saw us."

PC Harris listened while we explained. Not everything. Not yet. There was far too much. But enough.

Enough for him to understand that this wasn't two teenagers playing a stupid prank. Enough for him to realise that we'd been chased. That we'd been frightened. That we'd crossed the mudflats because we couldn't find another way off the island.

He asked a few questions. Where exactly had we seen the dumping? How many men? What vehicles? Had anyone threatened us directly? I answered as best I could. Clem filled in the things I'd forgotten.

At one point, PC Harris looked down at my feet again.

Then at the broken window. Then at us.

He shook his head slightly.

"Right."

He stood.

"I need to speak to control again."

He stepped towards the entrance and raised his radio.

"Control, Harris. Further information from the two females."

The radio crackled.

He continued.

"They're reporting a possible organised illegal dumping operation involving Cairn Eco-Solutions, with multiple vehicles and personnel. They have video evidence. They also report being pursued throughout the night and prevented from leaving the island by the usual route."

A pause.

Then he added, "Both are juveniles. One has injuries to her feet and appears to have been walking without footwear for some considerable distance."

I looked at Clem. She gave me a tiny smile.

"Some considerable distance," she whispered.

I smiled weakly.

"Very official."

She nodded.

"Sounds impressive."

I looked down at my socks.

"Doesn't feel impressive."

PC Harris listened to the radio. Then answered.

"Understood. We'll remain with them. Requesting medical assessment and additional units. Also, we'll need to establish contact with their parents."

My stomach dropped. Parents. Oh, God. Mum and Dad. I'd been so busy trying to survive that I'd barely allowed myself to think about them. They'd woken up this morning. Found my bed empty.

My phone switched off. No message. No explanation.

And I'd been gone all night. I stared at the floor. Mum must be terrified. Dad too. They might have been searching for me. Calling people. Walking around the island. Asking if anyone had seen us.

And CES had been going from house to house, asking about children who'd come home late.

I felt sick.

Clem must have noticed. She leaned closer.

"What?"

I looked at her.

"Our parents."

Her expression changed.

"Oh."

For a moment, she looked just as frightened as I felt.

Then she reached for my hand. I took it.

PC Harris came back towards us.

"All right. We're going to get you somewhere safe and warm. There'll be more officers coming, and someone will need to take a proper statement from both of you."

I nodded.

"Okay."

He looked at Clem.

"And we'll contact your parents as soon as we can."

She nodded too.

"Right."

I swallowed.

"Are we in trouble?"

He frowned.

"For what?"

I looked towards the broken window.

"The shop."

He glanced at it. Then at the owner.

The man was standing behind the counter, looking at the damage. PC Harris looked back at me.

"Right now, I'm much more concerned about why two teenage girls felt they had to break into a shop to call the police."

I stared at him. He continued.

"We'll sort out the damage later."

I nodded.

"Okay."

The shop owner sighed.

"Just don't make a habit of it."

I looked at him.

"Definitely not."

He nodded.

"Good."

Outside, another police car pulled up. Blue lights flashed across the shop window. The female officer went out to meet it.

I watched through the broken glass as two more uniformed officers climbed out. One spoke into a radio.

The other looked along the road. Towards the direction the men had run. For the first time since we'd left the marsh, I felt something loosen inside me. Not completely. I was still frightened. Still cold. Still exhausted. But there were police officers outside. Real ones.

And they knew what was happening. They knew about CES. They knew about the video. They knew the men had been chasing us.

I looked at Clem.

She was sitting beside me, holding her bottle of water with both hands. Her hair was a mess. Her coat was filthy. She had a little bruise forming near her shoulder. I wondered whether I looked as bad. Probably worse.

I leaned towards her.

"Hey."

She looked at me.

"Yeah?"

"We did it."

She stared at me for a moment.

Then smiled.

A tired, crooked little smile.

"Yeah."

I squeezed her hand.

"We actually did it."

She squeezed back.

And for the first time since Friday night, I began to believe that we might really be safe.

Chapter Forty-Two

The tea was too hot to drink.

I held the mug between both hands anyway. It was the best thing I'd touched in about twelve hours. Apart from Clem. Although I wasn't going to tell her that.

We were sitting together on a little sofa in a room at the police station. There were two armchairs, a low table and a box of tissues that someone had placed between us.

A clock ticked on the wall.

Someone had given us blankets. Mine was dark blue and smelled faintly of washing powder. Clem's was grey, with a little hole near one corner. We looked ridiculous.

Two filthy girls wrapped up like elderly people waiting for the heating to come on. But I was warm. Actually warm. And sitting down. On furniture. With cushions. It was wonderful.

I took a tiny sip of tea. Burned my tongue.

"Ow."

Clem looked at me.

"What?"

"Hot."

She stared at my mug.

"Tea usually is."

I gave her a look.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She smiled into her own mug.

A police officer had brought us here from the shop.

A paramedic had looked at my feet before we left, cleaned the cut on my right sole and covered it with a dressing. She'd also checked that I could still feel my toes, which seemed a reasonable concern given how cold they'd been.

Then she'd given me a pair of thick socks.

Proper socks. Dry ones. I couldn’t help it and had hugged her.

I was wearing them now, along with a pair of enormous disposable slippers someone had found. They were white. They made a horrible rustling noise when I walked. And they were approximately three sizes too

big. I loved them.

My ruined socks had been put into a plastic bag. I hoped never to see them again. The paramedic had also looked at our shoulders. Mine was bruised. Clem's was worse. Apparently, running into a locked door wasn't a particularly good idea.

Who knew?

I looked at the clock. Just after nine. That seemed impossible. Yesterday morning, I'd been in bed. Yesterday afternoon, I'd been thinking about going out with Clem. Yesterday evening, we'd been creeping across the marsh with Dad's binoculars.

And now we were sitting in a police station, wrapped in blankets, waiting for our parents. I looked at Clem.

She was staring into her tea. Her hair had dried into a complete mess. There was a little scratch on her cheek. She looked exhausted.

I nudged her knee with mine.

"Hey."

She looked up.

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

She thought about it.

"Think so."

"Convincing."

She smiled faintly.

"You?"

I looked down at my mug.

"Ask me next week."

She nodded.

"Fair."

A woman called Sergeant Patel had spoken to us earlier. She was perhaps in her forties, with dark hair tied back and a calm, practical manner that I liked immediately. She'd explained that we weren't in trouble. At least, not for the moment.

They needed proper statements from us, and the video on my phone would have to be copied and examined. But first, we needed to get warm, have something to drink and wait for our families. She'd also told us that the police were already dealing with CES.

That was the part I kept thinking about. Already dealing with them. Not going to look into it next week. Not planning to make some enquiries. Actually doing

something. Right now. It felt strange.

For hours, it had been just me and Clem. Two girls against what seemed like half the island. Now there were adults involved. Proper adults.

With radios and police cars and people who knew how to investigate things. I was quite happy to let them take over.

There was a knock at the door. We both looked up.

Sergeant Patel came in.

"How are we doing?"

Clem lifted her mug.

"Good tea."

The sergeant smiled.

"Glad to hear it."

I looked at her.

"Any news?"

She nodded.

"Quite a bit, actually."

I sat up.

"About CES?"

"Yes."

She pulled one of the armchairs closer and sat down.

"First, I want you both to know that we are taking what you've told us very seriously."

I nodded. She continued.

"The video from your phone has been copied, and officers are reviewing it."

I looked towards my phone, which was lying on the table. Someone had charged it. Another wonderful thing. Electricity. I'd missed electricity.

"And?" I asked.

She smiled slightly.

"And it's been very helpful."

I looked at Clem. She raised her eyebrows.

I looked back at the sergeant.

"So they believe us?"

"We had no reason to think you were making it up, Maya."

I felt my face get warm.

"Right."

"But the footage gives us something concrete to work with."

I nodded. That made sense. Sergeant Patel folded her hands.

"We've also contacted the Environment Agency."

I frowned.

"The what?"

"The Environment Agency. They deal with environmental protection, including pollution and waste offences."

"Oh."

"An investigation team is on its way to the island now."

I stared at her.

"Already?"

"Yes."

Clem leaned forward.

"To the marsh?"

"That's one of the places they'll be looking at."

I thought about the enormous hole. The lorries. The containers. The digger pushing earth over everything.

"Will they be able to find it?"

The sergeant nodded.

"Your video shows the location and some of the equipment. We also have officers familiar with the area. There are several lines of enquiry."

I swallowed.

"Good."

She looked at us both.

"And the police are securing the relevant parts of the island."

Clem frowned.

"Securing?"

"Making sure evidence isn't disturbed and that the people we need to speak to remain available."

I looked at her.

"Are they arresting people?"

She nodded.

"Several people in senior positions at CES have already

been detained."

I stared.

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

Clem looked at me. I looked at her.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then I said, "Oh."

It wasn't a particularly impressive response.

But it was all I had.

"Some of the other people involved are still on the island," Sergeant Patel continued. "The main causeway is being controlled by police."

I sat up straighter.

"Controlled?"

"Officers are checking vehicles and preventing people connected with the investigation from leaving without being spoken to."

I thought about the two men standing near the landing. The ones who'd been waiting for us.

I almost smiled.

"Good."

The sergeant looked at me.

"Good?"

I nodded.

"They were watching the causeway. Yesterday. Well, this morning."

I shook my head.

"I've lost track of time."

"That's understandable."

"They said nobody was getting off the island without them knowing."

Sergeant Patel nodded.

"Well, they're not in charge of it now."

I looked at Clem. She gave me a small smile. That was probably the nicest thing anyone had said all morning.

There was another knock.

A young officer opened the door.

"Sergeant? The families are here."

My stomach dropped.

Clem sat up so quickly that her tea nearly spilled.

"Families?"

The officer nodded.

"Three adults. Asking for Maya and Clementine."

I stared at him. Mum. Dad. Tom. They were here.

Suddenly, I wasn't sure whether I wanted to see them. Not because I didn't miss them. I missed them so much it hurt. But because I knew what was coming. The questions. The worry. The look on Mum's face.

The fact that I'd disappeared all night without telling anyone where I was.

I looked at Clem. She looked just as nervous.

Sergeant Patel stood.

"I'll bring them in."

Then she left.

For a moment, neither of us moved. I stared at my mug. Clem stared at the door.

Then she said quietly, "Dad's going to kill me."

I looked at her.

"Mine too."

She glanced at me.

"Your dad?"

"Probably not literally."

"Mine neither."

We sat in silence.

Then I added, "Mum might."

Clem smiled.

"Yeah."

I swallowed.

My hands were shaking again.

I put the mug down before I dropped it.

The door opened.

Mum came in first.

I barely recognised her.

Not because she looked different.

Because I'd never seen her look like that before.

Her hair was tied back badly, with loose strands hanging around her face. She was wearing jeans,

trainers and the old grey jumper she normally wore when she was working at home.

Her eyes were red.

Dad was right behind her.

He looked exhausted.

His hair was a mess, and he was wearing his outdoor jacket over a shirt that wasn't properly buttoned at the collar.

Tom came in after them. Big. Bearded. Still wearing his heavy coat. His face was pale beneath the beard.

For one second, all three of them just stood there.

Looking at us.

Then Mum said, "Maya?"

I stood up. Or tried to. The slippers got caught beneath my feet. I stumbled.

Mum crossed the room before I could fall. And then she was hugging me. Hard. So hard I could barely breathe.

"Oh, my God."

Her voice broke.

"Oh, Maya."

I wrapped my arms around her.

And suddenly I was crying.

I hadn't cried properly all night.

I'd come close. Several times. Many times. But there'd always been something else to do. Run. Hide. Walk. Keep moving. Don't stop. Now there was nothing. Just Mum.

Her arms around me. Her hand on the back of my head. Her voice saying my name. And I couldn't stop crying.

"I'm sorry."

She held me tighter.

"I'm so sorry."

"Oh, love."

Her voice was shaking.

"We've been looking everywhere."

"I know."

"No, you don't."

She pulled back just enough to look at me.

Her face was wet.

"Do you have any idea how frightened we've been?"

I shook my head.

"I'm sorry."

She stared at me. Then hugged me again. Dad joined us. His arms went around both of us.

"Sweetheart."

I started crying harder. Which was annoying. Because I thought I'd already reached my limit. Apparently not.

Beside us, Tom had reached Clem.

He didn't say anything at first. He just wrapped his arms around her. She disappeared into his coat.

I heard him let out a long, shaky breath.

"God, Clem."

Her voice was muffled.

"Hi, Dad."

He laughed.

Not a happy laugh.

More like someone who'd been holding his breath for hours and had finally remembered how to breathe.

"Hi, Dad?"

She nodded against his chest.

"Yeah."

He held her tighter.

"That's what you've got?"

"Sorry."

He kissed the top of her head.

"Bloody hell, girl."

Eventually, Mum let me sit down again. Not that she really let go. She sat beside me and kept one arm around my shoulders. Dad pulled up a chair.

Tom sat beside Clem, holding her hand.

For a while, nobody seemed to know what to say. Then Mum looked down at my feet.

"Where are your shoes?"

I closed my eyes.

"Oh, for God's sake."

Dad blinked.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Clem started laughing.

Quietly at first. Then harder. I looked at her.

"Don't."

She shook her head.

"Sorry."

Mum stared between us.

"What?"

I sighed.

"I lost them in the mud."

Dad looked horrified.

"Both?"

I stared at the ceiling.

"Yes. Both."

Clem laughed again.

And suddenly I was laughing too.

Not because it was particularly funny.

Because everything was so ridiculous. Because we were alive. Because our parents were here. And because apparently losing both boots was going to be the thing everyone remembered.

Sergeant Patel returned a few minutes later.

She brought another officer with her, who introduced himself as Detective Inspector Morgan.

He was a tall man with greying hair and a tired expression. He shook hands with our parents. Then sat down.

"I understand you've been given a brief explanation of what's happened."

Mum nodded.

"Very brief."

Dad looked at me.

"We were told the girls had witnessed something at the CES site."

Tom frowned.

"And that they'd been chased."

Detective Inspector Morgan nodded.

"That's correct."

He looked towards us.

"Would you girls mind if I explain a little more to your parents?"

I nodded.

"Please."

Clem nodded too. I was grateful. I didn't think I could tell the whole story again. Not yet. He explained what we'd seen. The night operation. The waste being dumped into the underground caverns. The vehicles. The video. The men pursuing us. The night in the boathouse. The causeway. The shop. He didn't go into every detail. But he said enough.

Mum's arm tightened around me when he mentioned the marsh. Dad went very still when he heard about the dumping.

Tom looked as though someone had hit him.

"CES?" he said quietly.

The detective nodded.

"Yes."

Tom shook his head.

"I work there."

"I understand."

"Maintenance. Day shift."

"We're aware of that, Mr..."

"Tom."

"Mr..." The detective checked his notes, then continued. "We understand you work at the main plant."

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

He looked at Clem.

Then back at the detective.

"I didn't know anything about this."

His voice sounded different. Smaller.

Almost frightened.

Detective Inspector Morgan nodded.

"At this stage, we're not suggesting that ordinary staff at the main facility were aware of the activities under investigation."

Tom rubbed his face.

"Christ."

Clem squeezed his hand. He looked at her.

"I'm sorry, love."

She shook her head.

"Not your fault."

He didn't answer.

Dad leaned forward.

"The birds."

Everyone looked at him. He stared at the detective.

"The changes in the bird populations. The eastern marshes. That's what this is about, isn't it?"

Detective Inspector Morgan considered his answer.

"It's too early to say exactly what environmental damage may have occurred."

Dad nodded slowly.

"But it could explain it."

"Potentially."

Dad looked at me. I could see him thinking. All those mornings with his binoculars. All those notes. The strange changes he'd been trying to understand. He looked suddenly older. Then he reached for my hand.

"You filmed it?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

He stared at me. Then shook his head.

"Sweetheart."

I swallowed.

"I know."

He squeezed my hand.

"That was incredibly brave."

Mum turned towards him.

"Julian."

He looked at her.

"What?"

"Please don't encourage her."

I almost smiled.

Dad looked back at me.

"Also incredibly stupid."

"Thanks."

He gave me a tired smile.

"Both things can be true."

Detective Inspector Morgan explained that the Environment Agency had been notified shortly after the police received our call.

"They've got officers and specialist staff heading to the island now," he said. "We're working together to preserve evidence and establish exactly what's been happening."

Dad nodded.

"Will they be able to test the ground?"

"That's something they'll assess."

"And the water?"

"Potentially, yes."

Dad looked as though he wanted to ask another twenty questions. I recognised that expression. It was his work face. The one he got when someone mentioned birds, migration patterns or anything remotely scientific.

Mum put a hand on his arm.

"Julian."

He looked at her. She gave him a look.

He stopped.

"Right. Sorry."

The detective continued.

"Several senior CES personnel have already been taken into custody. Others are being located and questioned."

Tom looked up.

"Senior personnel?"

"Yes."

"At the main plant?"

"I can't go into individual names at this stage."

Tom nodded.

"Right."

"The causeway is currently under police control," the detective added. "We're checking movements on and off the island."

Mum looked at him.

"Yes, we saw that."

I turned towards her.

"You did?"

She nodded.

"We came across just before they started stopping everyone."

Dad leaned forward.

"There were police vehicles everywhere."

Tom nodded.

"And people being helped off the mud."

I stared at him.

"What?"

He looked at me.

"Near the old crossing."

My stomach tightened.

"The southern one?"

"Yes."

Dad nodded.

"We saw emergency crews heading down towards the flats."

Mum looked at me.

"There were men out there. Stuck in the mud."

I stared.

"The men who chased us?"

"We don't know, love."

Tom shook his head.

"Looked like at least two of them needed help getting out."

I thought about the man who'd sunk almost to his knees. The one who'd been struggling while another tried to pull him free. I pictured him still out there. Stuck. Cold. Waiting for someone to rescue him.

I didn't feel particularly sorry.

But I was glad someone was helping.

Mostly because I knew exactly how horrible that mud could be.

"Are they all caught?" Clem asked.

Detective Inspector Morgan looked at her.

"We're still establishing who was involved."

She nodded.

"But the men who chased us?"

"Some have been detained. Others are being sought."

I looked at him.

"So they're still out there?"

He paused.

"Possibly. But the island is being secured, and officers are looking for them."

Mum's arm tightened around me again.

I swallowed.

I wanted him to say no.

That everyone had been caught.

That nobody could come after us anymore.

But at least he wasn't pretending.

I appreciated that.

Even if I didn't particularly like the answer.

After a while, the detective stood.

"We'll need formal statements from both girls, but there's no need to rush them this morning."

Mum nodded.

"Thank you."

"They've had a very difficult night."

I almost laughed.

That was one way of putting it.

He looked at us.

"You've both done very well."

Clem nodded.

"Thanks."

I nodded too.

Then he left with Sergeant Patel.

And suddenly it was just us. Mum. Dad. Tom. Clem. And me.

For a while, nobody spoke. Mum kept stroking my hair. Dad was holding my hand. Tom sat with his arm around Clem.

The clock ticked. Someone walked past in the corridor. A telephone rang somewhere outside. Ordinary sounds. Safe sounds. I took another sip of tea. It had finally cooled enough to drink. Perfect.

Then Mum said quietly, "We searched all night."

I looked at her.

"I know."

She shook her head.

"No, love. You don't."

I stared at her.

"We went to Clem's house first," she said. "When you weren't home."

Tom nodded.

"I thought you might be together."

Dad looked at me.

"Then we started asking around."

"Everyone," Mum said. "The pub. The shop. People in the village."

Tom rubbed his forehead.

"We walked the lanes. Checked the boathouses."

I froze.

"The boathouses?"

He nodded.

"Some of them. Not all."

I looked at Clem. She looked back. We'd been hiding in one. All night. While our parents were searching. I felt sick.

Mum continued.

"We called your phones. Over and over."

I looked down.

"Mine was off."

"We know that now."

She took a breath.

"We were terrified."

I swallowed.

"I'm sorry."

Mum looked at me.

Then pulled me close again.

"Oh, love."

Tom looked at Clem.

"Why didn't you come home?"

She hesitated.

Then said quietly, "We couldn't."

He stared at her.

"What?"

"They were looking for us. We thought if we went home, they'd find us."

Tom's expression changed. He looked towards Mum and Dad. Then back at Clem.

"You thought they'd come to the house?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

He closed his eyes. For a moment, he didn't speak. Then he pulled her into another hug.

"God."

I looked at Dad. He was staring at the floor. I knew what he was thinking. That we'd been close. That we'd passed our own house while running through the village. That Mum and Dad had been inside. And I'd kept going. I reached for his hand.

"Dad?"

He looked up.

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head.

"Don't."

"But..."

He squeezed my hand.

"Sweetheart, you're here."

I stared at him.

"That's what matters."

My eyes filled again.

I looked away.

I was getting very tired of crying.

Clem shifted beside me. Her blanket slipped off one shoulder. Tom pulled it back up. She gave him a look.

"Dad."

"What?"

"I'm not five."

He stared at her.

Then smiled.

"No."

He tucked the blanket around her anyway.

"You're not."

I smiled. Mum did too. And for a moment, the room felt almost normal. I looked at Clem. She looked at me. We'd done it.

We'd got off the island. We'd called the police. We'd told someone what was happening. And now the Environment Agency was heading towards the marsh. The police were guarding the causeway. People from CES were being arrested.

The men who'd chased us were either caught, being hunted or stuck in the mud waiting for someone to pull them out. I wasn't sure which option I preferred. Probably the mud. Just a little.

Mum stood.

"Right."

I looked up.

"What?"

"You're both going to need some proper food."

I stared at her.

"Food?"

"Yes, Maya. Food."

I thought about it. When had I last eaten? Yesterday evening? A sandwich before going out? That seemed like a lifetime ago.

My stomach suddenly growled. Loudly. Everyone looked at me. I stared at them.

"What?"

Clem started laughing. Tom smiled. Dad shook his head. Mum gave me a look.

"Exactly."

I leaned back against the sofa. The blanket was warm. My tea was nearly finished. My feet were finally dry and warm. And Mum was sitting beside me. Dad was there. Clem was there. Tom was there.

For the first time since we'd stepped into the marsh the previous night, I didn't have to think about where to run next.

I didn't have to listen for engines. Or footsteps. Or men shouting in the dark. I didn't have to worry about the tide. Or the causeway. Or whether the ground beneath my feet was going to swallow me. Someone else was

dealing with all that now.

I looked at Clem. She was watching me. She gave me a small, tired smile. I smiled back. Then I reached for her hand beneath the blankets.

She took it. And held on.

Chapter Forty-Three

By three o'clock, I'd discovered that there were worse things than wearing clothes that didn't fit.

Not many. But a few. Being chased across a marsh by angry men was one. Spending an entire night in a freezing boathouse was another. And walking across a kilometre of wet sand in socks was definitely up there.

Still, the trousers were ridiculous. They were black jogging bottoms, about four inches too long, with an elastic waistband that came almost up to my ribs. I'd rolled the legs up three times. They still looked stupid.

The jumper was worse. Bright pink. With a picture of a smiling sheep on the front. Underneath it were the words EWE ARE AMAZING.

I stared down at myself.

"I look like a primary school teacher on Christmas Jumper Day."

Clem looked up from her hot chocolate.

She smiled.

"You look lovely."

I gave her a look.

"Don't."

"Very fetching."

"Clem."

"Really brings out your eyes."

I kicked her gently beneath the table. She laughed. It was the first proper laugh I'd heard from her all day. And despite the jumper, I found myself smiling.

We were sitting in a café just outside the village on the mainland.

It was the one with the chairs upside down on the tables, with faded curtains, mismatched chairs and a handwritten sign in the window advertising cream teas.

The sign was probably older than me.

According to the woman behind the counter, the café hadn't been open since summer. But today, someone had unlocked it. Apparently, when half the Norfolk police force turned up in a tiny coastal village, somebody had to make them tea.

There were police officers everywhere. Inside. Outside. In the car park. Standing beside vehicles with radios pressed to their mouths.

A couple of people wearing dark jackets with ENVIRONMENT AGENCY printed across the backs

were sitting at another table, drinking coffee and looking at maps.

Someone had brought in a stack of sandwiches. Another person was carrying a tray of mugs towards the door. It was the busiest closed café I'd ever seen.

Admittedly, I didn't have much experience with closed cafés. But I felt confident about that one.

Mum and Dad were sitting opposite us.

Tom had gone to speak to one of the police officers outside, but he'd promised Clem he wouldn't disappear.

He'd said it about three times. She'd rolled her eyes. Then made him promise again. I understood. After last night, I didn't particularly want anyone wandering off either.

Mum was wearing the same grey jumper she'd had on at the police station. She'd washed her face and brushed her hair, but she still looked tired.

Dad had acquired a cup of coffee and was staring out of the window. Every few minutes, another police vehicle passed. Some were heading towards the coast. Others were coming back.

The main road towards the island had been closed to ordinary traffic. Nobody was being allowed across the causeway without permission. Which meant we couldn't go home. Not yet.

Mum had asked about it earlier. The police had explained that the island was still part of an active investigation and access was being controlled.

They'd find somewhere for us to stay if necessary. I wasn't particularly upset. Home sounded wonderful. My own bed sounded even better. But the thought of going back across that causeway made my stomach tighten. Even in a car. Even with Mum and Dad. I wasn't ready.

I lifted my mug. Hot chocolate. With whipped cream. And little marshmallows. The woman behind the counter had insisted.

She'd looked at us when we came in, taken one glance at our faces, and announced that we needed something with sugar in it.

I hadn't argued.

The chocolate was thick and sweet.

I drank some.

A little whipped cream stuck to my nose.

Clem noticed.

Of course she did.

She reached across the table and wiped it away with her thumb.

"There."

I stared at her.

"Thanks."

She smiled as she put her finger in her mouth and licked it. Not in a gross way but very cutely so. I felt my face getting warm.

Which was stupid.

After everything we'd been through, apparently having Clem touch my nose was still enough to make my brain stop working.

I looked down at my mug. Very interesting mug. Lovely handle. Excellent ceramic work. The clothes had come from the village shop. Not the one we'd broken into. A different one. An actual shop that sold clothes, although apparently only to people who were either twelve or seventy.

Mum had bought us both a change of clothes while we were at the police station.

Clem was wearing grey tracksuit bottoms and a huge navy sweatshirt with NORFOLK written across the front. The sleeves covered half her hands and she looked like she'd borrowed clothes from someone much larger.

I thought she looked adorable. I was going to tell her

that. Just because it would irritate her. But not with our parents sitting there.

She'd also been given a pair of cheap trainers. Bright white. Far too clean. They looked completely wrong on her.

I'd got trainers too. Mine were black and slightly too big. But they had soles. Actual soles. I was prepared to overlook everything else.

The shop hadn't had much choice in our sizes, and Mum had clearly decided that warmth was more important than fashion.

I agreed. Mostly. I looked down at the sheep again. Perhaps not entirely. Dad turned away from the window.

"How are your feet, sweetheart?"

I looked at him.

"Still attached."

He smiled faintly.

"Good start."

"Bit sore."

"Have you taken the painkillers?"

I nodded.

"Yes."

"And the dressing?"

"Still there."

He looked as though he wanted to check. Again.

Mum gave him a look.

"Julian."

He raised his hands.

"Just asking."

She smiled.

"She's been checked by a paramedic and a doctor."

"I know."

"Twice."

"I know."

I took another sip of chocolate.

"Three times if you count you."

Dad looked at me.

"Very funny."

"Thank you."

Outside, a police van pulled into the car park. Two officers climbed out. One opened the rear doors and took out several boxes. The other spoke into a radio.

I watched them carry the boxes towards a vehicle parked near the road. There was something strange about seeing so many police officers in one place. Normally, if I saw a police car, I barely noticed. Now every uniform made me feel a little safer.

And a little nervous. Because they were here because of us. Well, not exactly because of us. Because of CES. Because of what we'd seen. But if we hadn't gone out last night, perhaps none of this would be happening.

I looked at the Environment Agency people sitting across the room. One had spread a map across the table. I recognised the shape of the island. The southeastern marsh. The coastline. The causeway. The man was pointing towards the eastern end.

Another person was writing something in a notebook. I wondered whether they knew about the enormous cavern. Whether they'd found it yet. Whether they'd seen the same things we had. I wanted to ask.

But Mum had already told me that I wasn't allowed to investigate anything else today. Or tomorrow. Or, apparently, for the rest of my natural life.

The café door opened. Cold air swept into the room. Tom came in. He looked around, spotted us and headed over. Clem sat up.

"Everything okay?"

He nodded.

"Yeah."

She looked at him.

"Sure?"

"Sure."

He pulled out a chair and sat beside her.

"Just spoke to one of the officers."

Dad leaned forward.

"Any news?"

Tom shrugged.

"Not much they're telling people."

He looked towards the window.

"They're still stopping everyone at the causeway."

Mum frowned.

"Even residents?"

"Yeah."

He rubbed his beard.

"There's a queue of vehicles on the mainland side. People trying to get home."

I looked at him.

"Are they letting anyone off?"

"Some people. After checking them."

I thought about the CES men. The ones who'd been searching the island. The ones who'd chased us. I wondered whether any of them were sitting in that queue. Trying to look ordinary. Trying to pretend they had nothing to do with anything. I hoped the police were checking very carefully.

Tom looked at Clem.

"How's the shoulder?"

She shrugged.

"Fine."

He raised an eyebrow.

"Fine?"

"Bit sore."

"Thought so."

He looked at me.

"And yours?"

"Also fine."

He gave us both a long look.

"You're terrible liars."

Clem smiled.

"Been told."

Tom shook his head. Then reached across and squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

The woman behind the counter came over with a plate.

"Anyone fancy a scone?"

I looked up.

The plate held four enormous scones.

With jam. And cream. I stared.

"Yes."

Mum laughed.

"That was quick."

"I've had a difficult day."

The woman smiled.

"So I've heard."

She put the plate down.

"On the house."

Mum looked at her.

"Oh, that's very kind."

"Don't mention it."

She glanced at Clem and me.

"Poor things."

I wasn't particularly keen on being called a poor thing. But if it came with free scones, I was prepared to make an exception.

I reached for a scone. Clem reached for the same one. We both stopped. I looked at her. She looked at me. Then she slowly pulled her hand back.

"Go on."

I narrowed my eyes.

"Why?"

"Nothing."

"What's wrong with it?"

She smiled.

"Nothing."

I looked at the scone.

Then at her.

"You're being suspicious."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

She laughed. I took the scone anyway. For a while, we just ate and drank. And watched the strange little world outside the café window.

A police car passed. Then a van. Then another police car.

An officer came in and asked for six teas to take away. The woman behind the counter started filling paper cups.

Someone at the Environment Agency table answered a phone.

I caught the words "sampling equipment" and "access road".

Then they lowered their voice. Dad noticed too. I could practically see him trying not to listen. He was failing.

Mum nudged him.

He looked at her.

"What?"

"Leave them alone."

"I wasn't doing anything."

"You were listening."

He smiled.

"Scientifically."

She rolled her eyes. I smiled into my hot chocolate. It was nice hearing them sound normal again. I looked at the clock above the counter. Nearly four.

It had been less than twenty-four hours since Clem and I had met by the old post box. That seemed impossible. It felt as though a week had passed. Maybe longer.

I thought about last night and looked at Clem. She was spreading jam onto half a scone. Carefully. As though this was the most important thing in the world. I

wondered whether she was thinking about it too.

Probably. But she didn't look frightened now. Just tired. And hungry. And slightly ridiculous in her enormous sweatshirt. I liked that.

Mum reached across the table and touched my hand.

"Love?"

I looked up.

"Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

I thought about it. Actually thought about it. My feet hurt. My shoulder hurt. I was exhausted. I was worried about going home. And I had absolutely no idea what was going to happen with CES. But I was sitting in a warm café. With hot chocolate. And scones. And Mum and Dad. Clem and Tom. And nobody was chasing us.

I nodded.

"Yeah."

Mum studied my face.

"Really?"

I smiled faintly.

"Mostly."

She squeezed my hand.

"Mostly will do."

Outside, a convoy of vehicles passed towards the coast. Two police cars. A dark van. Then a white vehicle with the Environment Agency logo on the side.

Dad watched them go.

"So they're really doing it," he said quietly.

Mum looked at him.

"Doing what?"

"Investigating."

He stared out of the window.

"Properly."

I looked at the vehicles disappearing down the road and I thought about the birds. The strange silence in the eastern marsh. The places where Dad said there should have been flocks. The things he'd been noticing for weeks. And the enormous hole in the ground.

I hoped they would find everything. Every container. Every barrel. Every bit of waste. And exactly what CES had been doing. And stopped it for good.

Clem leaned towards me.

"Hey."

I looked at her.

"Yeah?"

She nodded towards my jumper.

"Still think it's lovely."

I stared at her.

"Oh, shut up."

She grinned.

"Very you."

I looked down at the smiling sheep.

Then back at her.

"At least mine doesn't say NORFOLK in enormous letters."

She looked at her sweatshirt.

"What's wrong with Norfolk?"

"Nothing. Just in case you forget where you are."

She laughed.

"Useful, actually."

I smiled. Then leaned back against the seat. Outside, another police car went past. The road towards the island was still closed. We couldn't go home. Not yet.

But for once, I didn't mind being stuck somewhere. The café was warm. The chocolate was good. And Clem was sitting beside me, her knee resting against mine beneath the table.

I looked out at the grey November afternoon. For the first time since we'd arrived on the Mudpack, the island felt very far away. And right now, that was exactly how I wanted it.

Chapter Forty-Four

The first television van arrived. I noticed it because it had a satellite dish on the roof. A proper one. The sort I'd only ever seen on the news. It pulled into the car park opposite the café, followed by a smaller car with two people inside.

A woman climbed out of the van, looked towards the island and immediately started talking into her phone. Then a man appeared carrying a camera. I stared through the window.

"Oh, brilliant."

Clem looked up from her hot chocolate.

"What?"

I pointed.

"Television."

She turned.

"Oh."

The cameraman lifted the camera onto his shoulder and started filming towards the coast. The woman was still on her phone. Another man opened the back of the van and began unloading equipment.

I looked at Clem.

"Think they're here for the cream teas?"

She smiled.

"Probably."

"Very important national story. Norfolk café reopens."

"Locals stunned."

I laughed.

Then the woman with the phone turned towards the café. And I stopped laughing.

By half an hour later, there were three television vans. And several ordinary cars that apparently belonged to newspapers. And a photographer with an enormous camera lens. And a man carrying a microphone with a fluffy grey thing on the end. I'd never seen so many people looking so interested in a small car park.

The café owner stood behind the counter, watching them through the window.

"Well," she said, "this is new."

Tom looked up.

"Getting busy out there."

"Busy?" she said. "I haven't had this many people

outside since the village fête."

Mum glanced towards the window.

"Do they know the girls are here?"

Nobody answered. Which was probably answer enough.

The police had set up a temporary control point near the road leading to the causeway. From our table by the window, we could see part of it. Several police vehicles were parked across the road.

Officers in high-visibility jackets were checking cars and speaking to drivers. Further away, towards the water, more vehicles had gathered.

There were Environment Agency vans. A couple of police four-wheel drives and a Coastguard vehicle with yellow and blue markings. Every now and then, someone walked past carrying equipment. Boxes and bags, even some long poles and things I couldn't identify.

I watched a group of people in waterproof jackets head towards the shoreline. One carried a large case. Another had what looked like a long metal tube. Dad leaned forward.

"Sampling equipment."

I looked at him.

"For the mud?"

"And the water, I expect."

I watched them disappear down the track. It felt strange. Last night, the marsh had been empty. Dark. Secret. A place where men could do whatever they wanted because nobody was watching.

Now there were police officers and scientists and people in bright jackets all over it. I liked that. A lot.

A Coastguard team was working near the edge of the mudflats. I could see them in the distance, little figures moving across the pale sand. They had a vehicle parked near the bank and were carrying ropes and other equipment.

Further out, towards the island, a small boat moved slowly along one of the tidal channels. I watched it for a while.

"Are they looking for people?" I asked.

Tom followed my gaze.

"Possibly."

"Or checking the channels," Dad said.

Clem leaned closer to the window.

"That's near where we crossed."

I looked.

She was right.

The boat was moving along the southern side of the flats. Near the old crossing. I could just make out a few of the wooden posts. They looked so small from here. So harmless. I thought about the freezing water around my knees. The soft sand. The men shouting behind us. My feet sinking. I pulled my blanket a little tighter.

Mum noticed.

"You cold, love?"

I shook my head.

"No."

She looked at me for a moment. Then put her hand over mine.

A police van came slowly along the road from the causeway. It was followed by another vehicle. Both stopped near the car park. Two officers climbed out. Then the side door of the van opened. A man stepped down.

He was wearing a dark jacket and jeans. His hands were held in front of him. An officer stood on either side. I stared.

"Clem."

She looked.

"What?"

I pointed.

"That man."

She leaned forward.

For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then she said quietly, "Yeah."

I recognised him. Not his face particularly. But the jacket. The way he moved. He'd been near the lorries. At the cavern. I was almost certain. He looked very different in daylight. Smaller. Ordinary.

Not like one of the terrifying figures who'd chased us through the marsh. Just a man in a jacket being escorted across a car park. He glanced towards the television cameras. Then immediately looked down.

The photographers moved closer. Cameras clicked. One of the reporters shouted a question. The man didn't answer.

The officers guided him towards another vehicle.

I watched until he disappeared inside.

"Was that one of them?" Mum asked.

I nodded.

"I think so."

Dad looked towards the car park.

"From last night?"

"Yeah."

Clem nodded too.

"He was at the dumping site."

Tom stared at the van. His expression had changed.

"Do you know him?" Clem asked.

He hesitated.

"Seen him around."

"At work?"

"Yeah. Not often."

He looked uncomfortable.

I understood why.

For four years, CES had been the company that employed half the island. Tom worked there. People talked about it in the pub. It sponsored things. Promised things. Made everyone feel that the island had a future.

And now its employees were being escorted away by police officers while television cameras filmed them. That had to be horrible. Even if Tom hadn't done anything wrong.

Clem put her hand on his arm. He looked at her. Then gave her a small smile.

More people were brought over during the next hour. Some in police vans. Others in ordinary cars with officers beside them. A woman in a smart coat. Two men wearing CES jackets. Another man in a high-visibility vest. I didn't recognise all of them. But I recognised enough.

One of the men had been near the digger. I remembered him standing beside the enormous opening in the ground, watching as containers disappeared into the darkness.

Now he was standing beside a police car, looking furious. He said something to an officer. The officer shook his head. The man said something else. Then the officer guided him into the vehicle. I watched the door close.

For a moment, I felt almost dizzy.

These were the people who'd been chasing us. Or helping the people who chased us. The ones who'd made us run through the marsh. The ones who'd kept us hiding all night. And now they were the ones who couldn't leave. Not without police permission.

I looked at Clem.

She was watching too. Neither of us said anything.

The television crews had noticed the police vehicles. They moved towards the car park, calling questions and filming everyone who came out.

A woman with a microphone stood in front of the camera. I obviously couldn't hear what she was saying through the glass but I could see her gesturing towards the island.

Behind her, the causeway stretched across the grey water. The Mudpack. Our Mudpack. On television. I tried to imagine people watching it in London. People sitting in warm living rooms with cups of tea. Seeing the place where we'd nearly been caught. Seeing the police vehicles. The Environment Agency teams. The men being taken away. It felt unreal.

Like watching a film about somewhere I'd once visited. Except I was in it. And I didn't particularly want to be.

The café door opened. A man came in. He was perhaps in his thirties, wearing a dark coat and carrying a notebook. He looked around. Then spotted our table.

I noticed his expression change. Not dramatically. Just a little flicker of recognition. He approached.

"Excuse me."

Mum looked up.

"Yes?"

The man smiled.

"Sorry to bother you. I'm with a local newspaper."

My stomach tightened. He looked at Clem and me.

"Are you the two girls who escaped from the island?"

Nobody answered.

Then Mum said, very calmly, "They're not giving interviews."

The man nodded.

"Of course. I completely understand. I was just hoping to ask a couple of questions."

"No."

He looked at Dad.

"Perhaps one of the parents could tell us..."

"No," Dad said.

Not loudly. Not rudely. Just no. The man hesitated. Then smiled again.

"It's quite an extraordinary story."

Mum looked at him.

"They're children who've had a very frightening experience."

"Absolutely. And we're very sympathetic."

"Then please leave them alone."

He looked between us. For a moment, I thought he might argue. Then he nodded.

"Of course."

He put his notebook away.

"Sorry to disturb you."

And left. I stared at Mum.

"Wow."

She looked at me.

"What?"

"That was terrifying."

She raised an eyebrow.

"Was it?"

"Yes."

Dad smiled.

"She's had practice."

Mum looked at him.

"Julian."

He lifted his coffee.

"Nothing."

Clem leaned towards me.

"Your mum's scarier than the CES blokes."

I nearly choked on my chocolate.

Mum looked at her.

"What was that?"

Clem smiled sweetly.

"Nothing."

Unfortunately, the newspaper man wasn't the last. About ten minutes later, a woman with a microphone approached the café window. She peered inside. Then pointed towards us.

Another person joined her. A cameraman. I immediately looked down.

"Oh, God."

Clem followed my gaze.

"Don't look."

"I'm trying not to."

The woman tapped on the glass. Mum turned. The woman smiled and raised her microphone slightly. Mum shook her head. The woman gestured towards the door. Mum shook her head again. Then she stood.

I stared.

"Mum?"

"Stay there, love."

She walked towards the counter. Spoke briefly to the café owner. Then came back.

A moment later, the owner went to the door and turned the sign around.

CLOSED

Which was quite funny, considering the café had technically been closed all day.

A police officer came over from the control point. He spoke to the woman outside. She gestured towards our window. The officer shook his head. They talked for

another minute. Then the woman and cameraman moved away.

I let out a breath.

Clem looked at me.

"Popular."

I stared at her.

"Don't."

She smiled.

"Local celebrities."

"I will throw this hot chocolate at you."

"Wouldn't waste it."

She was right. I took another sip.

Sergeant Patel arrived a little later.

She came in with another officer, spoke to the café owner and then approached our table.

"How are you all doing?"

Mum nodded.

"Fine, thank you. Although the press are getting rather persistent."

The sergeant glanced towards the window.

"Yes. We've noticed."

She looked at Clem and me.

"You don't need to speak to any journalists."

I nodded.

"Good."

"Your names and details aren't being released by us. And we're asking the media to respect your privacy."

I looked towards the cameras.

"Will they?"

She gave me a small smile.

"We'll do what we can."

I appreciated that she didn't promise something she couldn't guarantee.

"Thanks."

She nodded.

"We've also asked officers to keep an eye on the café."

Tom looked up.

"Because of the press?"

"Partly."

I felt my stomach tighten.

"Partly?"

Sergeant Patel looked at me.

"Just a precaution, Maya."

I nodded. I knew what she meant. There were still people connected to CES who hadn't been accounted for. And although the police were everywhere, it was probably sensible not to make us easy to reach.

Outside, the sky was beginning to darken. The grey afternoon was turning into a grey evening. The water around the island reflected the last of the daylight.

I watched another Environment Agency vehicle make its way towards the causeway. A Coastguard officer stood beside the road, speaking to someone in a waterproof jacket.

A police helicopter passed somewhere in the distance. I heard it before I saw it. A low thudding sound above the clouds. Then it appeared briefly, moving towards the eastern marsh. I stared.

"A helicopter."

Clem looked up.

"Yeah."

I turned towards her.

"Where was that yesterday?"

She smiled.

"Bit late."

"Very."

I watched it disappear. Then looked back at my hot chocolate.

Tom had gone quiet. He was watching the police vehicles. I noticed because he hadn't touched his tea for a while. Clem noticed too.

"Dad?"

He looked at her.

"Yeah?"

"You okay?"

He nodded.

"Yeah."

She gave him a look.

He sighed.

"Just thinking."

"About work?"

He nodded.

"Mostly."

Mum looked at him.

"Have they said anything about the staff?"

"Not much. I spoke with them earlier when I was outside."

He rubbed his beard.

"Plant's shut down for now. Nobody's going in unless the police say so."

Dad frowned.

"Even the day operation?"

"Yeah."

Tom looked out of the window.

"Suppose they need to check everything."

Clem squeezed his hand. He smiled faintly.

"Don't worry about me."

She raised an eyebrow. He sighed.

"All right. Worry a little."

Another group of CES employees was escorted across the car park. This time, there were four. Two men and two women. One of the women was crying. A police officer walked beside her, speaking quietly.

The cameras immediately turned towards them. Flash after flash. Questions shouted across the road. I watched the woman lower her head. For the first time, I wondered how many people at CES had known what was happening.

Some must have. The men we'd seen in the marsh certainly had. But what about everyone else? The people who cleaned the offices. The drivers who worked during the day. The people who answered phones. The ones who believed they were working for a company doing something good.

I looked at Tom. He was staring at the same group. I wondered whether he was thinking the same thing.

A photographer suddenly appeared near our window. He lifted his camera. I froze. The lens was pointing straight at us. Before I could react, Dad stood.

He moved between us and the window. The photographer lowered the camera slightly.

Dad shook his head. The man tried to move sideways. Dad moved too. Not aggressively. Just enough to block the view. Mum stood beside him.

Then Sergeant Patel appeared at the door.

She stepped outside and spoke to the photographer. I couldn't hear what she said. But he lowered his camera. A moment later, he walked away.

Dad sat down again. I stared at him.

"Thanks."

He smiled.

"Any time, sweetheart."

I looked at Clem.

She was smiling too.

"What?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing."

I narrowed my eyes.

"You're doing that a lot today."

"Am I?"

"Yes."

She grinned.

The café owner came over with another jug of hot chocolate.

"Refills?"

I looked at my mug. Then at her.

"Please."

She smiled and filled it. Clem held hers out too and the woman topped it up, then looked towards the window.

"Never seen anything like it."

Mum nodded.

"Neither have we."

The woman shook her head.

"That company's been here four years. Everyone thought they were wonderful."

Tom looked down. She noticed.

"Oh, sorry, love. I know you work there."

He shook his head.

"It's all right."

She sighed.

"Just goes to show, doesn't it?"

Nobody answered. She went back behind the counter.

I watched the road. Another police vehicle passed. Then an Environment Agency van. Then a Coastguard four-wheel drive. People were still working out there. It felt like a hundred vehicles and people had arrived by now. In droves.

On the island. In the marsh. Along the shoreline. They were finding things. Checking things. Taking photographs. Collecting samples. Doing all the things that needed to be done. I hoped they were finding enough. I hoped the video had helped. I hoped Dad would finally get answers about the birds.

And I hoped the people responsible would never get the chance to do it again.

Clem leaned closer.

"Hey."

I looked at her.

"Yeah?"

"You're doing that thing."

I frowned.

"What thing?"

"Thinking too much."

I stared at her.

"That's not a thing."

"Definitely is."

I looked towards the window.

Then back at her.

"There's a lot to think about."

She nodded.

"Yeah."

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then she reached beneath the table and took my hand. I looked down.

Her fingers were warm. Mine were too. That was new. I liked it. I gave her hand a squeeze and kept holding it.

Outside, another reporter approached the café. He stopped when he saw the police officer standing near the door. They spoke briefly. The reporter looked towards our window. Then walked away.

I watched him go.

"Think they'll get bored?"

Clem looked out.

"Eventually."

"When?"

She considered it.

"Next week?"

I groaned.

She smiled.

"Maybe Tuesday."

"Brilliant."

I looked down at my jumper. The smiling sheep stared back. I wondered whether someone had already photographed me wearing it. I sincerely hoped not.

If my first appearance on national television involved that jumper, I was moving back to London immediately. Possibly changing my name.

The last of the daylight faded. The café lights reflected in the window, making it harder to see the island. I could still make out the flashing blue lights near the causeway. And the distant shapes of vehicles moving along the coast. But the Mudpack itself was becoming a dark shape against the water.

I stared at it for a while. It was strange. A few days ago, I'd thought the island was boring. Too quiet. Too small. Too far from everything. Now it was surrounded by police. Full of investigators. And apparently interesting enough to attract half the country's journalists.

I wasn't sure which version I preferred. Probably the boring one. Definitely the boring one.

Mum touched my shoulder.

"Love?"

I looked at her.

"Yeah?"

"Are you tired?"

I nodded.

"Very."

She smiled gently.

"I thought so."

Dad glanced at his watch.

"We should probably find out where we're staying tonight."

Tom nodded.

"Yeah."

I looked at Clem. She looked at me. Neither of us said anything. But I could tell we were thinking the same thing. We didn't want to be separated. Not tonight. Not after everything. I squeezed her hand again. She squeezed back.

Mum noticed.

Of course she did. She looked at our hands. Then at our faces. For a moment, I thought she was going to say something.

Instead, she smiled.

"Well," she said, "wherever we end up, I think we can arrange for you two to stay together."

I stared at her.

"Really?"

She nodded.

"Really."

I looked at Clem. She was smiling. A proper smile. Not tired. Not frightened. Just happy.

I smiled back.

Outside, the cameras were still rolling. Police officers

were still working. The Environment Agency was still investigating. And somewhere on the island, people were being questioned about what they'd done.

There would be more questions tomorrow. More statements. More things to explain. Probably more reporters. And eventually, we'd have to go home.

Back to the island. Back to school. Back to whatever normal was supposed to look like after something like this. But not tonight. Tonight, there was hot chocolate. Warm clothes. Our parents. And Clem's hand in mine.

I looked out at the darkening coast. For once, I didn't need to know what was happening out there. There were plenty of people taking care of it. And I was quite happy to let them.

Chapter Forty-Five

The internet was back.

That was probably the strangest part.

Not the police cars we'd seen on the causeway. Not the reporters who'd spent three days trying to get photographs of us. Not even the fact that several people from CES were apparently facing criminal charges.

The internet.

After weeks of living in what had felt like the nineteenth century, my phone was suddenly receiving messages again.

All of them. At once.

I'd been sitting on my bed when it happened. One little notification. Then another. Then about forty more. My phone buzzed so much that I'd thought something was wrong with it.

There were messages from friends in London, school emails, news alerts and several increasingly frantic messages from people who'd apparently seen something about me on television.

One of my old friends had sent:

MAYA IS THAT YOUR ISLAND ON THE NEWS???

Followed by:

OMG

Then:

ARE YOU ALIVE

I stared at the screen.

Then typed:

Unfortunately yes.

She replied with eleven crying emojis.

It was nice to know some things hadn't changed.

It had been five days since we'd escaped from the marsh. Five days since the police had found us in the shop. Five days since I'd last worn the horrible pink sheep jumper.

I'd burned that, obviously. Not literally. Mum had washed it and folded it neatly in my wardrobe, claiming it might come in useful. I couldn't imagine a situation where a bright pink jumper announcing EWE ARE AMAZING would ever be useful. Perhaps if I joined a sheep appreciation society. Otherwise, no.

We'd been allowed back onto the island two days

earlier.

The causeway was still controlled, but residents could come and go after being checked.

The first time we'd driven across, I'd sat in the back seat staring out of the window.

Mum had been driving. Dad had been beside her. Neither had said much. The water was low. The road was perfectly ordinary. There were no men waiting beside the landing.

No vehicles blocking the way.

Just a police car parked near the island end and an officer waving us through. Still, my stomach had tightened as we approached.

I hadn't realised how much until Mum reached back and touched my knee.

"All right, love?"

I'd nodded.

"Yeah."

She hadn't pushed.

That was something my parents had become very good at.

Not pushing.

Now it was Thursday evening, and we were all sitting around our dinner table.

Mum and dad of course. But also Clem and Tom. And me.

Dad had made spaghetti bolognese. A ridiculous large amount of spaghetti bolognese. Enough to feed approximately seventeen people. Apparently, when Dad was worried about something, he cooked.

A lot.

The table was covered in bowls, plates, garlic bread and a jug of water. There was also a little vase of flowers Mum had bought on the mainland. Yellow ones.

I didn't know what they were called. Dad probably did. He knew things like that. I knew approximately three types of flower. Roses, daisies and yellow.

Clem was sitting beside me. Not opposite. Beside. She'd chosen the chair next to mine without asking. And I'd moved my chair a little closer.

Not obviously. Just enough that our knees touched beneath the table. They'd been touching for most of dinner. Neither of us had moved away. I liked that.

Probably more than I should have.

Tom was sitting opposite us, eating his third helping of spaghetti. Mum was talking about the café on the mainland. Apparently, it had decided to reopen properly after the unexpected business from all the police officers and journalists.

"She said she's had more customers this week than in the previous six months," Mum told us.

Dad smiled.

"Silver linings."

"Exactly."

Tom shook his head.

"Funny old world."

I looked at Clem. She was trying to wind an enormous amount of spaghetti around her fork. I watched her struggle.

"You're going to lose that."

She glanced at me.

"No, I'm not."

The spaghetti slipped off.

Half of it landed back on her plate.

I smiled.

"Excellent technique."

She gave me a look.

"Shut up."

There had been news. Lots of news. The Environment Agency had found evidence of extensive illegal dumping in the underground caverns. They'd also found contaminated soil and water in parts of the eastern marsh. The full investigation would take months. Possibly longer.

Several senior people at CES had been arrested, and the police were still investigating who had known what. The company's operations on the island had been suspended. The promised bridge was almost certainly not happening. At least, not through CES.

And Tom was temporarily out of work. That was the part nobody was particularly happy about.

He'd been told that the main plant would remain closed while the investigation continued. He wasn't suspected of being involved. Neither were most of the ordinary staff. But that didn't mean there was any work for them. He'd been trying to find out what would happen next. So far, nobody seemed to know.

Dad put down his fork.

"Any news from the company?"

Tom shook his head.

"Not much."

"Still no word about wages?"

"Nothing definite."

Mum frowned.

"That's awful."

Tom shrugged.

"Could be worse."

Clem looked at him.

"Dad."

He smiled at her.

"What?"

"You always say that."

"Because it's usually true."

She rolled her eyes.

He reached across the table and stole a piece of garlic bread from her plate.

"Oi!"

He grinned.

"Compensation."

"For what?"

"Emotional distress."

I laughed. Clem stared at him.

"You're unbelievable."

"Been told."

Dad leaned back.

"Well, if you need anything..."

Tom shook his head.

"Thanks, Julian. Appreciate it."

"I mean it."

"I know."

They looked at each other for a moment.

Then Tom nodded.

"Cheers."

I watched them. It was strange how quickly everyone had become close. A week ago, Mum and Dad barely

knew Tom. Now he'd spent half the weekend with us.

We'd stayed together on the mainland until the police allowed us home, and since then he'd been round almost every day. He'd helped Dad fix a loose gutter.

Dad had helped him move some furniture. Mum had sent him home with enough food to survive a small apocalypse.

And Clem had practically become part of our house. Which was fine by me. Very fine.

After dinner, Mum brought out apple crumble. Homemade, with custard. I stared at it.

"Mum."

She looked at me.

"What?"

"Are you trying to make us explode?"

She smiled.

"Possibly."

Dad reached for the serving spoon.

"There's plenty."

"That's what I'm worried about."

Clem leaned closer.

"I'll have yours."

I looked at her.

"Absolutely not."

She smiled.

"Thought so."

My phone buzzed on the table. I glanced at it. Another message. From school. I sighed. Mum noticed.

"School?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She looked at the phone.

"What now?"

"Reminder about the English assignment."

Dad looked up.

"Which one?"

I stared at him.

"The one I haven't done."

He smiled faintly.

"Ah."

I opened the message. It was from my teacher. A very polite reminder that my coursework was still outstanding. Apparently, being chased through a marsh by criminals didn't automatically excuse me from analysing poetry.

Which seemed unfair.

I put the phone face down.

Clem looked at me.

"Poetry?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Which poem?"

I told her.

She made a face.

"Unlucky."

"Thank you."

Mum looked at me.

"Love, you don't have to worry about that tonight."

I shrugged.

"I know."

"We've spoken to the school."

"I know."

"They understand."

I nodded. I did know. My teachers had been surprisingly nice. Even the maths teacher. Which was suspicious. But the problem wasn't that I didn't have time. The problem was that I couldn't concentrate.

Every time I opened a school document, my mind wandered. To the marsh. The men. The boathouse. All of it. I'd sit staring at a paragraph for ten minutes and realise I hadn't read a word.

It was annoying. I wanted my brain back.

Preferably the version that could complain about homework without remembering what it felt like to be hunted.

Dad looked at me.

"Sweetheart, you've had a rather unusual week."

I smiled faintly.

"Understatement."

He nodded.

"Quite."

Mum reached for my hand.

"There's no rush."

I looked at her.

"You're not going to start nagging me about school?"

She smiled.

"Oh, I will."

I stared.

"Great."

"Just not yet."

I laughed.

"Fair enough."

After dinner, Tom helped Dad clear the table. Mum went into the kitchen to make tea. Which left Clem and me sitting together.

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then she leaned towards me.

"Hey."

I looked at her.

"Yeah?"

"How's your foot?"

I sighed.

"Better."

"Really?"

"Mostly."

She looked down at my feet.

I was wearing proper socks.

And slippers.

Actual slippers.

It was wonderful.

"Still sore?"

"A bit."

She nodded.

Then nudged my knee with hers.

"At least you've got shoes now."

I stared at her.

"Don't start."

She smiled.

"Just saying."

I shook my head.

"You're never going to let that go, are you?"

"Nope."

I smiled. Then looked down at the table.

For a moment, I thought about the mud. About sinking. About Clem pulling me free. About the little kiss I'd given her on the nose afterwards. I felt my face getting warm.

Clem noticed. Of course she did.

"What?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing."

She smiled.

"You're doing that thing."

"What thing?"

"Thinking."

I looked at her.

"Apparently I'm very good at it."

She laughed.

Later, we moved into the sitting room. Dad put some music on. Something quiet. Mum curled up in her favourite chair with a book. Tom sat on the sofa, talking to Dad about the island.

Clem and I sat together on the other end. Close. Very close. Her shoulder rested against mine. My head rested against hers.

Nobody said anything. Which was nice.

I wasn't sure what Mum and Dad thought about us. They'd definitely noticed. Mum noticed everything. Dad probably had too.

Although he sometimes failed to notice when someone moved furniture directly in front of him. But nobody made a fuss. Nobody asked questions. Nobody gave us meaningful looks. They just let us sit there. Together.

I appreciated that more than I could explain.

At about half nine, Tom stood.

"Right. I'd better get going."

Clem looked up.

"Already?"

He smiled.

"Some of us are old."

She rolled her eyes.

"You're not old."

"Tell my knees."

Dad stood too.

"I'll walk you out."

Tom looked at Clem.

"You coming?"

She glanced at me.

Then at him.

"Um..."

Mum looked up from her book.

"Actually, Tom, we were wondering whether Clem might like to stay tonight."

I froze. Clem looked at Mum. Then at her dad.

Then at me.

"Really?"

Mum smiled.

"Of course."

Tom considered it. Then looked at Clem.

"Would you like that?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

He smiled.

"All right, then."

I tried not to look too pleased.

I failed. Completely.

Tom came over and hugged Clem.

"Behave yourself."

She smiled.

"Always."

He raised an eyebrow.

She sighed.

"Mostly."

He kissed the top of her head.

Then looked at me.

"Look after each other, yeah?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

He smiled.

"Good."

Then he said goodnight and left with Dad. Mum watched them go. Then looked at us.

"Right. You two."

I sat up. Oh, God. Here it came. The talk. The questions. The awkward parental conversation. I braced myself.

Mum smiled.

"There's clean bedding in the cupboard upstairs."

I blinked.

"Oh."

"And spare towels in the bathroom."

I nodded.

"Right."

She looked at Clem.

"Make yourself at home, love."

Clem smiled.

"Thanks, Tori."

Mum nodded.

Then went back to her book. I stared at her. That was it? Apparently. Wonderful!

Upstairs, my room looked almost normal. Almost - there were still a few boxes in the corner. My desk was covered in schoolbooks. My laptop was open on an unfinished assignment.

And my phone was charging beside the bed. The internet icon was showing a full connection. I stared at

it. A miracle.

Clem came in behind me. She looked around.

"Nice."

I smiled.

"Bit messy."

She shrugged.

"Seen worse."

"Your room?"

She grinned.

"Definitely."

I laughed. Mum had left clean bedding on the landing. We made up a mattress on the floor beside my bed. Clem helped. Although she was terrible at putting a duvet into its cover.

Absolutely terrible.I watched her struggle.

"How do you even manage to get dressed in the morning?"

She looked at me.

"Very carefully."

I laughed. She threw a pillow at me. I caught it. Then threw it back. It missed and hit the wardrobe.

We both laughed. Quietly. Because Mum and Dad were downstairs. And because it was nice to laugh about something stupid.

Eventually, the bed was made.

Clem sat on the mattress. I sat on my bed. For a while, we just talked. About school. About London. About the island. About the café. About the fact that the internet was back. Everything and anything that wasn't the last couple of days.

Clem was delighted. Apparently she'd been waiting weeks to download an update for a game. I stared at her.

"Weeks?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

"How have you survived?"

She smiled.

"Barely."

I looked over at my desk. My laptop was still open. The unfinished English assignment stared at me. I looked at

it. Then sighed. Clem followed my gaze.

"Still bothering you?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She thought for a moment.

Then said, "You could do it tomorrow."

I looked at her.

"Could."

"Or Sunday."

"Could."

"Or never."

I smiled.

"Tempting."

She laughed. Then leaned back against the side of my bed. I looked down at her. Her hair was falling across her face.

She looked tired. But happy. I liked seeing her like that.

"Hey," I said.

She looked up.

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

She frowned.

"For what?"

I shrugged.

"Everything."

She stared at me.

Then smiled faintly.

"You've already thanked me."

"I know."

"Several times."

"I know."

She tilted her head.

"Planning to keep doing it?"

I smiled.

"Probably."

She laughed quietly.

Then reached up and took my hand.

I let her and we sat like that for a while. Not talking. Just holding hands. I could hear Mum and Dad downstairs. The faint sound of music. A cupboard closing. The kettle. Ordinary house noises. I hadn't realised how much I'd missed them.

The last time we spent the night together was in a motel bed on the mainland and we had both passed out immediately. The previous time we'd been hiding behind an overturned boat, freezing cold and terrified.

Now she was sitting on a mattress beside my bed. In clean clothes. With a pillow. And a duvet. And absolutely no men chasing us. It felt almost ridiculous.

I looked at her. She looked back. For a moment, neither of us spoke. Then she smiled.

"What?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing."

She raised an eyebrow. I sighed.

"Just glad you're here."

Her expression softened.

"Me too."

Later, after we'd brushed our teeth and changed into pyjamas, Mum knocked on the door.

"Everything all right?"

I looked up.

"Yeah."

She opened the door slightly.

Clem was sitting on the mattress, pulling the duvet over her legs.

Mum smiled.

"Comfortable?"

Clem nodded.

"Very, thanks."

"Good."

She looked at me.

"Don't stay up too late, love."

I nodded.

"Okay."

She gave me a look.

I smiled.

"Promise."

Mum laughed quietly. Then said goodnight and closed the door. I turned off the main light. The little lamp beside my bed stayed on. It cast a warm glow across the room.

Clem lay down on the mattress. I lay on my bed. For a while, we talked quietly. About nothing important. A teacher Clem couldn't stand. A girl from my old school who'd apparently started dating someone she'd spent six months complaining about. A terrible film we'd both seen. Normal things. Teenage things. Things that didn't involve police officers or underground caverns. I liked that.

Eventually, the conversation slowed. Clem yawned.

"Tired?"

She nodded.

"Bit."

I looked at the clock. Nearly midnight.

I should have been exhausted. I was exhausted. But I didn't particularly want to sleep. Not yet. I looked down at her.

"Clem?"

She opened her eyes.

"Yeah?"

I hesitated.

Then said quietly, "I'm glad we went out that night."

She stared at me and for a moment, she looked genuinely confused.

"What?"

I smiled faintly.

"Not the being chased bit."

"Good."

"Or the mud."

"Definitely not the mud."

"Or the boathouse."

She smiled.

"Right."

I looked at her.

"But if we hadn't gone..."

I stopped. I wasn't sure how to say it. She watched me. Then her expression softened.

"Oh."

I felt my face getting warm.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Me too."

I reached down from the bed. She reached up.

Our fingers met in the little space between us. I held her hand. She squeezed mine. And for a while, we stayed like that.

The room was quiet. The house was quiet. Outside, the wind moved gently around the windows. Somewhere in the distance, a bird called. I wondered whether Dad would recognise it. Probably. He recognised everything.

I smiled to myself. Then looked down at Clem. Her eyes were closed. But she was still holding my hand. I squeezed it gently. She squeezed back.

I turned off the lamp. And for the first time in days, I wasn't afraid of the dark.

Chapter Forty-Six

I lasted about eleven minutes. Possibly twelve. I'd turned off the lamp, closed my eyes and tried to sleep like a normal person. Which should have been easy. I had a proper bed. A proper duvet. Clean pyjamas. And absolutely no chance of being discovered by angry men in a marsh. Everything was perfect.

Except Clem was sleeping on the floor. Right beside me. Which seemed like a terrible waste of a perfectly good double bed.

I rolled onto my side.

"Clem?"

There was a pause.

"Yeah?"

"Are you asleep?"

"Obviously not."

I smiled into the darkness.

"Right."

Another pause.

"What?"

I looked down at the vague shape of her beneath the duvet.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yeah."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"Because the mattress is quite thin."

"It's fine."

"And the floor's probably cold."

"Maya."

"What?"

She sighed.

"What are you trying to say?"

I hesitated. Then felt very stupid.

"You could come up here."

Silence. I stared at the ceiling. Wonderful. Excellent. I'd managed to make things awkward.

Then Clem said, "You sure?"

I turned towards her.

"Yeah."

Another pause.

"Your bed's not that big."

"It's big enough."

"For both of us?"

"Unless you're secretly enormous."

She laughed quietly.

"All right."

I lifted the edge of my duvet.

"Come on, then."

There was a rustle of bedding. Then a quiet thump as Clem got up. The mattress dipped beside me.

She climbed in carefully, trying not to knock anything off the bedside table. Which was quite considerate. Although there was nothing particularly valuable on it. Just my phone, a glass of water and a book I hadn't finished.

She settled beside me. For a moment, we lay very still.

There was plenty of room. Not loads. But enough. Our shoulders touched. I could feel the warmth of her arm against mine.

"All right?" I whispered.

"Yeah."

"Better than the floor?"

"Much."

I smiled.

"Good."

A pause.

Then she said, "You could've asked earlier."

I turned my head.

"Could I?"

"Yeah."

I stared at her silhouette.

"Oh."

She laughed softly.

"Idiot."

"Rude."

"True, though."

I couldn't really argue.

We lay side by side, staring at the ceiling. The room was dark, apart from a little pale light coming through the curtains. Outside, the wind moved around the house. Somewhere downstairs, a floorboard creaked.

Probably Dad. He had an extraordinary ability to make the entire house sound haunted whenever he went to the kitchen for a glass of water.

Clem shifted slightly. Her arm brushed mine. I moved closer. Not much. Just enough that we were properly touching. She didn't move away. In fact, she moved closer too.

I smiled to myself. This was nice. Really nice. And a little terrifying. Not in the same way as the marsh. Obviously. But still.

"Feels weird," Clem whispered.

I turned towards her.

"What does?"

"Being here."

I looked around my room.

"Bit offended."

She laughed.

"Not like that."

"Good."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Just... last time we spent the night together not passed out, we were hiding in that boathouse."

I swallowed.

"Yeah."

"Freezing."

"Yeah."

"Trying not to make a sound."

I looked at her.

"That bit was difficult for me."

She smiled.

"Noticed."

I nudged her gently. She laughed. Then we went quiet again. I thought about the boathouse.

The smell of old wood. The tarpaulin. The sound of men outside. The horrible certainty that someone would open the door and find us.

I could still remember exactly how cold I'd been. How frightened. How I'd wanted to go home so badly it hurt. Now I was home. And Clem was beside me. I turned onto my side.

"Quite an improvement."

She turned towards me.

"Yeah."

For a while, we talked about the things that had happened since. The police. The reporters. The endless questions. It was easier now in the dark.

The fact that my phone had become practically unusable for a day because everyone from London suddenly wanted to know whether I was famous.

Clem found that hilarious.

"You're a celebrity."

"I'm not."

"Bit famous."

"Absolutely not."

"Should ask for your autograph."

I gave her a look.

She smiled.

"Could sell it."

"For how much?"

She considered it.

"Fifty pence?"

I stared.

"Fifty?"

"Maybe a pound if you sign it nicely."

I laughed.

"You're horrible."

"Been told."

Then we went quiet again. Not awkwardly. Just quiet. I could hear her breathing. Feel the warmth of her beneath the duvet.

It was strange how quickly I'd become used to having her close. A few weeks ago, I'd barely known her.

Now the thought of her not being around felt wrong. I

stared at the curtains.

"Can I tell you something?"

She shifted slightly.

"Yeah."

I hesitated.

Then said, "When we moved here, I thought my life was over."

She laughed softly.

"Bit dramatic."

"I know."

"Very dramatic."

"Thank you."

She smiled.

"Go on."

I looked at her.

"I mean it. Two years on that island. No friends. No proper shops. No cinema. No anything."

She nodded.

"Sounds terrible."

"It was."

She raised an eyebrow.

I smiled.

"Well, it felt terrible."

"Better."

I looked back at the ceiling.

"I thought two years was going to feel like a prison sentence."

She was quiet.

Then she said, "And now?"

I turned towards her.

I could just make out her face in the darkness.

"Now it doesn't."

She looked at me. I felt my cheeks getting warm. Which was ridiculous. She could barely see me.

But still. I swallowed.

"Now I think it might actually be all right."

Clem smiled.

"Just all right?"

I smiled back.

"Maybe better than all right."

She didn't answer immediately. And something about that made me look at her more closely. Even in the dim light, I could see that her expression had changed.

She was looking past me. Thinking.

"Clem?"

She blinked.

"Yeah?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

I gave her a look.

She sighed.

"Okay. Something."

I waited.

She looked down at the duvet.

Then said quietly, "I might not be staying on the island."

I stared at her. For a moment, I thought I'd misheard.

"What?"

She picked at the edge of the duvet.

"Dad's lost his job."

I nodded.

"I know."

"And he doesn't know when he'll get another one."

"Yeah."

She looked at me.

"So I might have to move."

I felt something cold settle in my stomach.

"Move?"

She nodded.

"Maybe."

"Where?"

She hesitated.

"Probably Mum's."

I stared.

"On the mainland?"

"Yeah."

For a moment, I couldn't think of anything to say. It was ridiculous. We'd spent all that time trying to get off the island. Trying desperately to reach the mainland. And now the thought of Clem living there made me feel sick.

I looked at her.

"But..."

She smiled faintly.

"I know."

"You're not definitely moving?"

"No."

"Just maybe?"

"Yeah."

I swallowed.

"Right."

She looked at me.

"Dad's trying to find something else. Work, I mean."

I nodded.

"Of course."

"But there's not much on the island."

"No."

"And Mum's got room. So..."

She shrugged.

I stared at the duvet. I hated how sensible it sounded. That was the worst part. There wasn't anything unreasonable about it. Tom had lost his job. He needed to work. Clem had a mum who lived on the mainland. Of course it made sense. I just didn't want it to.

"Does your mum want you to move in?" I asked.

Clem nodded.

"Yeah. She'd like that."

"Right."

"Not because she wants me away from Dad or anything."

"I know."

"They're fine with each other."

I nodded.

She looked at me.

"It's just practical."

I stared at her.

"Practical things are rubbish."

She laughed softly.

"Sometimes."

I sighed. Then rolled onto my back and looked at the ceiling. A few minutes ago, I'd been thinking about how wonderful the next two years might be. Now I was imagining them without Clem. Which made the whole thing feel completely different. Again.

Clem shifted beside me.

"Hey."

I looked at her.

"What?"

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Look like someone's died."

I stared at her.

"I'm not."

She raised an eyebrow.

I sighed.

"All right. Maybe a bit."

She smiled.

"I'm not moving to Australia."

I looked at her.

"No."

"Or Scotland."

"No."

"Or even London."

I turned towards her.

"London would be quite convenient, actually."

She laughed.

"Yeah?"

"I know people there."

"Really?"

"Several."

She smiled. I looked at her.

"Where does your mum live exactly?"

"Just outside Wells."

I blinked.

"That's not far."

"No."

I thought about it. Actually thought about it. Not just the horrible idea of Clem leaving. But the practical part. The distances. The roads. The buses. The fact that the mainland wasn't another country. It was right there. Just across the water.

"Oh."

Clem smiled.

"Yeah."

I turned onto my side to face her.

"Wait."

She looked at me.

"What?"

"You'd still visit your dad."

"Obviously."

"Like every weekend?"

"Probably. Some weekends, anyway."

I nodded.

"And you'd come to the island?"

"Yeah."

I thought about it.

"Which means you could still come here."

She smiled.

"Exactly."

I stared at her.

"Oh."

She laughed.

"You're very clever, Maya."

"Shut up."

"Top of your class?"

"Probably."

She grinned. I thought about it some more.

"And I could come to the mainland."

She nodded.

"Yeah."

"To see you."

"Yeah."

"There's buses."

"Usually."

"And Mum and Dad have a car."

"That too."

I smiled.

"And I could stay at your mum's?"

She hesitated.

"Probably. I'd have to ask."

"Right."

"But I don't think she'd mind."

I stared at her. Then smiled.

"Okay."

She smiled back.

"Okay."

It was strange how quickly everything changed. A few minutes earlier, the idea of Clem moving had felt like the end of the world. Now I was thinking about visiting her. Going into Wells. Getting coffee. Walking around shops. Doing normal things. Things we hadn't had a chance to do together.

I looked at her.

"Actually..."

She raised an eyebrow.

"What?"

"If you lived on the mainland, we could go to the cinema."

She smiled.

"Yeah."

"And proper shops."

"Yeah."

"And cafés that aren't full of police officers."

She laughed.

"That'd be nice."

I nodded.

"Very."

Then I thought of something else.

"Hang on."

Clem looked at me.

"What?"

"Your dad's cottage."

"Yeah?"

"If you move in with your mum, does he have to leave?"

She shrugged.

"Don't know."

I frowned.

"But he's lived there for ages."

"Yeah."

"Can't he find another job on the island?"

"He's trying."

I nodded.

"Right."

She looked at me.

"He's good at fixing things."

I smiled.

"Very."

"He can do loads of stuff."

"Like pulling people out of mud?"

She laughed.

"That was me."

I smiled.

"True."

She nudged me gently.

"Don't forget it."

"As if I could."

We went quiet and I looked at her. Really looked at her. The messy brown hair. The dark eyebrows. The little scratch on her cheek that was almost healed. The way she smiled with one corner of her mouth slightly higher than the other. I'd noticed that before. I liked it.

I liked far too many things about her. Probably all of them. Even the annoying ones. Especially the annoying ones.

She noticed me looking.

"What?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing."

She smiled.

"You're doing it again."

"What?"

"Thinking."

I sighed.

"Apparently."

She laughed softly.

I moved a little closer. She did too. Our knees touched beneath the duvet. Then our legs. I could feel her warmth.

She was lying on her side now, facing me. I was facing her. There was only a little space between us. Not much.

I could see her eyes properly now. The pale light from the window caught them.

She looked at me. I looked back. Neither of us spoke. It wasn't awkward. Not exactly. But I was suddenly very aware of how close we were. And how quiet the room was.

And how fast my heart was beating. Which seemed unfair. I'd survived being chased across a marsh by criminals. Surely I could survive lying next to a girl I liked. Apparently not.

"Hey," Clem whispered.

I swallowed.

"Yeah?"

"You know something?"

"What?"

She smiled.

"I'm glad you moved here."

I stared at her.

For a moment, I couldn't answer.

Then I smiled.

"Really?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

I looked down.

Then back at her.

"Even with all the trouble?"

She laughed softly.

"Maybe not that bit."

"Good."

"But the rest."

I smiled.

"Yeah."

She looked at me.

"I'm glad."

I thought about London.

My old room. My old school. The friends I'd left behind. The life I'd been so angry about losing. I still missed it.

Of course I did.

But I didn't feel quite the same about it anymore. It was strange. I'd spent weeks wishing I could go back. Now, if someone offered me the chance to leave tomorrow, I wasn't sure I'd take it. Not if it meant leaving Clem. I looked at her.

"Two years," I whispered.

She smiled.

"Yeah."

"Doesn't sound so long anymore."

"No."

I hesitated.

Then added, "Might not be long enough."

She looked at me. Her smile softened.

"Maybe not."

We moved closer. Not all at once. Just a little. Then a little more. Until there was barely any space between us. Clem's hand found mine beneath the duvet. I held it.

Her thumb moved gently across my knuckles. I could feel her breath against my face. Warm. Soft. Close. I swallowed. She looked at me.

"All right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She smiled.

"Good."

I smiled back. Then shifted closer again. Our foreheads almost touched. I could see the tiny freckles across her nose. I'd never noticed how many there were.

I wondered whether she'd mind if I counted them. Probably.

I smiled. She noticed.

"What?"

I shook my head.

"Nothing."

She laughed quietly.

"You're impossible."

"Been told."

For a while, we just lay there. Face to face. Holding hands. Sharing the warmth beneath the duvet.

I could hear the wind outside. The faint creak of the house. The distant sound of a car passing along the lane. Normal things. Safe things.

I thought about the island. The causeway. The mainland. The little cottage with the green door. My house. Clem's mum's house somewhere near Wells. All the places we'd been. All the places we might go.

It didn't seem so impossible anymore.

Two years on the Mudpack. Maybe Clem living on the mainland. Maybe visiting each other. Maybe weekends together. Maybe more.

There was still so much we didn't know. But for once, that didn't frighten me. Not really. Because Clem was right there.

Warm. Close. Looking at me with that little crooked smile. And whatever happened next, we'd find a way.

I was beginning to believe that. Really believe it. I moved just a fraction closer. So did she. And suddenly

the distance between us was so small that I could barely see anything except her eyes.

Neither of us looked away.

Chapter Forty-Seven

I don't know how long we stayed like that.

Long enough for my arm to start going numb beneath the pillow. Long enough for the wind outside to settle, leaving the house so quiet that I could hear the occasional tick from the radiator.

Clem was still looking at me. I was still looking at her. And neither of us seemed particularly interested in doing anything about it. Which was ridiculous, really.

We'd run across an entire marsh together. We'd hidden from men who wanted to catch us, broken into a shop, called the police and survived the sort of night that ought to have earned us a lifetime exemption from PE.

Yet somehow, lying in my own bed, looking into Clem's eyes, was making me more nervous than any of it.

I could feel a smile spreading across my face.

Clem narrowed her eyes.

"What?"

"Nothing."

"That's not a nothing face."

"I have a nothing face?"

"You've got several."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah. There's your thinking face, your worried face, your I'm-about-to-say-something-stupid face..."

I gasped.

"Excuse me."

"And that one."

"What one?"

"The offended face."

I laughed and gave her shoulder a little shove.

She barely moved.

"You're horrible."

"Apparently."

I tried to look cross with her, but she was smiling, and that made it almost impossible. Then I remembered something. Something that had been sitting in the back of my mind for days.

"You kissed my nose!"

Clem blinked.

"What?"

"My nose. You kissed it."

She stared at me for half a second, then started laughing.

"I know!"

I propped myself up on one elbow.

"You just went and kissed my nose!"

"Well, it was there."

"It was there?"

"Right in front of me."

I laughed.

"That's your explanation?"

She nodded solemnly.

"Very tempting nose."

"Oh, shut up!"

I grabbed the nearest pillow and pushed it against her face.

She made a muffled noise of protest, caught the pillow and pulled it away.

"Violence!" she whispered.

"You deserve it."

"I'm a guest."

"You're an awful guest."

She tried to put the pillow over my face instead, but I ducked, and she ended up hitting the headboard.

There was a surprisingly loud thump.

We both froze. For a moment, neither of us breathed. I listened for footsteps in the corridor. Nothing.

Then Clem whispered, "Smooth."

I pressed my lips together.

She did the same.

Which made it worse.

A little snort escaped me. Clem started giggling. I buried my face in the duvet, trying desperately not to laugh out loud.

"Stop," I whispered.

"I'm not doing anything!"

"You're laughing!"

"So are you!"

I was.

Quite a lot.

Eventually, we managed to settle down, although every time I looked at her, another laugh threatened to escape.

She pulled the duvet back over us. I tucked the pillow beneath my head. Our faces were close again. And suddenly, the laughter faded into something softer.

"Actually," I whispered, "why did you kiss my nose?"

Clem looked at me.

She seemed to consider the question seriously.

Then she shrugged.

"Because I wanted to."

I blinked.

"Oh."

She smiled.

"That all right?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

"Good."

I thought about that.

Because I wanted to.

It was such a simple answer.

I'd spent days wondering whether the nose kiss meant something. Whether the hand-holding meant something. Whether the way Clem sometimes looked at me meant the same thing I felt when I looked at her.

And here she was, making it sound as though the answer had been obvious all along.

I smiled.

"Could've warned me."

"Would've ruined the surprise."

"Nearly gave me a heart attack."

She laughed softly.

"Bit dramatic."

"I'm a very dramatic person."

"Noticed."

I reached across and poked her nose.

"There. Revenge."

She wrinkled it.

"That wasn't much of a revenge."

"Working up to it."

"Oh, are you?"

"Absolutely."

She watched me for a moment, smiling.

Then she said, very quietly, "You can pay me back if you want."

My stomach did something peculiar. Not unpleasant. Just peculiar. I looked at her.

"Can I?"

She nodded.

"Yeah."

I smiled, suddenly feeling very brave.

Which was probably a mistake.

"All right, then."

I moved closer.

Carefully.

I wasn't entirely sure why I was being careful. It was only a nose.

A perfectly ordinary nose.

Admittedly, it belonged to Clem, which made it considerably more interesting than most noses. But still.

I could manage this. She was watching me with a little smile. I could see the freckles across the bridge of her nose, the way her hair had fallen against the pillow, the tiny scratch on her cheek that was almost gone.

I leaned towards her.

She stayed still.

I got closer. Close enough that I could feel her breath against my face. I aimed for the tip of her nose.

And just as I was about to kiss it, Clem tilted her head back.

Only slightly.

But enough.

My lips missed her nose completely. And met hers instead. For one startled second, my brain stopped.

There was nothing. No clever thought. No witty comment. Not even a particularly useful noise. Just Clem.

Her lips against mine. Soft and warm. I hadn't expected it. Or perhaps I had.

Perhaps I'd been expecting it for weeks without quite admitting it to myself.

I don't know. All I knew was that I didn't want to move away. And neither did she.

The kiss lasted only a few seconds.

It was gentle and a little uncertain, and I was so aware of everything that I couldn't possibly have explained any of it afterwards.

The warmth of her hand holding mine. The pillow beneath my cheek. Her hair brushing my face.

The fact that she was kissing me. Actually kissing me.

Then we drew apart. Not far. Just enough to look at each other. Clem's eyes were wide. So were mine, probably. For a moment, neither of us spoke.

Then she smiled. A tiny, nervous smile.

"Sorry," she whispered.

I stared at her.

"Sorry?"

She bit her lip.

"Was that okay?"

I looked at her.

Then I started smiling.

I couldn't help it.

The smile just kept getting bigger.

"Okay?"

She laughed nervously.

"Yeah."

I shook my head.

"Clem."

"What?"

"That was..."

I stopped.

I had absolutely no idea how to finish that sentence. Wonderful sounded ridiculous. Amazing sounded worse. Perfect was probably far too much. Although, actually...

I smiled.

"That was really nice."

Her expression softened.

"Yeah?"

I nodded.

"Yeah."

She let out a little breath.

"Good."

I looked at her for another moment.

Then narrowed my eyes.

"Hang on."

She blinked.

"What?"

"You cheated."

She stared at me.

Then burst out laughing.

I grinned.

"You did!"

"How?"

"I was aiming for your nose!"

She laughed harder.

"Sorry!"

"No, you're not."

She shook her head.

"No."

I smiled.

"Thought not."

We lay there grinning at each other like complete idiots. I couldn't seem to stop.

Every time I tried to make my face behave normally, I remembered what had just happened, and the smile came back.

Clem wasn't doing much better. She'd pulled the duvet up to her chin, but I could still see her smiling above it.

"Stop looking at me like that," she whispered.

"Like what?"

"Like that."

I widened my eyes innocently.

"I'm not doing anything."

She laughed.

"You're staring."

"You're staring."

"Only because you are."

"That's a terrible excuse."

She moved a little closer.

"All right. I'll stop."

She closed her eyes.

I waited. One second. Two. Three.

Then I whispered, "Clem?"

She opened one eye.

"What?"

I smiled.

"Hi."

She laughed, grabbed the edge of the duvet and pulled it over both our heads.

Suddenly, we were in a little warm tent of our own making. It smelled of clean cotton and Clem's shampoo. She was so close that our noses almost touched.

"You're impossible," she whispered.

I grinned.

"Been told."

We stayed under the duvet until it got too warm. Which didn't take long. Then Clem pushed it back, and we both took a breath of cooler air.

I rolled onto my back. She stayed on her side, looking at me. My heart was still beating rather quickly. I wondered whether that was normal.

Probably. I hoped so.

I wasn't particularly interested in explaining to Mum that I'd developed a medical condition because Clem had kissed me.

Although Mum would probably find that hilarious. I looked towards the bedroom door.

"Do you think they know?"

Clem followed my gaze.

"Who?"

"Mum and Dad."

She thought about it.

"Know what?"

I turned towards her. She was smiling. I stared.

"Oh, very funny."

She laughed.

"Sorry."

I nudged her.

"You know what."

She shrugged.

"Probably."

I sighed.

"Yeah."

"Your mum definitely does."

I groaned.

"She knows everything."

Clem smiled.

"Mine's like that too."

I looked at her.

"Really?"

"Yeah."

I thought about the possibility of meeting Clem's mum.

Properly. Not just as the woman who lived somewhere outside Wells. But as Clem's mum. Someone who knew her. Someone who might ask questions. Someone who might notice that I couldn't look at her daughter without smiling like an idiot.

That was a terrifying prospect. I decided not to think about it tonight. Clem settled onto her back beside me. Our shoulders touched.

After a moment, she reached for my hand again. I took it. We lay looking at the ceiling. I could still feel the kiss. Not literally. But the memory of it.

I kept going over it in my head, trying to make sure I hadn't imagined anything.

The way she'd tilted her head.

The brief moment of surprise.

The warmth.

The way she'd smiled afterwards.

I turned towards her.

"Clem?"

"Mm?"

"Did you mean to do that?"

She looked at me.

"The kiss?"

I nodded.

She hesitated. Then smiled.

"Yeah."

I felt my face getting warm.

"Oh."

She watched me.

"Did you mind?"

I shook my head so quickly that she laughed.

"No."

"Good."

I looked down at our hands.

Then back at her.

"Actually, I was sort of hoping..."

I stopped. She tilted her head.

"What?"

I swallowed.

"Well. Not necessarily tonight. Just..."

She smiled.

"Yeah?"

I sighed.

"You're enjoying this."

"A little."

I gave her a look.

She laughed softly.

Then squeezed my hand.

"I was hoping too."

I stared at her.

"Really?"

She nodded.

"For a while."

"How long?"

She thought about it.

"Since before the marsh, anyway."

I smiled.

"Right."

She looked at me.

"What about you?"

I considered lying.

Something cool and casual.

Something that made me sound as though I'd had the whole thing under control from the beginning. But there didn't seem much point.

"Pretty much since I met you."

Clem stared at me. Then her face broke into the loveliest smile I'd ever seen.

"Oh."

I laughed.

"Yeah. Oh."

We were quiet for a while after that.

There wasn't really anything else that needed saying. I could hear the faint sound of the wind outside, moving through the trees near the house. Somewhere downstairs, a door closed. Then everything went quiet again.

I thought about the day we'd moved to the island. How terrible I'd felt. How I'd stood in my new bedroom surrounded by boxes, staring out at a place I didn't want to live. I'd thought two years was forever.

Two years away from London. Away from my friends. Away from everything I knew.

I'd imagined counting the days until we could leave. Making little marks on a calendar, perhaps. Like someone in prison. It seemed so stupid now.

Not because the island had magically become wonderful. It hadn't. There were still hardly any shops. The internet had only just returned. The causeway was still a nuisance. And the whole place was going to be dealing with the CES disaster for a long time.

But there was Clem. And somehow, that changed

everything. I turned onto my side again. She did too.

We were face to face, just as we'd been before.

Only now, something was different. Not dramatically. There hadn't been any music. No fireworks. No great declaration.

Just one little kiss.

And yet I felt as though we'd crossed another causeway. A much nicer one. With considerably less mud. Clem brushed a loose strand of hair away from my face.

I smiled.

"What?"

"Nothing."

I raised an eyebrow.

She laughed.

"All right. Just looking at you."

I felt myself blush.

"Oh."

She smiled.

"Yeah. Oh."

I moved a little closer. She slipped an arm around me. I rested my head against her shoulder, and she tucked the duvet around us.

For a while, we lay like that, warm and comfortable, listening to the house settle around us.

Then I lifted my head.

"Clem?"

She looked at me.

"Yeah?"

I smiled.

"Can I kiss you again?"

Her expression softened.

"Yeah."

I leaned towards her.

This time, there was no confusion about where I was aiming. No last-second trick. No nose involved at all. Just Clem smiling at me. And me smiling back.

Our lips met again.

It was still a little clumsy. Still new. But neither of us seemed to mind. When we parted, Clem rested her forehead against mine.

We both laughed quietly. I wasn't even sure why. Perhaps because we were happy. Perhaps because we'd spent so long being frightened that happiness felt almost unfamiliar.

Or perhaps because we were sixteen and fifteen, lying in bed together, and we'd finally managed to do something we'd both wanted to do for ages.

Whatever the reason, I didn't care. Eventually, Clem yawned. I smiled.

"Tired?"

She nodded.

"Very."

"Sorry."

She frowned.

"For what?"

"Keeping you awake."

She laughed softly.

"Think I can forgive you."

"Generous."

"I know."

She pulled me a little closer. I settled against her, my cheek resting on her pillow. Her arm stayed around me. I could feel her breathing slow and I closed my eyes.

For the first time since we'd moved here, I wasn't thinking about how long we had left on the island. Or what would happen when Dad's research finished. Or whether Clem would end up living with her mum.

Those things mattered. Of course they did. But they didn't need answers tonight. We had tomorrow. And the weekend. And hopefully lots of ordinary, boring days after that. Days when we could meet at the old post box. Walk along the beach. Go into Wells. Sit in cafés that weren't surrounded by television crews. Do homework together. Complain about the weather.

Maybe kiss again.

Actually, definitely kiss again.

I smiled into the pillow.

Clem stirred beside me.

"What?"

"Nothing."

She made a sleepy noise.

"You're smiling."

I opened my eyes.

"How do you know?"

"Can tell."

I laughed quietly. She kissed my forehead. Then settled back against the pillow.

"Night, Maya."

I looked at her. "Night, Clem."

She closed her eyes and I watched her for another moment, then moved closer and closed mine too.

Outside, the Mudpack was quiet. The tide would be coming in again soon, covering the mudflats and turning our little island into an island properly.

Tomorrow it would go out. And the next day. And the day after that. The causeway would disappear beneath the water and come back again, just as it always had.

For once, I didn't mind.

I wasn't counting the days until I could leave anymore.

I was looking forward to the ones still to come.

Two years. One isolated island. And something in the marshes that nobody wants to talk about.

Sixteen-year-old Maya has been dragged away from London to a tiny island off the Norfolk coast, where the tides decide when you can leave, the internet barely works, and everyone seems perfectly happy living in the middle of nowhere.
Everyone except Maya.

Then she meets Clem, a local girl who knows the island's secrets, its hidden paths, and exactly how to make Maya forget how much she hates being there.

But something strange is happening beyond the village. Lights move through the marshes at night. Unexplained noises drift across the water. And the wildlife Maya's father came to study seems to be disappearing.

The locals have their explanations. Maya has her suspicions.
And when curiosity draws the two girls into the darkness, they discover that some secrets are buried for a reason.
On an island where the sea controls every escape, uncovering the truth might be the easy part.

Getting away with it is another matter.

> "WE JUST WANT TO TALK!"
> I almost laughed.
> Of course they did.
> Just a friendly little chat.
> Perhaps they'd offer
> us tea and biscuits.