

one

The snake stared at Zoe. Zoe stared at the snake. She had got used to all sorts being washed up on the beaches of Norfolk since the waters had started to recede. But they had brought with them new horrors, new dangers, new misfortune. Zoe looked at the creature with a renewed sense of not caring, until she spoke quietly to herself,

'Don't give up, people are depending on you, don't give up.'

She came to realise that the snake was as scared as she was, and in any case it was a harmless grass snake.

But amongst everything she did know now, she wasn't to know that.

In any case it was hard to tell as the creature was a dirty brown colour instead of its usual bright green. Everything was a dirty brown colour now, as the water came and went. Zoe could almost see the disease welling up in the water.

'It's 'nake!' cried William excitedly as the creature slid off.

'Yes, William, a snake, well done!'

'It want it!' William yelled, and then, *'it not scared!'*

He had only just started talking, and everything was 'it'. No hes, shes or wes, just its! He was so cute!

She gathered William up quickly in her arms, and wrapped his little body in what remained of her dress. It was the dress Munchkin had bought her from the hospital. Or rather brought her. *'No payment necessary!'* he had said in the heat of that terrible moment. She was never quite sure if he should have done that, but the dress had stayed with her, and it reminded her of him.

In the nearly two years since she and Munchkin had been found, exhausted and half-drowned in the shallows, she had developed an obsession with moving on. Maybe it was due to what had gone before, the multiple journeys, the endless grind of staying alive, but in her head she was crystal-clear – it was time to move on again, to take advantage of whatever lay to the West.

Just like William had sung that day.

She squatted down, balancing the toddler on her knee.

The brownness of everything was overwhelming. She breathed deeply, and then regretted it.

All around, the stench of rotten organics. *'It will become fertiliser,'* she thought, and new plants will emerge. But not yet. The ground was too sodden to produce anything useful. There were no seeds to plant in the soil. The water was poisoned with salt from the sea. They were hungry.

It was time to go.

What did they have to stay for anyway?

The house was half buried, damp to its rafters, and slowly rotting into the mud.

Dad sat miserably in the midst of it all. They both knew that someone had to remain and that they would be parted again. To leave even the most modest of dwellings was to invite any passing traveller, all of whom would be desperate, to take up residence. It was too horrible to think about, so they agreed that he would stay.

Zoe had started a tiny kitchen garden behind the house, growing anything that would emerge quickly enough to sustain them. Their problem was seed. Nothing would grow without seeds to start it off. Zoe marvelled at the power of the nature around her. After a year under water, the garden could still produce just enough to feed them. No meat – breeding animals would take much longer and there were so few left to breed from – but a few vegetables – potatoes, carrots, onions and turnips. She and Dad usually made a watery soup, using the rainwater they had collected off the top of the house. Dad's friend, long since gone, had helped him construct guttering out of some of the old tins they had discarded, and this provided them with a regular source of the fresh water they desperately needed.

She wrapped a grubby shawl – one her mother used to wear – around her waist, and bundled William into it, so that he was supported on her back like a baby in a rucksack. His little pink legs stuck out each side and wiggled when Zoe walked around the room. He giggled excitedly, but Zoe did not. Those legs, like matchsticks now, had been so plump and so strong.

'Zoe?' asked Dad. Tears filled his voice and he choked a little.

'Yes Dad,'

'You know I'm proud, right? But I'm also scared. It is like I know I won't see you again.'

'I know Dad. But you know one of us has to do this. I'm doing it for you. And for William. And I'm coming home Dad. Give me a few weeks. I'm coming home.'

'It coming home!' chirped a little voice from behind Zoe's back.

Dad managed a weak smile and held Zoe's hand very tightly.

'Go West, Zoe. Look for higher ground. And take care Princess. There are bad people out there.'

'There are good people out there too, Dad. You know that. And you know Munchkin. He is out there somewhere. I know it. And I will find him. Or...,' her voice sounded uncertain, *'he will come back and*

find me.'

'But you won't be here.'

The reality of her situation hit her. Munchkin had headed west too. And had talked of higher ground. She had to follow. She packed the potatoes, onions and other vegetables into a canvas bag which Dad helped her to fix behind William.

And during the winter. Was it the winter? Time had passed her by. Slowly, but imperceptibly they had all been getting hungrier and thinner. The winter vegetables had sustained them to a level. Not everyone could survive that.

It had been cold for sure when it happened. The mudflats had frozen, and their only way of keeping warm – ever-smaller branches torn from the rough trees – was dwindling. About the time that Munchkin had left. Dad was struggling.

William had been squirming around on the damp floor, playing with the toys that Dad had retrieved from one of bigger houses. He had just started talking.

They had been gathered in the stinking living room, Mum and Dad on the remaining furniture, Zoe and William on the floor.

'It not moving!' William had said, excitement mixed with confusion in his tiny voice.

'Come, Will, come here.' Zoe had comforted the infant.

And that was it. Zoe's mother had just given up. In truth she had never properly recovered from the birth. No facilities. Inadequate food. The survival of the fittest.

And the fittest now, were William and Zoe.

And so they just left. Zoe and William. Some food. A wave from their father. Into the gloomy dusk of

evening.

Zoe had decided that for the first few miles they would walk in the cool summer darkness. They would find a space to sleep later. Other than that she had planned nothing.

They tramped noiselessly for a few hours along what had been country lanes, knowing nothing of what they might find. Was everyone on the move again? Where were they heading? With no information, with no news, with no-one around, Zoe just didn't know. She felt scared, but at the same time, liberated. A new start. Away from the house, the despair. She smiled a little to herself. Daydreamed a bit.

Shaken out of it by the sight of two small figures in the distance, heading away from them, weighed down by a large sack.