

GIRL ISLAND

- A NOVEL -

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For Miss Edwards.

And for all the loners out there.

I am a rock, I am an island.
And a rock feels no pain.
And an island never cries.

— *Simon and Garfunkel*

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances:
if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

— *Carl Jung*

There was a little girl,
Who had a little curl,
Right in the middle of her forehead.
When she was good,
She was very good indeed,
But when she was bad she was horrid.

— *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

PROLOGUE

Crack!

The sound of a twig breaking rouses me. I hold my breath and stay completely still.

I hear them whispering, maybe fifteen metres to my left. I turn my head slowly and see torchlight through the leaves. The light is getting brighter, closer.

“Maybe she’s dead already. You stuck her pretty good.”

“We need to find her. And we need to make sure.”

They are no more than ten metres from me now and walking straight towards my hiding spot.

This island must be purgatory, I think. Not for the first time.

Seven metres now. Six.

I only have one option left.

I burst from my hiding place and run.

“*There!*” one shouts. “Found her! She’s here!”

I run. I run as fast as I possibly can. Through the thick vines and undergrowth, deeper into the jungle. I don’t look back. Thorny creepers whip and sting my face and arms. Pain streaks hot down my side. My T-shirt clings to my skin with blood and sweat. My lungs are burning. But every fibre of my body is in overdrive, united in its one purpose: to survive.

As long as I am running, I know I can out-pace them. I just need enough space between them and me – enough time – to find a better hiding place.

I get a good head start before the ground takes a sudden uphill turn and I stumble. I clamber up the hill, my fingers clawing at the damp earth, finding purchase. Footsteps crash through the underbrush behind me. I manage to get to my feet again and sprint through a clearing, further into the dense jungle, into the blackness. Away from their torchlight, away from the moonlight.

One thing I am certain of: being alone in the dark is the only way I will survive the night.

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Rylan and I transfer the last few Granny Smith crates from the trailer into the barn. I pull the huge wooden door shut and secure it with the padlock and chain. The keyring dangling from my hand is labelled 'Fruit Barn', in my dad's handwriting. I shoot a sideways glance at Ry. He's looking at the label, a tell-tale shimmer in his eyes.

It's been three months since Dad passed away, but I haven't been able to cry yet. Rylan has only just turned fourteen, so it's been a rough ride for him. It would be tough enough in a normal household, but when that household is a working farm it's damn near impossible for me to pause and grieve. The only thing I've been able to focus on is running the farm and helping my little brother and mother through it.

"Are you sure you're gonna be okay, Ry?" I ask, resting a dirty hand on his shoulder. "I'll only be gone a week, and that's the last of the harvest for a little while."

"Ellery, it'll be fine. Stop worrying," he says, looking down at his feet to hide his face.

I squeeze his shoulder, swallow the hollow lump in my throat and force a smile. "Right, hop up. Let's get back for breakfast. I hope Mum is making omelettes."

We haul ourselves up into the tiny cab of our old Leyland tractor. I start her up, depress the clutch and slide her into gear. We trundle down the narrow track that runs between the lake and the raspberry fields on the way back to the house. It's a beautiful frosty November morning and the sun slants low over the farm, illuminating a fine mist that hangs over the water. I used to enjoy many happy, wonderful afternoons by that lake. But that was a long time ago.

I push old images out of my mind and sneak a few glances at Rylan on our journey back. He is beginning to change physically; his cute boyish face is becoming more angular, his chest and shoulders are broadening from his work on the farm. I'm starting to see what he will look like as a man. Ry is the image of our mother – dirty-blond hair tucked behind his ears, fair skin with a generous smattering of freckles, and clear hazel eyes. I look much more like my dad – short brown hair swept across my forehead, green eyes and olive skin, deeply tanned from endless days spent outdoors.

We round the bend, and the farmhouse comes into sight. It's a ramshackle one-storey timber-framed house which my dad and grandpa built using the trees from our woods. Over the years, we have added to it – an extra bedroom here, a storeroom there – simply by stacking hay bales for the walls and insulation, framing them with timber and finishing with lime plaster or planed shiplap cladding. The farmhouse is powered by a wind turbine and – apart from the oil-fired Aga in the kitchen – is completely self-sufficient.

I bring the tractor to a standstill and Rylan climbs out to unlatch the gate that separates our house from the rest of the farm. Fixed to the front of the gate is my dad's hand-carved wooden sign:



Holmes Farm has only fifty acres but – with a lot of hard work – we make the most of our land. Almost half of the farm is dedicated to soft fruits, which we open to the public for ‘pick your own’ weekends during the summer. The other half is made up of vegetables which we sell all year round to local businesses, along with our fruit. It's also home to just enough livestock to help sustain us. The farm feeds our small family and generates just enough money to keep us afloat, but it's an endless struggle.

I put the tractor into gear, push the throttle forwards, and follow Rylan up the drive towards the house.

With Dad gone, an uncertain future looms before us.

For the first time since the tenth of August, the chair at the head of our breakfast table isn't empty.

Sitting in Dad's place, sipping tea from my faded *Transformers* mug, is a woman dressed in a pristine royal blue tracksuit, with an elaborate gold crest and ‘King's Academy’ embroidered on the chest. Her blond hair is tightly braided, and her skin is sallow and pale, but she has bright eyes and an easy smile.

“Ah, you must be Ellery,” she says as I walk into the kitchen. She stands to shake my hand. “I'm Miss Ramsay, your new PE teacher.”

She is tall and extremely thin. I wonder when she actually last did some good exercise. I walk past her to the sink and turn on the hot water tap. “Sorry,” I say, holding my hands up

apologetically. "My hands are filthy. Just one second."

At the sound of my voice, Mum twirls around from the Aga, waving an egg spatula in the air. "Ellery Isla Holmes! I told you to be back by ten o'clock. Poor Miss Ramsay has had to listen to my nonsense for fifteen minutes!"

This is the most energetic and cheerful I've seen Mum since...well, before.

"Please, Mrs Holmes, there's no need to worry," says Miss Ramsay, smiling back at me. "Your mum and I thought it would be a good idea for us to get to know each other a bit before the trip, Ellery. I didn't want you to turn up at the airport tomorrow and not know anyone at all."

I dry my palms and shake her hand. It feels slim, cold and fragile, like it's made from fine bone china. I squeeze it very gently, worried it might shatter. She smiles at me kindly, tilting her head to one side ever so slightly. I've seen that look many times over the past few months – you know, the look people give you when someone close to you has just died – but to be fair, her eyes are filled with more compassion and understanding than most.

"Pleased to meet you," I say. "I didn't actually know you were going to be here." I throw a glare in my mother's direction, but she's too busy at the stove to notice.

"I'm very pleased to meet you too," she says, her smile widening. "I must say, I'm delighted to have such an accomplished young athlete join our academy. We've been following your success very closely, Ellery. I think you will fit in just fine at King's. And I'm so pleased we could arrange a last-minute place for you on this trip. It's the perfect opportunity for you to meet some of your fellow students. There are eight of you going along – a couple of them are also scholars, by the way – and most of the kids are in your year group, so you should make some new friends before you officially start."

I doubt that, I think. But I smile back at her.

"Oh, that's good news, isn't it, Ellery?" Mum says from the Aga. "I keep telling her it's the best way to make friends, Miss Ramsay, but she's been worried about going away with complete strangers."

"*Mum!*" I hiss under my breath.

"What?" Mum says. "Oh, don't be embarrassed. Miss Ramsay doesn't mind, do you, Miss Ramsay?" She brings two plates over to the table, piled high with scrambled eggs and buttered toast. "I know it's not ideal starting halfway through the term, but, like we're both saying...you'll make friends on this trip before you start at King's, and then everything will be easy-peasy-lemon-squeezy."

I roll my eyes but can't hide a small smile. It's so nice to see Mum in a lively mood, however forced it might be. I glance at Miss Ramsay, who flashes me a grin, her eyes twinkling with

amusement and what looks like some semblance of understanding. I'm beginning to like her.

Maybe this won't be so bad, after all.

Miss Ramsay and I sit down at the table. The six chairs around it are all entirely different from one other – each one salvaged from a charity shop, a jumble sale, a roadside or a skip – and each of us has our favourite. Mine is a high-backed, slim but solid-looking chair which I reckon must have once belonged in a church, as it has a pocket for a hymn book or bible on the back. It's painted white and has a well-worn navy-striped cushion tied to its seat, just like Mum has done with the other five mismatched misfits. Each one different, but the same.

"Rylan!" Mum yells as she places another two plates of steaming eggs on the table. "Breakfast's ready!"

A few moments later, Rylan appears at the doorway with our dog, Jima, alongside him. Jima has been his shadow since Dad died. He's a black and white border collie with one blue eye and one brown eye and spends his life rounding up every animal we have on the farm. Lately, he's just been rounding up my brother.

Ry stops when he sees Miss Ramsay sitting in Dad's chair.

"Eat your eggs, buddy," I say as cheerfully as I can.

He pulls out his stool next to me and begins to shovel piles of eggs into his mouth, side-eyeing the woman at our table. Jima takes his place next to him, watching each forkful travel back and forth like he's watching a tennis match, his tongue lolling out of his mouth.

"Do *not* feed that dog, Rylan Holmes," Mum says, taking her seat.

While she busies herself pouring out apple juice, I nudge Ry and pass him a piece of toast under the table to give to Jima.

We all eat silently for a while. Well, Mum, Rylan and I eat. Miss Ramsay seems to push her eggs around her plate. I don't suppose she expected to be fed, but no one leaves this house with an empty stomach. Well, that's how it always was, before.

Eventually, she clears her throat, breaking the awkward silence. "So, I should congratulate you on the championship, Ellery. I was there, you know, at the stadium. That second day...those javelin throws...that 800 metres! You were simply incredible."

I stop chewing. My heart thumps heavily in my chest and I feel my skin start to prickle with sweat. I try my best not to look at Mum or Rylan, who I know will be feeling the same wave of anxiety.

She doesn't know, I tell myself. She's a nice lady. Just be cool.

Of course she doesn't know. How could she?

No one outside our family knows the day I won the British under-18 heptathlon championship

is the same day I lost my father.

When he was younger, my dad was an Olympic decathlete. He won a bronze medal at the 1972 Munich Games and a silver medal in Montreal four years later. After reaching those dizzying heights, he tried his best to sustain a career in athletics – which is tough enough for even the cream of the crop – until he tore his cruciate ligament while training for the pole vault. Doctors told him he would never compete again. Devastated, he withdrew from athletics for a quiet life working on the family's farm, out of the spotlight. As I grew up, it became clear that I had inherited my father's athletic ability. After watching me win every different race available at my primary school's sports day each year, Dad began to teach me the basics of every event he had mastered. At least, all seven events that matched up with the female equivalent of the decathlon: the heptathlon.

Here's the funny thing about growing up on a farm. As it turns out, it's the perfect environment to train and grow as a heptathlete. The 200 metre and 800 metre races? No problem: Dad would mark out the distances around the tractor track and the cow field. Hurdles? Throw in some pig fences. High jump? A pole and some hay bales set up in the barn would do the trick. Long jump? Start from a run along the jetty into the lake and move on to the soft ground of the chicken coop. And the javelin and shot put? Nothing a whittled rake pole and an old steel hammerhead couldn't simulate – that was until we could afford to buy the real things, anyway. As I moved through secondary school, I became district champion in virtually every track and field event. And, when I was old enough, my parents signed me up with the same athletics club my father had trained with. The rest, as they say, is history.

Except, now my dad isn't there to cheer me on anymore.

He wasn't cheering me on during that final 800 metre race when I won the heptathlon championship, either. He was lying on the floor in the stands; my mother and brother crouched over his lifeless body, desperately trying to save him.

After an awkward breakfast, Rylan makes his excuses and takes Jima outside. I clear everything away and wash up the dirty dishes while Mum chats to Miss Ramsay about passports, insurance, vaccinations and other formalities. Then Mum stands and says, "Be a good girl and talk to Miss Ramsay now, Ellery. I'm going to check on the chickens."

As Mum turns away, I watch her face transform into its usual vacant state. It's like that trick kids do when they swipe their hands down their faces, changing the shape of their mouths from happy to sad.

'Happy Mum' sure was nice while she lasted.

Oblivious, Miss Ramsay takes a crisp white piece of paper out of her bag and passes it to me across the table. "Here's a list of everything we are asking students to pack for the trip. Your mother has already given me your passport, and your bursary covers the cash required, so there's no need to worry about those items. But if you could pack as much here as you are able into your rucksack – and make sure it weighs no more than 20 kilos – then everything is taken care of. Like I told your mum, you'll need to be at the airport at three o'clock tomorrow afternoon. You'll find me just outside the entrance for departures. I'll be holding a sign." She taps the paper and looks at me gently. "Now, is there anything on that list you don't have which I might be able to help you with?"

This woman might be a virtual stranger to me, but I know she's not stupid. She has now spent an hour in our company. She's seen our house, the furniture, our clothes, our belongings. Or rather the lack thereof. I can already tell from the look on her face that I will not have a lot of what's on the list.

Reluctantly, I look down at the neatly typed letter. It's headed with a gold embossed King's Academy logo and titled '*SIXTH FORM PE TRIP - NOVEMBER 1993*'. I spend a couple of minutes reading everything that's listed. After a while, I say quietly, "Uh, I don't have a waterproof rucksack or waterproof boots. Well, I have wellingtons, but I suppose they're not really..." my voice trails off. I feel my face flush and fiddle with the pendant that hangs around my neck.

"That's okay, Ellery," she says reassuringly. "Whatever you need, we can buy from the airport." She marks an asterisk next to each item that I don't have. "What else?"

I look down again. "Um, I'm okay for clothes, I guess, but I don't have a swimsuit. At least, not one that fits anymore."

"Okay, that's no problem, either."

She waits patiently as I carry on reading.

"I have a torch...I have an anorak and trainers, but I don't have flip-flops or sandals. I...um...I have a penknife. Well, it's a multi-tool, but I guess that's okay. And...uh...I think that's it." I push the paper back towards her. I don't mention that I haven't got a journal or a camera or a compass or sunglasses or a hat or sunscreen or deodorant or insect repellent. I might die of embarrassment if I do.

She marks several more asterisks alongside the items and folds the paper, handing it to me.

“Right then...I will leave you to pack what you have and then you can bring that along tomorrow, and I’ll take you shopping for the rest. I’ll bring along the rucksack you’ll need as well. Are you happy with that?”

“Yes. Thank you,” I reply, hanging my head to hide the heat in my face.

“Ellery. It’s really not a problem. We are very lucky to have you.” She stands up and hooks her bag over a slim shoulder. “I’ll see you tomorrow at three o’clock, then.”

I nod and walk her to our front door. Jarvis and Jekyll, our goats, are chewing at the tangle of honeysuckle that clings densely around the door frame. I shoo them away and Miss Ramsay laughs brightly, walking out into the sunshine. She looks a little bit healthier outside.

Halfway down our driveway, she turns and calls out to me, “Oh, and Ellery? I’m so glad you’re joining us. I think this will be a trip you’ll never forget.”