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The morning air is cold but the storm from last night has cleared and the wind is feathering the peak at the river mouth. Rowdy waits patiently on the lookout platform while I change into my wetsuit and pull my board out from its hiding place in the tea trees.

Before long, I'm duck-diving under the waves as they hit the inside bar, the freezing water finding the holes in the stitching and my bare skin underneath. When I reach clear water, I catch my breath and ease into a steady rhythm, paddling towards the peak. The winter storms have shifted the sand and it'll take me a while to get used to how the wave is breaking. When I get

close, I sit up on my board and take stock. The peak is further along the beach than I've seen it before, almost in line with the platform, but provided the channel is still shallow enough, the wave should break all the way through to the river mouth.

Sitting out here, it's hard not to remember what it was like before the virus: surfing with my mates, the beach dotted with swimmers and walkers, the lifesavers' flags flapping yellow and red in the offshore breeze. On the other side of the dunes the car park would be overflowing on a day like this, the road choked with cars and caravans and the town buzzing with holidaymakers. Across the river and up the hill, Mum would be out in the garden, weeding or pruning, and Dad would be in the shed stripping back an old table, the smell of dust and linseed oil hanging in the air.

But when I look now, I can see all the way back up the river to the road bridge and the ruins on the main street, the shells of burnt-out shops and abandoned cars. It's hard to keep track of time when you're on your own but there've been three winters since the virus spread beyond the cities, reaching us and forcing the town into quarantine. That's when Dad died. And two winters ago, I lost Mum. Everyone else in town was either killed by the virus or took their chances heading north, leaving me and Rowdy to fend for ourselves.

We did okay, hunting and fishing and staying out of sight. Then Rose came.

Everything changed the day she appeared on the beach, scared, injured and pregnant, an escaped Siley on the run from Ramage and the Wilders. Taking her in and hiding her

unleashed a shit storm. First there was the journey north to find her sister, Kas, then the escape back to the coast with Willow in tow, and finally, on the worst night of my life, Rose dying as Hope was born.

The swell is a little unsettled and I need to be careful not to get too far inside the peak. Dad always said the best way of starting a surf was to take off on the biggest wave you could get. Opening your account, he called it. So I ease over the top of the first four waves, each one breaking a little further out, until I'm in perfect position for the next one. I barely have to paddle into the take off, just a couple of deep strokes and the rest is muscle memory. I'm a little slow to my feet, but I balance myself and feel the beautiful rush of the drop down the face.

As usual, I lose all sense of time in the water and before I realise it the sun's above the ridge and there are new storm heads building in the west. Kas and Willow will be awake and wondering when I'll be back. So I take one last wave, riding it all the way to the beach, where Rowdy paces up and down the sand, chasing seagulls he'll never catch. He brushes past my leg as we make our way back up the dune to the platform.

The winter has almost passed and Kas, Willow and I have welcomed the return of some warmth to the air. It's been a winter of storms, with huge fronts coming straight up from the south, smashing into the coast. There's damage all over Angowrie—big trees uprooted, roofs blown off and the river flooding right up into town on the king tides.

In a strange way the harsh weather's kept us safe. We've been isolated for months; the road north is blocked and there's snow on the ridges. As long as I've been alive it hasn't snowed this close to the coast, but the weather's so cocked up now, everything feels like it's never happened before. We figure the Wilders were forced back to Longley to sit out the winter, but with the warmer days, they'll be out on the hunt again soon.

It's been a tough time for all three of us, but Kas has been the worst affected. Rose's death hangs over everything she does. She stays in her room for days at a time, refusing food and snapping at Willow and me when we try to cheer her up. She's a different person now. I'd hoped when we got back to Angowrie she'd gradually work her way through her grief. But every time I've tried to comfort her, to hold her or even touch her, I've felt her resistance. No matter what we talk about, she always ends up back at Ray's place that night, Rose dying, Ramage arriving to claim his child and us running from the Wilders. She hardly mentions Hope—it's too hard, on top of all her grief, to think what might have happened to the baby.

I've spent the winter worrying about Ray. He's used to being on his own but he's so isolated out there in the Addiscot Valley. It's only a couple of hours away on foot but he's too old to travel far and I know the storms will have tested him. He'll be struggling to get out and work his garden, not that much would've grown in the cold months. Before the weather got really bad, I thought if we went out to visit him Kas could at least see where Rose was buried, but she kept putting it off, always finding excuses.

The first few weeks after Rose died were the hardest. The full force of winter hadn't arrived yet and we had to be extra cautious moving around Angowrie, not knowing if the Wilders stayed south of the main range. I didn't believe they'd leave us alone. They'd figure we had food supplies hidden somewhere and Ramage still wanted to take Kas back to Longley. As far as he was concerned, she was a Siley and his property.

Back then, I wasn't prepared to risk trapping along the fences. It's what they'd be expecting, that we'd return to a place we knew we could get food. As long as we stayed in town, kept out of sight, lit a fire only on moonless nights and got by as best we could, I thought we'd be safe. So we relied on what food we could pick off the reef, mostly pippies and mussels exposed at low tide.

Rowdy rushes ahead once we get close to home. By the time I'm through the back door he's lapping water from his bowl in the corner. Kas and Willow sit at the kitchen table peeling hard-boiled eggs.

Willow looks up and smiles. 'How was the surf?'

I cup my cold hands on the side of her face and she reels away. 'A bit chilly,' I say.

Kas forces a smile then goes back to the eggs. This is what she's like now, only half with us, hardly joining in, as though it would be some sort of crime.

With Kas off in her own world, Willow's become my shadow. She's always watching me, asking a million questions about rabbits and hunting and living off the land.

I decided last night that we should start trapping again and she's excited to get going.

After breakfast she sits on the back porch watching me oil the traps. The wind has turned and another storm is threatening. She pulls her favourite woollen coat tight around her shoulders. We needed to find some clothes for her when we got back from Ray's, so I went through all the houses in the area. Eventually, I found a heap of kids' clothes in a place at the top of Parker Street. She had a great time trying them on, parading up and down the hallway. Even Kas managed a smile.

'Show me how to do that,' she says, coming and kneeling next to me on the grass.

I work the trap's jaws open and shut while she drips oil into the spring. I look up and see the concentration on her face, everything focused on what she's doing, as though this is a skill she'll need to hang onto.

She pushes the hair off her face with an oily hand and catches me looking.

'What?' she says.

'Nothing,' I say, trying not to smile. She's easy to be around. I never have to second guess her or worry about upsetting her. She's turned out to be a tough kid.

The storm is short and sharp, exhausting itself in fifteen minutes. When we're ready to leave, I stick my head in the door and tell Kas we're heading up to the fences. She's still at the table with the same blank look on her face she's had since we got back from Ray's. I so much want the old Kas back, the

one that was funny and warm. She looks the same, her hair thick and tangled and falling across her face, deep brown eyes, the skin dark around the birthmark on her cheek, but there's something missing—the spark that made her who she was. Even though she's been right here, sleeping in the next room, eating at the same table, warming herself by the same fire, she might as well be on another planet.

'I'm taking Wils with me,' I say.

'Sure. Whistle when you come back.'

This is the way she talks now, in short little sentences, like anything else is too much effort.

We head out with the traps, keeping to the back tracks and staying alert for any sign of danger. The storm damage is everywhere. Fallen branches and uprooted trees block our way at every turn. Only Rowdy is unconcerned, darting ahead, happy to be active again after a slow couple of months. He senses the familiarity of it, though this time with Wils included in our little party. It's easy to forget she's only nine or ten years old. She doesn't wander or dawdle like a kid anymore, she walks with purpose, keeping her eyes and ears open.

And she's been practising with the bow and arrows. At the beginning of winter she set up a target in the backyard, an old mattress with a bullseye painted in the middle. At the start, I think she did herself more damage than the target—she had big red welts on her arm where the string hit her—but gradually she got the hang of it. Now she can hit the target from the other side of the yard, and when she isn't practising, she'll be in the shed sharpening the metal tips of the arrows.

It takes twice as long to get up to the ridge as it would have before the winter. We approach the fence slowly but everything looks the same. The burnt-out hayshed is still a tangle of steel girders and blackened rafters, all collapsed into a heap. I know this place well—I've been setting my traps up here since before Mum died.

Further along we come to the gateway where I knocked Ramage off his trail bike. I'd strung a length of wire across the opening so he'd hit it at speed. He was injured and I had a knife at his throat, but somehow I couldn't finish him off. Now I wonder how things might have been different if I'd killed him when I had the chance. Maybe he wouldn't have attacked the valley, forcing us to escape with Willow. Maybe Rose would be alive. Maybe she and Hope would be living with us and Kas would be a different person.

Finding a small gap in the bottom of the fence, I dig the first trap in and push hard on the spring to set the plate. Willow squats next to me and watches.

'This is where you've gotta be careful, Wils. If the plate doesn't catch, it'll snap shut and you'll lose a finger.'

The plate holds and I sprinkle some dry leaves over the top to hide the metal. Willow is holding her breath. Rowdy knows to stay well clear. We set four traps at intervals along the fence.

It's slow going on the way back down. Willow walks out in front, checking every now and again to check I'm keeping up. When we reach the lookout above the old football ground we sit down for a rest and scan the town below for any sign

of danger. From up here I can pick every street, every short cut and trail through the dunes. This is my town, my fortress against the Wilders. If they come again, I can outwit them; I know the terrain so much better than they ever will.

Willow sits next to me and says, ‘When is Kas going to be happy again, Finn?’

‘It’s going to take a while, I think.’

Willow sighs and looks to the blue line of the horizon. ‘She cries in the night,’ she says.

‘She’ll get better. We’ve just gotta look after her until she does.’

‘Finn!’ Willow says suddenly. She points to where the main road winds down into town. There’s movement, something catching the light. I can’t hear anything above the sound of the wind whipping through the trees, but I watch a gap in the bush a little further down and wait to see what emerges.

There are maybe six or seven of them—we’re too far away to work out who they might be, but they’re moving slowly. I can’t see any weapons but they’re pushing handcarts piled with sacks. I’m hoping they’re Drifters, like the ones that passed us when Harry had me blindfolded up above Pinchgut Junction.

Rowdy’s picked up their scent and he stands to attention. Keeping low, we take off down the track to the river bridge, arriving before they get there. We make our way across and hide just off the road in a low stand of tea tree.

The first thing I want to see is that they’re not Wilders. After a few minutes they come to the bridge and stop. There are six men and two boys, Drifters for sure. Their clothes hang off

them and they hold rags over their mouths as though the air is dirty. Their hair is long and matted and their eyes dart left and right. One of them, a tall man with a stooped back, walks out onto the bridge and looks up and down the river.

Willow lies next to me holding her breath. Rowdy crouches low, ready to spring at them if he has to. I touch him gently on the nose but he stays alert. These are the first Drifters I've seen in Angowrie, the first to take their chances on passing through a quarantined area—at least I hope they're passing through.

The tall guy motions the others across. They stay in single file keeping their heads down and their mouths covered. As they pass us, I see how thin they are. Their eyes are dark and sunken, their arms and legs like sticks. I can smell them too—a stench of sweat and piss. Some are barefoot but a couple wear shoes that clomp on the asphalt road. The smallest two boys, about seven or eight years old, are at the back, struggling to keep up.

They continue along the road parallel to the river, the axles of their carts squeaking under the weight of their loads. We track them as they pass below the platform and make their way up the hill and out along the coast road.

I'm happy to see the back of them. Mum and Dad always said we should help people less fortunate than us, but all the old rules fell away after the virus. We probably could've given them some food, though we hardly have enough for ourselves, but who's to say they wouldn't have killed us for it. I stopped trusting people a long time ago. I don't feel good about it, but it's necessary now.

In the next couple of weeks we survive the last of the storms, hunkered down, hoping our little house will stand up to the weather. The appearance of the Drifters is a reminder that the spring will bring more danger. We've got no way of knowing what's happening outside Angowrie in the bigger towns like Wentworth, where I used to go to school, or further north in the larger cities, but people are moving again. Add to that the threat of the Wilders and things are going to change. Quickly, it seems.

We see out the winter, scrounging for food and huddling together to keep warm. I can't help but think back to my previous two winters, when there was just Rowdy and me doing the same, scrounging for food and huddling together for warmth. But everything has changed since Rose appeared on the beach.

More than ever, now, I need to find a way through to Kas, to open her up again. And not just because I want to feel her close to me. If we're going to make it through the summer, with the Wilders returning to settle old scores, all three of us will have to have to work together. It's the only way I can see us surviving.

2

Spring has taken ages to get here, but finally the storms have eased off and the few remaining fruit trees around town have started to blossom.

Today it feels like we've turned some sort of corner. The sun has got a bit of punch to it and we can feel it warming our winter bones. Willow wants to come down to the beach and watch me surf. Kas sits on the porch, stretching and flexing like a cat that's just woken up. She ties her hair back and turns her face to the sun.

'Me and Wils are going to beach,' I say. 'Wanna come?'

She's hardly been outside for months. The fresh air and

sunshine would do her good.

‘I might come over later,’ she says, but I can’t tell whether she means it or not.

I’ve almost given up trying to convince her to do anything. Willow hasn’t said as much but I reckon she feels the same way. She spends all her time with me and hardly bothers to tell Kas what she’s doing. And Rowdy has adopted Willow—they go everywhere together.

As we make our way up to the platform, it’s good to feel the sand under my feet and the northerly at our backs. The swell is dead straight, not too big, which is good because I’m a bit rusty. Willow and Rowdy race down onto the open beach. I change into my wetsuit, stash my clothes under the platform and follow them. The sets are lining up nicely but I want to make sure Willow understands we have to be careful, even though it’s a beautiful beach day.

‘Wils, we need a way of signalling each other in case there’s any trouble,’ I say.

‘Like how?’

‘If you want me to come in, hold both your arms up in the air and keep them there. I’ll watch for you and if I see you signalling, I’ll come straight in, okay?’

‘Like this?’ She stands on her toes and holds her arms up straight.

‘Perfect. You’d make a great surf lifesaver.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Never mind. Stay with Rowdy.’

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The current is strong and by the time I make it across the bar, my arms are starting to feel it. It's good to duck dive under a set on the way out, keeping my eyes open underwater and watching the rolling force of the wave come at me. I sit up and look back at Willow, who's racing up and down the beach with Rowdy. Like every other time I've surfed over the past three years, I check up the river as far as I can see, then turn and paddle towards the peak. The water hasn't settled after the rain and there are little bits of weed and leaves that have been washed down the river. But the offshore wind is glassing off the surface and the waves are hitting the bar and peeling along the line.

What I've missed through not surfing much over the winter is doing something that's not just about survival for a change. But, for some reason, I feel uncomfortable today. I keep looking at the beach, where Willow has stopped running along the sand and is staring out to sea. I take a wave and paddle back out. When I look again, Willow has both her arms in the air. Kas is standing a little way behind her, arms in the air, too. My heart starts to race and I scan the dunes for signs of trouble before catching the next wave and belly-boarding in over the bar. I tuck the board under my arm and run towards them.

I'm out of breath by the time I get close enough to yell to them. 'What is it? Where are they?'

'Come here,' Willow calls.

I splash through the shallows until I reach her.

'What's going on?'

'I wanted you to come in,' Willow says.

The offshore blows her hair from behind, making it fly around her face like a halo. She puts her hands on her hips and juts her jaw out. 'I want to swim, Finn. I want to go in the water,' she says.

I'm relieved but a bit confused too. I look to Kas, who's standing a few metres back but she doesn't meet my gaze. 'What's stopping you?' I ask Willow.

'Come with me,' she says.

'Why?'

'We've never been in the sea before,' Kas says. 'Remember?' Her voice sounds different, more lively, and there's a half smile on her lips.

I take my board up to the dry sand and put it down. Willow and Kas follow me and shyly strip off to their underwear. Kas has her arms across her chest and Willow jumps up and down to keep warm.

'We reckon the wetsuit's not fair,' Kas says. 'If we're gonna get cold, you are too.'

'All of us together,' Willow says, kicking at the sand.

So I unzip it and peel it off. I'm glad I left my jocks on underneath. Willow runs ahead but pulls up short of the waterline. Kas walks down next to me and I steal a glance at her. Her body is thin but her dark skin glows in the sun. She has a singlet on and a pair of black undies that might have been Mum's. I could be imagining it but I think she's leaning in to me as we walk. Our shoulders touch and her hair brushes against my arm. We reach Willow, who's bouncing on her toes in the shallows.

'Is it safe?' Kas asks.

The sea is second nature to me, part of who I am. I remember Dad carrying me into the water when I was really little. I could swim by the time I was five and I started going to the beach on my own when I was ten. I've never felt fear in the water, though Dad always taught me to respect it, not to take anything for granted, especially when the bigger swells are running.

'Okay,' I say, 'the waves are pretty small but there's a strong current running along the beach. You'll have to brace against it.'

I'm peering out to sea and when I look back at Kas and Willow I can tell they haven't understood a word. So I hold out my hands and they each take one.

'Come on,' I say, and we walk out until the white water pushes against our knees. The water is freezing and I can feel the goosebumps rising all over my skin. Willow grabs hold of my arm with both hands, while Kas lets go and edges back towards the beach, looking uncertain.

'Take Wils first,' she says, 'I'll wait here.'

Willow climbs onto my back and we walk out to where the waves are breaking on the bar. She seems so much bigger and heavier now than a few months ago. The current is strong but I hold my footing and before long we are pushing through chest-high waves. Willow's squealing with the excitement of it, her arms squeezed around my neck hard enough for it to hurt. Slowly, she slips off and dives under a wave.

After a few minutes she's shaking with the cold so I guide her back in to where Kas is standing in the shallows. Willow runs up the beach to dry off and Rowdy follows her.

Kas looks at me with wide eyes. I mean really looks at me,

like she hasn't since Rose died. She takes my hand and we turn to walk out into the waves. By the time we get to the bar she's bracing her body against the sweep.

When a bigger wave pushes through, she turns her back and it knocks her off her feet.

I show her how to dive under them and before long she's sliding through the water like she's been doing it all her life. When she surfaces her hair is a slick of black down her back. Her mother's ring, looped around her neck on a strip of leather, falls out of her singlet.

'Okay,' I say, 'try this now.'

I pick up a wave and body surf it a few metres towards the beach. She can't quite get the hang of it at first but eventually she throws herself down the face of a smallish wave and comes up spluttering next to me. She surprises me by standing and hugging me. Her skin is cold and I hold her, not quite sure what's going on. Her breath comes in sharp little pants and when she lifts her head I see she is crying, her body jerking with the effort. I'm so surprised, I don't know how to react. I thought we were having fun.

'I'm sorry,' she says, her voice shaking. 'I'm so sorry, Finn.'

'Sorry for what?'

'Shutting you out.'

'It's okay, Kas. She was your sister.'

'And your friend.'

Her eyes are red from the crying and the salt.

I don't see the next wave coming. It bowls us over and we roll across the bar, a tangle of arms and legs. Kas throws her

hair back and grabs my hand.

Willow is huddled in the pile of clothes further up the beach. She stands and runs down to meet us. Kas nuzzles into her neck and hair, and kisses her. Willow puts her arms around Kas and the three of us stagger and fall in a heap on the dry sand. Rowdy dances around and barks excitedly.

‘I’m sorry to you, too, Wils,’ Kas says. She is still hanging on to me, our wet skin covered in sand. We get to our feet, link arms and walk back into the water to wash off. With Kas and Willow rolling over each other in the shallows, I would’ve taken a photo of this back before the virus. Moments like this are so rare now, when we forget about surviving and actually enjoy ourselves. When I think about everything we’ve lost—our families, our friends, our homes—it’s easy to forget about what we’d be doing if the virus hadn’t swept them all away. I’d be in senior school, playing football, surfing whenever I could and living with Mum and Dad. Willow would be with Harry and Stella where she belongs, and maybe even Kas would have a better life, living with Stan and Beth and Rose, riding Yogi and working on the farm.

I look at them now and try to hold onto the smiles on their faces before we go back to the business of staying alive.

We make our way up to the platform, where I stash my board and wetsuit in the bushes and throw on a warm jumper. The wind is stronger up here and it pricks at our skin. Kas leads the way and Willow and I follow. Rowdy has raced ahead. I find I’m looking at Kas. I watch the way her calf muscles flex with every step and her hair swings behind her, all wet and

tangled. She turns and walks backwards for a while, a smile easing its way across her face.

She doesn't say anything, but she laughs and the sound rings around inside me.

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