

TWELVE

I roll the sack-cloth fabric, wrap and tie the yellow, green and brown twelve-belt around it. Then I shove the bundle into the tall dune grass, hidden from view. Racing towards the sea in my vest and leggings, I don't stop until the water reaches my belly button. That first touch of it shocks and my skin tightens around me. I wait for a bit, but there's only one way to get used to it: I dive in. Swallowed by cold and dark, I blow all of my breath out and it bubbles in front of me. I pull wide on a breast-stroke, come up for new air, then swim freestyle in the direction of Outer Farne.

I notice it then: she's not with me. I stop and tread water, looking out for her. The sea spreads wide, salty and deep, its waves gently rolling and tossing. The movement feels playful, as it rocks me in my position. But I've seen its strength, depth and darkness and I know never to forget what the sea can do. I can't see Amarie anywhere, but before panic sets in she appears, hovering just beneath the surface like the black ink of a cuttlefish. I swim on, stronger with her beside me.

Outer Farne is the only Farne Island that is completely swallowed by the sea at high tide which keeps other people away. We arrive at low tide and crawl onto the bank. The ground is covered in blotches of guano that make me think of Dalmatian spots. We settle on a clean grassy area to catch our breaths. The sun dries my skin and leaves a trail of salt crystals, little white specks shimmering along the skinny brown of my arms and legs.

'What are you going to do about the trip?' Amarie asks.

I shrug. 'I guess I could talk to her.'

Amarie sits cross-legged looking at me, 'How?'

BOOK ONE: SUNSUM

‘Stop pressurising me. I’ll think of something.’ I pause. ‘Maybe, maybe I’ll say something like ... about, how it’s the end of the term and the end of the school year ... and how everyone’s really excited about the class trip to the Grace Darling Museum. I might say, how they’re all talking about it, so I was looking forward to it too – but that Sister Maria told me I might not be allowed to go. I could maybe ask Mother about it, like it’s a question, like I’m not sure of the answer.’

‘She didn’t even have the decency to tell you herself.’

‘She’ll be trying to protect me.’

‘From a museum?’

‘She’ll be thinking that it’s for my own good. And maybe the Grace Darling Museum won’t be that special – we don’t know... It would be nice to leave the island – the proper way for a change - and to see the mainland, to actually walk on the mainland.’

Amarie doesn’t say anything. I get up and wander away from her, feeling judged. It is barely the end of June, but it has been so warm that the tips of the grass have started to turn yellow. I brush my toes through strands of blonde grass as I walk, pulling a few out that are practically straw. I stop beside a rock pool, dip my feet in its waters and then settle myself on its incline. I grab at flotsam and seaweed that’s trapped there and kick the water up a bit. We should never have started talking about the trip to the museum; it’s completely changed the mood of the day.

A dazed-looking mackerel circles the edge of the water, trying to avoid my feet. I lean in to touch it, and it slips along my palm and swims towards the farthest wall, putting as much space between us as it can. Its scales are smooth to the touch, like undersea velvet. Having nowhere else to go, it turns around, trapped. We look at each other. It feels like a challenge. I’m on my feet in the water, but crouching as though I’m about to catch a ball in rounders. It moves, slowly, away from the wall. I lunge. It tries to escape, but

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my hands are around it. I tighten my grip. Gotcha! I squeal and jump, nearly lose my balance but manage not to fall. I hold it up to show Amarie. It thrashes between my fingers. Amarie gives me a thumbs-up, then turns away. Deflated by her response, I nearly lose my hold on it. I steady myself, then throw it and send it flying up and out – it glides through the air, then splashes as it falls into the open water, to freedom.

