

three

The four of them set off together in the direction indicated on the compass, even if the rising sun had already set their course.

Zoe realised that the compass was the first almost-modern man-made object she had seen since the incident with her mother's necklace. She wondered briefly where they had found it, but she somehow trusted the two striding figures in front of her.

'Slow down, please, you're going too fast!' she called to the boys who were a few yards ahead of her.

'How far do you think we need to go?' she asked.

'Let me take the boy Zoe, he is weighing you down,' said the taller of the two boys. Zoe started to untie William from behind her, before she caught herself. *'I have no idea who they are, I can't just hand him over.'*

'It's OK thanks, he's fine with me,' she corrected herself. *'Where are you guys heading?'*

'We're going the same way as you.'

'How d'you know where I'm going?'

'Well this morning you told us you are looking for woodland, a city, shelter, food. That's exactly what we're doing. We have some idea of where it is, but we need help.'

They walked on in silence for a while. Time and distance did not mean a lot to Zoe and William. She had no way of measuring either of them. She estimated that they had walked for about three hours, and by the position of the sun it was getting close to midday. She was dying for a break and some shade – the sun was dominant in the sky now and there was nowhere to hide. Her dress was drenched in sweat and she realised she had not drunk anything since that morning.

'There're some trees up there – let's take a time out,' announced the shorter boy, his light brown forehead glistening with a sheen of perspiration.

Zoe stared ahead of her and swayed a little on her feet. She could not actually see the shade he was talking about, but she knew that she needed shade and cool more than anything in her life right now. She staggered a little, and began to untie William from behind her waist.

'You OK Zoe?' the voice was sympathetic but businesslike, the tone almost 'take it or leave it'.

'I..I don't really know,' Zoe replied. William, standing on the ground next to her now, looked up at her.

'OK, we'll bring William, you take a drink and follow behind.' The plastic container from out of the sack was pulled out again, and Zoe took a long drag from the proffered bottle.

'Urgh..' her reaction was involuntary as the now-warm pale liquid ran down her throat. Although the taste wasn't unpleasant, it was strong and pungent, and left her with an unerasable memory of what she had just drunk.

She felt slightly better, and followed the three boys towards what she could now see was a small stand of densely-packed trees, standing on a rise in the ground. William looked tiny holding the hands of the other two, but she could tell, even from the back, that he was proud to be 'one of the boys'. She had time to think about how he was growing up too quickly.

Despite her fragility, she couldn't help passing her eyes over her mystery companions. The taller boy, his hair towseled behind his head and drooping down over his strong shoulders, and the smaller one, tight curls neatly bobbing as he walked, his body lithe and slim like a boxer. She also couldn't help noticing their clothes.

Since she had left Norfolk nearly two years before, no-one she had met on her travels had paid any attention to what they looked like. Dress sense went in waves. If someone had just raided a big house, or struck lucky in an abandoned shop, they might look reasonable for a day or two. But a couple more days rowing or walking soon put paid to anything approaching decency. Most people were making do with whatever they could salvage or find, and the cloying mud and eternal dampness saw the end to decent clothes very quickly. She had managed to find a change of clothes of some description and stuff them into her bag, but that was it.

But not for these two.

They were dusty, sure. They had stumbled occasionally, and grazed their knees or stained their trousers when they fell. But compared to her, they were well dressed. Shirts with buttons on them. Jeans in one case, and cargo pants in the other, with pockets. Socks! She hadn't seen those for a while. And shoes – proper trainers, with laces, and chunky soles to help navigate the uneven ground. Funky colours.

They reached the wood and Zoe collapsed onto the floor in a clearing, still shaded, but also dappled with the sun through the canopy. She closed her eyes. William came and sat, half crouching as if protecting her, by her side.

'What time you got Bruv?'

'Woah Zee, I ain't ya brother!'

'Hey man, it's a figure of speech, or something like that!'

The exchange between them was light-hearted, banter even. Unheard of in Zoe's world.

'What time you got?'

'It's about ten after two.'

'OK so we need to step on it, he said be at the rendez-vous at six.'

'Yeah I know, how far is it?'

The tall one looked at his watch and consulted the compass again.

'He needs flat ground and a target but we've no battery to call him in, so let's go for plan B.'

'Which was?'

'Quit goofin' around bro!' said the younger one, 'You know what I mean. We wait by the lake – about four miles from here in that direction.'

He pointed slightly west-south-west by his compass. He lowered his voice before he whispered,

'You seen her lips?'

'You bet, in fact I was just daydreaming about kiss...'

'Pack it in man, can't you see? They're purple. The classic sign.'

'What're you saying? She ain't gonna make it?'

'She ain't,' came the reply, *'unless he gets here early.'*

'Not going to make what,' whispered Zoe, surprising even herself with the weakness of her speaking voice, *'What lake?'* She laid her head back down. It had become too heavy to lift.

'Look Zoe, you're not feeling right, OK? It is better that we get help for you, and bring it back here. We are trying to hook up with a friend of ours. He can help, but we cannot afford to miss the meet.'

'Please don't leave me,' her voice was desperate now, *'and don't leave William. He's all I have.'*

'Zoe don't you see? Don't you understand?'

'What?'

'Zoe. How many people have you seen in the last two days?'

Even through her fever Zoe realised that the three people near her now, and three pairs of eyes staring sympathetically at her, were the only humans she had laid eyes on since she left the house. Despite travelling on well-worn routes, there was no-one.

'Where has everyone gone?'

'They're gone Zoe. Gone.'

If she had been able to focus, Zoe would have seen the awful reality. She was shaken by curly boy's next comment.

'Your Mum, your Dad, your Munchkin, all gone.'

Her strength returned for a moment.

'Munchkin's not dead!' she screamed hysterically.

'You don't seem to realise do you? They are probably dead Zoe. This virus is unstoppable.'

'Virus?' she enquired weakly.

'Yes. Nobody knows exactly what it is yet, but it is taking everybody. Men, women, even children. You didn't know?'

'I didn't know,' she repeated back to them.

'Here drink a little more and you can move on with us. The further west we get the better. And he'll be here soon. At this time of year the lake will be dry, but he'll find us...I hope.'

'Who is he?'

'He's the guy we came to find. And he's the guy you need.'

'But I need Munchkin!'

Both boys smiled knowingly at each other, perhaps more at the name than anything else, or perhaps at the futility of Zoe's longing.

The four of them staggered through to what had been a small pool, fed from underground by a spring. The normally pure water had dried to a trickle and had combined with the familiar mud to create a cloying mess from which a colourful bird was trying to extract a little moisture. In the end they had dragged Zoe and William with them. It had seemed to risky to leave her.

It happened very slowly and almost imperceptibly. Had she been fully conscious, Zoe would have heard it first, but it was William who called out.

'It a bird!' he sang, dancing round the mudbath.

'Yes gorgeous, it's a bird, a kingfisher' she replied weakly.

'It a bird!' he repeated, this time waving his arms around.

Zoe's two saviours shielded their eyes from the sun, and looked heavenwards.

William aped their movements exactly, his chubby little arm protecting his eyes.

'It a bird,' for the third time, this time though his right hand was pointing skywards.

The sun was so strong and her head so weak that Zoe barely saw it. A mere speck in the sky. She could

not properly hear what they heard. A low whistling in the light wind. Something out of this world, heading their way.

The boys waved furiously and Zoe noticed the smaller one trying to glint the sun off his gold chain.

'Bird coming!' cried William.

Zoe felt herself drift in and out of consciousness, occasionally glimpsing the approaching object, and sometimes drifting into another place. A better place. Cooler. Shadier. A place where her head didn't hurt.

When she woke from the next cycle of feverishness and opened her eyes, there were four pairs staring back at her.

A new pair of eyes, the deepest blue she had ever seen, set in a pure chiselled face surrounded by a shaggy blonde mane. A voice so mellow she could drown in it.

'Don't worry Zoe, I'll have you on your feet in no time.'
