

two

Zoe did not quite know what to think. She was alone, it was true, apart from William, but she had grown used to being alone, from the very first journey on the boat, from arriving on Eel Island, she had always been alone.

She liked it.

Until she met Munchkin.

She smoothed her dress a little with her hand, and tried to imagine where Munchkin was now.

He had always seemed to have a sixth sense for safety – that is why she had agreed when he proposed leaving. He promised to return but when he had not, after all those months, she had felt it was her turn. Where could he be?

A shiver went through her as she thought of him. She crouched down behind one of the only features in that flat landscape and looked ahead at the two figures in the distance. They had not seen her, but they had also stopped, and looked to to be resting, and perhaps, she thought, eating, in the far distance.

Zoe was caught in two minds. Should she make themselves known to them? Would it be good to have company? Might they be able to help on the journey?

She then realised the fruitlessness of it all. What journey? Where were they heading, and why? She was leaving the safety of Dad and the house and moving west based on a throwaway comment from Munchkin, some five months earlier, and perhaps subconsciously on William's 'Go West' advice back on Eel Island. And perhaps because of her fondness for Munchkin. He had talked of a city on a hill, surrounded by woods and trees. It could have been a dream. But it was good enough for her – cities had people and food, woods were shelter, and hills were out of the water, perhaps dry, perhaps even warm.

Warmth! It had been a long time since she had really felt warm, at least since M had gone.

She reached round and manhandled a now-sleeping William from his perch on her back, laid out the blanket on the ground and wrapped him carefully in it. He gurgled happily in his sleep but didn't wake. She decided to wait it out here amongst the long grass until first light, and snuggled down next to him, wrapping herself in a corner of the blanket. The night was actually warm for once, and the stars were bright in the sky. Zoe gazed at them as if they were people staring down at her, and wondered if they could feel pity or sorrow.

Zoe had resolved not to sleep that night but had quickly fallen into a deep slumber, engulfed by worries and questions but unable to fight her overwhelming tiredness.

She was woken by William turning and kicking beside her. He let out a little half-burble, half-scream, the sort that toddlers sometimes made in the middle of a dream. He laid back down and was still. She relaxed and smiled to herself at the feel of his warmth, and her pride at keeping him safe.

She woke properly an hour later, as the sun made its weary way over the horizon. No real heat yet, but the prospect of a good day for walking, and a clear indicator of the way she needed to walk. She stood up and stared directly away from the sun, looking west. The ground was shrouded in a light mist, but she could see battered hedgerows and unruly fields far into the distance. Maybe there was even something to eat out there! She unwrapped some of the vegetable mix (really just a basic potato salad) she had prepared the day before. She took some, and then bent down to proffer some to William.

'William?'

The child slept on.

William was an active child, and was always hungry. It was not like him to just lie there. Zoe bent down and gently rubbed his shoulder. Nothing. The child did not move.

She shook him, more urgently this time. Nothing.

Zoe started to panic. It had not been that cold. He had stirred several times in the night. What was wrong?

She knelt beside his little body and let out a long, desperate scream.

On his thin hand were two puncture wounds. Perfectly spaced, a centimetre apart. A viper – the only poisonous snake on the island. No grass snake this one. He must have stirred in the night and disturbed the creature. For a terrible moment she thought she had laid him down onto a viper's nest. No matter - she had a half-hour window or she would lose him before they had even started.

She screamed again, more in desperation than in hope. Her wail melted into the saturated air and was gone.

'Woah Lady! Whassup?' cried a voice out of the fog.

Strangers would normally have been a threat, a danger, but the two figures emerging out of the half-darkness felt like her only hope. It was the two people she had seen in the darkness the evening before, who had lain down a hundred yards or so from where she had.

They jogged their way through the rough-hewn heavy grass to where William was lying. Zoe clasped her hands to her face in panic and fear, then lowered them, trying to remain calm, trying to stay cool. Despite the state she was in, she was still aware. Jogged? No-one jogged anywhere any more. Everyone just dragged themselves around. Who were these people?

'Look at his hand!' she whimpered, *'please help, he's all I have left.'*

The two boys said nothing.

The one with the brown curly hair wrestled with the clasp on the rough sack they had dragged with them to where William lay.

'Hurry, please hurry!' she implored.

The taller boy spoke. Zoe could not help but notice the watch on his wrist, which he now turned

towards himself, staring calmly at the little dials.

'We have twenty minutes to save him,' he said calmly to his companion, *'maybe twenty-five. He hasn't gone into shock yet, so this only just happened.'*

Zoe panicked again, looking around for the snake.

'Don't worry, we chased it off,' said the younger boy, although Zoe didn't feel sure. She wasn't sure about anything at that moment, apart from the need to keep her brother alive.

'Here, hold this.' The younger boy, kneeling beside William, produced a plastic container from the sack. It was half-full of a pale opaque liquid.

His voice was high-pitched but firm. She took the container, and started to unscrew the top. She could not make out the accent. It was neither Norfolk burr, nor Essex twang. It was a strange mixture. As he handed her the container, a heavy chain around his neck glinted in the morning sun, which had started to break through the mist. Gold maybe? How had that lasted so long?

The older boy pulled the lifeless William up into a sitting position. The younger one started to pour the liquid into his mouth.

'Wait, wait, what is it?' Zoe enquired, her voice pitching upwards in her concern.

'Don't worry, it worked for us once. It can't do any harm. Let's just try it.'

The juice ran down William's chin and onto his grubby t-shirt. Some of it seeped down his throat.

'OK, slower now, keep going,' the older boy said. His voice was so calm, Zoe momentarily felt reassured. It was all she had.

A few more dribbles of liquid seemed to stay in William's mouth, perhaps making their way down his throat. It was down to gravity now, and the older boy gave William a little slap on the back to jolt the liquid down.

After what seemed like hours, but was perhaps two or three minutes, a little liquid seeped back out of the boy's mouth, he jerked upwards, and vomited the remaining juice over the blanket lying on the ground. He shook his head like a wet puppy, and flung his hands towards his face, trying to wipe away the taste and feel of the juice. Zoe grabbed him and picked him up, rubbing his back as she held him. His little body jerked and squirmed, but he held his sister tight as if she might let him drop, and cried a little, his head resting on her shoulder. His breathing was rapid, but slowing and becoming more normal.

In her confusion, Zoe didn't think to thank the strangers for saving her brother's life. Instead she said,

'Wh...who...who are you?'

'Just travellers like you, heading west. Which way're you's goin'??'

He sounded like a cowboy riding across the plains in search of gold. He reached into the pocket of his cargo pants and produced a stainless steel object which he held out in front of him. It was a compass.

'Over yonder – that's where we're going. They say there's higher ground. There's woods for shelter. Maybe a town or somethin'. Wanna come?'

Zoe's mind raced again. The strangers had saved her journey before it had begun, had saved her brother. They had food and equipment. What did she have to lose?

'Sure. Thanks. I'm Zoe. This is William.' She packed up her rudimentary campsite and fastened her brother to her back.

'Hey Zoe. Good to meet you. Let's go.'

No introductions. No names. But a friendly greeting, and a plan.

Which was more than she had.
