

The Island At The End Of The World

by

Colin M. Drysdale

PREVIEW

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This is a work of fiction.

While it uses real locations as the basis for the story it tells, all the characters and events are fictional. Any resemblance to anyone living, dead or undead is purely coincidental.

Similarly, while the source of the infection is linked to bioengineering, it is purely fictional and any resemblance to any real commercial or research organisation or activity is purely coincidental.

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Other Books by Colin M. Drysdale

The *For Those In Peril* series:

For Those In Peril On the Sea

The Outbreak

Other Books:

Zombies Can't Swim And Other Tales Of The Undead

The Little Book Of Zombie Mathematics (available soon)

For Young Children:

Zombies Love Brains (available soon)

Preface

This is the third book in the *For Those In Peril* series. Originally intended as a single, stand-alone novel (*For Those In Peril On The Sea*), it has now expanded into a trilogy of separate, but interconnected stories set in the same post-apocalyptic world. In this book, I again draw heavily on my own experiences of working amongst the islands of Scotland's west coast, and in particular, on a visit I made to the remote and uninhabited island of Mingulay in the mid-1990s. I fell in love with Mingulay the moment I first set foot on it, and, to me, it is one of the most beautiful and magical places in the world. However, while it is amazing to visit, I can imagine that living on it would be a much more daunting prospect.

While I've tried to be as true as possible to the actual landscape of the island, those who are familiar with Mingulay will see that I've used some artistic licence, and tweaked things here and there to fit in better with the flow of the story. This includes adding a non-existent rocky beach on the south-eastern corner of the island (near Skipisdale), and making the bay on the east side, by the main settlement, sufficiently sheltered to be able to act as a suitable anchorage for boats, even in the worst of weather (which, visitors beware, is far from the truth). I've also re-established flocks of grazing sheep on the island, something which no longer happens, although it did until recently, and ignored the fact that there is a lot more still standing of the old schoolhouse than simply ruins. Similarly, I've ignored the fact that there's a lighthouse on the neighbouring island of

Berneray (the Barra Head lighthouse) which, for those who are interested in such things, would make a much better base for anyone wishing to survive a zombie apocalypse, and I have pretended that it doesn't exist in the world in which this book is set. Finally, while seabird research is conducted on Mingulay, the hut which features in this book is purely fictitious, and I don't know how similar it is to any real seabird research facilities which are on the island. However, I would hope that they are less basic than the one I have invented in this book (which is an amalgamation of various marine biology research facilities where I've lived and worked over the years – some of which were much less salubrious than others).

In addition to drawing on my own experiences of Mingulay, I also drew on a series of events that have become part of sailing folklore, but, unusually for such things, the true stories behind them more than live up to the myths that have grown up around them. These events are those that took place during the Golden Globe race to be the first to sail single-handedly and non-stop around the world. In the late 1960s, while America was preparing to put a man on the moon, this feat of endurance had yet to be achieved, and towards the end of 1968, a series of vessels set out to do what some considered beyond the realms of human capability.

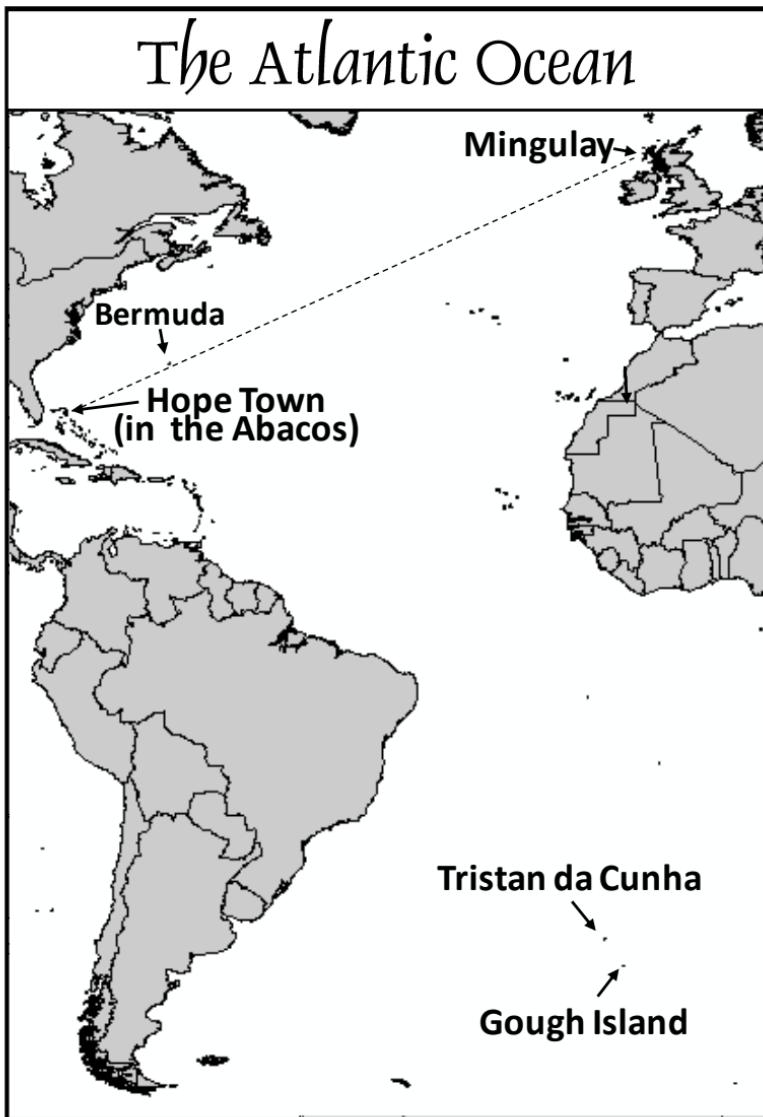
It might have been called a 'race', but winning it was less about being the fastest, and more about being the first to manage to keep their boat, and their sanity, intact long enough to make it across the finishing line. Amongst the tales of survival at sea, and unknown to

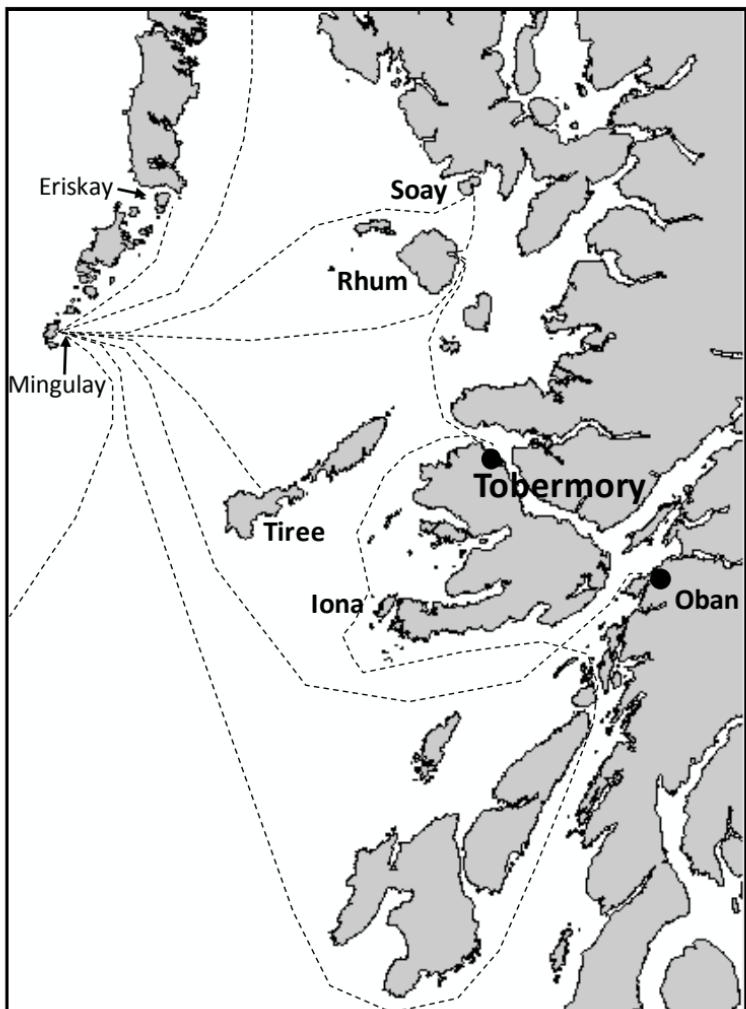
anyone at the time, something more bizarre was going on alongside the race itself. One of the competitors, for reasons which remain unclear to this day, started faking his position, giving the false impression that he was sailing faster and further than he actually was. With radio being their only point of contact (as was the case in the 1960s), he managed to keep up this subterfuge for many months, never venturing out of the Atlantic, into the dangers of the Southern Ocean, before finally succumbing to the pressure that he'd be found out. His boat was eventually discovered abandoned and drifting, with a diary on board which tracked his apparent descent into insanity and presumably suicide. This then, provided the inspiration for some of the events which unfold in this book.

As always, there are many people to thank for the help, inspiration and encouragement they provided during the writing of this book. They include Stephen Burges, Andrea Airns, Chris Parsons (thanks especially for the suggestion about the ‘red-neck hot tub’), Anna MacLeod, Barry Nichols, Emily Lambert, Lilian Leiber and Liz Small. Thanks, as always, also goes to Gale Winskill of Winskill Editorial (www.winskilleditorial.co.uk), for her help and advice.

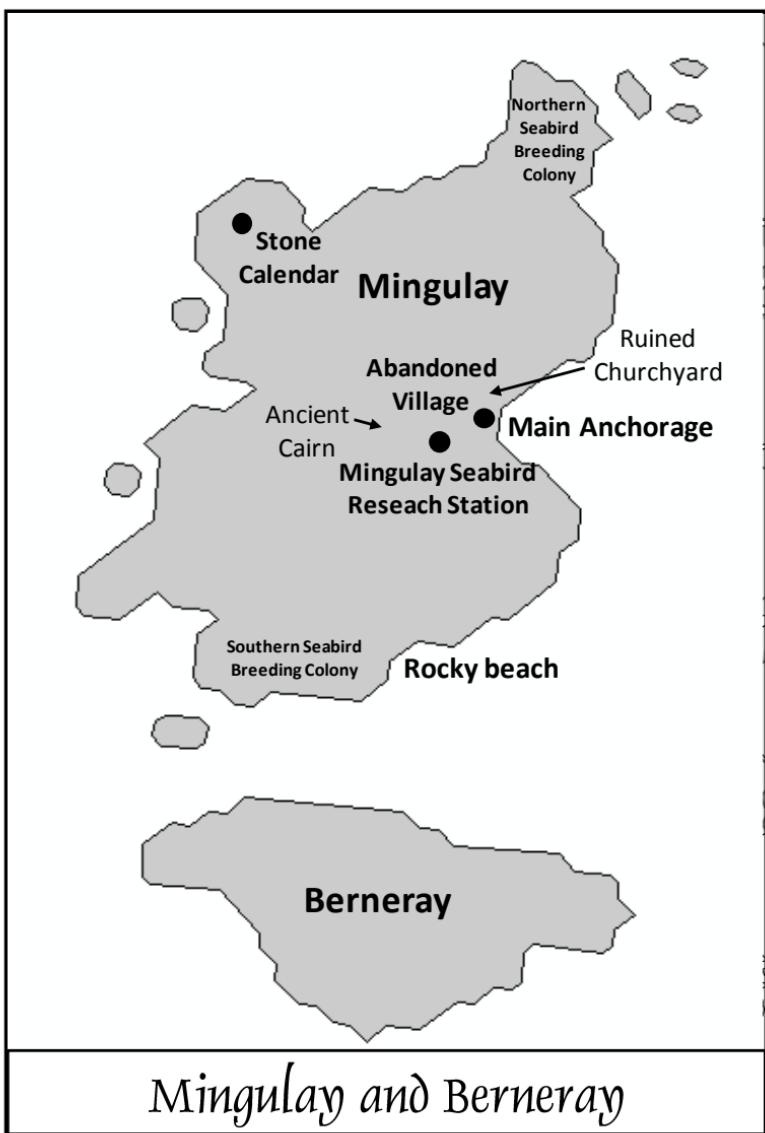
Finally, the biggest thanks of all must go to Sarah: for her patience as I developed the basic plot for this book; for her editing advice (which, I’ve learned over the years, is always better than my own); and for her support throughout the writing process, and throughout my life. If there were ever a zombie apocalypse, you’d be the one I’d move Heaven and Earth to save (and the guinea pigs!).

The real-world locations where the fictional events of *The Island At The End Of The World* take place.





The West Coast Of Scotland



One by one the lights around us blinked and went out, until ours was the only one left. Our candle flickered and guttered, and we wondered how long before we, too, would be swallowed up by the ever-encroaching darkness that was the end of the world.

Prologue

'Hey, Jack, what's that?' Andrew pointed over the older man's shoulder. The two of them had been sitting in the cockpit of Jack's large sport-fishing boat since before the sun went down, drinking rum and coconut water. It was the first drink either of them had had in many months, but for the first time in what seemed like a very long time, it felt like they had something to celebrate. Around them, four sailboats that, like Jack's boat, had clearly seen better days, rode at anchor, while further off, the shorelines of low-lying islands were just visible in the darkness.

A chart lay on the table in front of the two men, a series of small crosses marked on it, each with a date pencilled alongside in Jack's neat, but spidery handwriting. Rob and his crew had been gone for almost two weeks, and today, they'd reached the point of no return; they were now closer to their journey's end than to its beginning. If everything carried on as well as it had until that point, they'd reach their destination in another couple of weeks, and that would be when they'd finally find out if it had all been worth it; they'd find out if Mingulay was still the paradise that Rob remembered, or whether it was as infested with infected as the islands which lay all around the shallow channel, in a remote corner of the northern Bahamas, where Jack's boat was currently anchored.

Jack turned to look where Andrew was pointing and saw a bright light burning high in the sky. It was moving fast towards the western horizon, but before it got there, it seemed to hit something they couldn't see and explode. Glowing fragments radiated out in all directions, colliding with other invisible objects and causing further explosions.

Soon, it seemed like half the sky was filled with glowing, burning balls of fire that spun through the heavens. They were bright enough to mask the stars, and the night was now so filled with light that Jack could clearly see the people on the decks of the nearby boats as they gazed upwards in awe and fear. These five boats — six if you counted the one that had departed two weeks before — with a total of twenty-seven people on board, were all that was left of the once much larger Hope Town community.

'I don't know, Andrew.' Jack placed his glass carefully on the table in front of him. He'd heard people talk about this type of thing back before the world changed. Then, it had been little more than idle speculation, but now it seemed like it was becoming reality. The Earth's orbit was crammed with defunct satellites, old booster rockets and other pieces of abandoned junk, left there by what had, until not so long ago, been a thriving space industry. This meant there was always a risk that one of the active satellites would be hit by a piece of trash zooming around, high above the Earth, at unimaginable speeds. If this happened, the satellite could be thrown out of its assigned position and into the path of another one, damaging both of them. Once started, this could happen again and again, destroying satellite after satellite, until there was nothing left: it was an unstoppable chain reaction, called by those in the know 'the Kessler syndrome'.

In the past, space agencies had to constantly manoeuvre their space craft to prevent this from happening. Now, with no one left to monitor the risks and order the appropriate actions to be taken, it seemed like it had finally come to pass. It was a measure of just how badly humans had screwed up their planet that in a little

over half a century since they'd first ventured into the space which surrounded it, they'd made even that uninhabitable.

Jack frowned. 'Andrew, turn on the GPS.'

Andrew eyed Jack curiously. 'Why? We already know where we are.'

'I just want to check something,' Jack answered in his soft, southern American accent.

For a moment, Andrew hesitated, but the note of concern in Jack's voice made him obey without further questioning. Leaning backwards, Andrew pressed the power button on the GPS set into the bulkhead behind where he was sitting. He watched as the screen lit up and it started to search for the signals it used to work out where they were. Soon it had picked up the required four satellites and had provided a position.

Jack nodded towards the machine. 'Go to the receiver page.'

Andrew pressed the appropriate buttons and the screen changed. Now, it showed a plot of all the satellites the GPS was picking up signals from, and their positions relative to the boat.

'Shouldn't there be more than that?' Andrew was staring intently at the screen when one of the dots on it vanished. 'Hey, where did that one go?'

Jack walked over and stood behind Andrew. Just as he got there, another satellite blinked out, then another.

Jack's forehead furrowed. 'This isn't good.'

Andrew glanced at him. 'What d'you mean? What's happening?'

For a man in his sixties, Jack still had a surprisingly large amount of hair, but like his beard, it was as white as snow. As the wind ruffled through it, he reached up and did his

best to flatten it down again. 'It's the satellites, Andrew. Something must have gone wrong with one of them. They're crashing into each other. If this goes on much longer there won't be any left.'

They both stared at the screen, watching the signals vanish one by one. Soon, a message flashed up, telling them that there were no longer enough for the GPS to calculate a position. A few minutes after that and the last satellite disappeared.

'Christ!' Andrew's attention was drawn back to the chart and the line of crosses that snaked out into the middle of the Atlantic. 'How's Rob going to know where they are? How're they going to get there safely?'

Jack gazed up at the still-burning objects racing through the sky far above them. 'They've got a sextant. Jon told me once.'

Andrew was much younger than Jack, and unlike the older man, he was local, having lived almost his entire life on the nearby islands. Or at least that was where he'd lived until the infected came and drove him, and the other survivors, from them. He shifted nervously on his seat. 'Do any of them know how to use it?'

'I don't know.' Jack hesitated momentarily and then carried on more quietly. 'I hope so.'

Suddenly, the peacefulness of the night was shattered by a single roar, followed by another, then another. Jack's eyes shifted from the sky to the nearest island. There, he saw infected emerging from the remnants of buildings and out of the bushes. They were staring up into the night sky, reaching out towards the brightness. They didn't know what it was, but they assumed it meant their favourite prey was near, and for them, that was humans. They milled around, howling and moaning in frustration, unable

to find anything worth attacking.

Jack took his binoculars and examined them. It was the first time he'd seen infected in such numbers since the night the hurricane had ripped their community apart, killing many who'd survived the infected's initial onslaught. Most of them were thinner and more emaciated than ever, yet still the urge to attack, to rip, to kill, burned deep within their hearts. Here and there, amongst these skeletal figures, Jack spotted ones that were different: some had bellies bulging from their otherwise withered frames, while others seemed to have suffered little or no hunger at all. These infected had clearly been eating recently and regularly, and Jack wondered how they were sustaining themselves. Surely there could be little left for them to feed on? All the stray dogs, the feral cats and the rats must have been consumed by now. And yet, while most looked close to death, some of the infected were clearly not just surviving, they were thriving. There must be some resource they were consuming that others were not. Did this mean the infected were doing something different now? Or had these individuals always been there, and were only now visible as the others thinned? Jack wondered what this might mean for their ability to survive. They'd always assumed the infected would eventually starve to death, but did this mean that maybe they wouldn't? Or at least, that some of them wouldn't? Maybe they'd always be there, lurking in the shadows, waiting to attack the moment they tried to return to the land.

Jack lowered his binoculars and picked up his drink again before draining it. As he did so, a creeping sense of despair started to work its way into his mind. Every time the situation worsened, they'd adapted to it, but just as it seemed like they were about to get back on top,

something else happened and it would worsen some more. The hurricane had shown them they couldn't hope to survive in the Abacos in the long term, not with the infected on the nearby islands, the drifters in the surrounding sea, and the ever-present risk of more storms. Yet, Rob had come up with a plan that might just save them all, and he and his crew were now halfway across the Atlantic to check it out.

If it turned out to be a viable option, the other boats in the community would all need to be able to follow in Rob's path, but with the loss of the GPS satellites, this would be much more difficult than they'd originally anticipated. Indeed, without a working GPS, Rob might not even make it to Mingulay in the first place. If that happened, the rest of them, those that made up what was left of the Hope Town community, would have no other option but to stay in the Abacos, and then their only chance would be if the infected died off sooner rather than later. And now it looked like some of the infected were able to survive, even though there were no humans, or seemingly any other animals, left on the land for them to feed on. If Rob's plan failed, one way or another, Jack couldn't help but think that it would signal the end. It might be long and drawn-out; it might take years; but still, looking back, they'd see that Rob's failure to find a safe haven where they could rebuild their shattered community marked the point where the end had begun.

Chapter One

Ahead of us, silhouetted against the rising sun, was the first land we'd seen in almost two months. It was little more than an isolated rock rising above the ocean, but it was land nonetheless. More importantly, it was the first landmark we'd seen since the night we'd lost the GPS satellites, and with them, our ability to know exactly where we were. We'd all taken our turn trying to use the sextant and make the required calculations, but while Rob was the best at it the resulting positions were still too erratic for us to have any idea of where we really were. This meant that since the satellites went down, we'd been navigating by dead-reckoning and little else. Rob had told us to try to steer due east at all times, meaning that, based on our last accurate position, we should reach land somewhere around northern France. Yet, the ocean currents we were sailing with were strong, and they'd been pushing our catamaran northwards with every passing mile. How far off course they'd pushed us, we didn't know, and this meant the land we'd now spotted could be anywhere between Cornwall and the Faroe Islands.

'Hey, CJ, is that a lighthouse?' Jeff was shielding his eyes from the early morning sun and squinting towards the horizon.

I screwed up my eyes, trying to get a better look at the island, and the object that I could just make out perched on its summit. 'I think it is.'

Jimmy picked up the binoculars and started to raise them up to get a closer look when Mike batted his arms down.

'What d'you do that for?' Jimmy sounded hurt. Mike rarely treated him as roughly as that.

'Jimmy, you'd be looking straight at the sunrise.' Mike sounded exasperated. 'You'd burn your eyes out.'

'Oh,' Jimmy replied sheepishly, 'I hadn't thought of that.' Then, after a brief pause, 'Thanks.'

Mike ruffled his younger brother's hair. 'Not to worry, that's what I'm here for.'

I watched the scene play out in front of me: it seemed so normal, and yet the world we now found ourselves in was anything but. At nineteen, I was only a few years older than Mike, but while Mike played the role of older brother, more often than not, as the only woman on board, I ended up playing the role of mother to all three boys. I didn't mind it most of the time, but every now and then, it would cause friction between us, and I sometimes wished that Rob, as the only other adult on board, would act more like a parent and not just as the captain of our little crew.

Rob and I had been sailing across the Atlantic when everything changed, and when we had finally reached the other side, we'd found the world we'd known before was gone, all because of a disease. It sounded so unlikely, but this was no normal disease. Humans had lived alongside the rabies virus for as long as they'd been on the planet: an uneasy truce meaning that while the disease killed people, it did so slowly and they rarely passed it onto others before they died. Then someone decided that humans should strike back. They created a vaccine in an attempt to wipe out the virus, but that wasn't what had happened. Instead, the vaccine caused it to mutate. Suddenly, it became more virulent, but less deadly. People were now overwhelmed in hours or minutes, rather than weeks or months, and it no longer killed them; it just took over their brains, turning them into violent killing machines that attacked anyone close to

them, thus passing on the disease. Spurred on by its increased contagion, the mutated strain of rabies spread like wild fire, bringing down country after country, taking over the land mile by mile, until all that was left of humanity were a few scattered groups, clinging on in remote outposts, where they could somehow avoid the disease, and the infected it created.

There had been four of us on the boat originally: Bill, Rob, Jon and me. Bill had been our captain and Rob his second-in-command, while Jon, just a few years older than me, came next in the onboard pecking order, and I, as youngest and least experienced, came last. I was born Camilla Jamieson, but everyone's called me CJ since before I can remember. Everyone, except my mother when I was in trouble and Jon, who, when we'd first met, insisted on calling me 'Cammie', just because he knew how much it annoyed me. Rob and I were both British, while Jon and Bill were American, and together, the four of us had made up a barely functional crew. At least, that was how it was in the beginning. Then we'd discovered that in our absence, the world had changed beyond all recognition, and we'd realised we'd need to learn to work together if we were to have any hope of surviving.

Our numbers grew to six when we rescued Mike and his younger brother, Jimmy, just off the coast of what was left of Miami. By then, they'd survived a week on their own, and I doubted they'd have been able to keep going much longer if we hadn't found them when we did. We dropped to five when we lost Bill, but then we'd found the Hope Town community, nestled in a sheltered anchorage in the northern Bahamas. Jeff came on board after his family were killed, making us six again. Then we lost Jon and were back down to five. I still thought about Jon a lot, cried over his loss and why it had happened. I hadn't

known him long, and at first, I'd despised him, but as the situation had worsened, he stopped acting like a spoiled brat and started acting like the grown man he was. That was the Jon I'd fallen in love with, and that was the Jon I'd lost. I wasn't alone in having lost someone: everyone who'd survived as long as we had had lost people they loved, but knowing this didn't make my pain any less.

Hope Town had been an oasis in a world fallen apart; a little piece of normality that we hoped would allow us not just to survive, but to live, despite all that had happened ... only it didn't last. The second hurricane had been unexpected and brutal, and only six of the twenty-seven boats in the community made it through intact. The storm had shown us that Hope Town wasn't a place where we could survive forever, and it was Rob who'd come up with an alternative plan. There was a remote, uninhabited island he'd once visited, which he thought would allow us to regain a toe-hold on the land and give us a better chance of rebuilding our lives, far from the threat of the disease. The only problem was that it meant we'd have to cross the Atlantic to get to it, and the others in the community were unwilling to take the gamble of leaving Hope Town and crossing an ocean, without knowing exactly what they were heading for. After all, it seemed like the virus was everywhere, and how was anyone to know whether Rob's remembrance of an island was any safer than where they were now?

To solve this problem, Rob had offered to sail ahead, so that he could report back on the situation using our shortwave radio. Then the others would have all the information they'd need to decide if they wanted to follow, or not. By then, Hope Town was just a reminder of what had happened to Jon, and I was more than willing to go with Rob. Jeff was keen to go with us too, for similar

reasons, plus we'd become like a family by then and we didn't want to be split up. Mike and Jimmy felt the same, so the five of us had set off, the three boys seeing it as an opportunity for adventure after having been cooped up in the anchorage in Hope Town for so long.

The first part of the voyage went like clockwork, and we'd reached the halfway mark within a couple of weeks. Then, as suddenly as if someone had flipped a switch, it all started to go wrong. First, we lost the GPS satellites, meaning we no longer knew exactly where we were. Then the storms started: one after another, they rolled over us in what seemed like an endless procession, slowing our progress to a snail's pace, sapping our morale, and even threatening to sink us at times. With the storms, we lost the opportunity to fish for fresh food and, instead, we had to survive on the rapidly dwindling supplies we'd brought with us from Hope Town. For Mike and Jimmy, this didn't matter too much because the seasickness that came with the storms meant they could barely keep anything down for more than a few minutes after having eaten. From then on, for the most part, they remained in their bunks or hunkered down in a corner of the cockpit, staring off into the distance, looking grey and gaunt.

The storms meant Rob and I needed all the help we could get to keep the boat moving forward, but the seasickness meant the two brothers were in no condition to help, and at thirteen, Jeff wasn't able to take on much in the heavy weather. This left just the two of us, and I was hardly experienced enough to remain alone on deck in such strong winds. The result was that Rob had barely slept for more than a few minutes at a time for I don't know how many days. I could tell this was wearing him down, taking a heavy toll on him both physically and mentally. Rob wasn't a natural leader and he'd only took on the

role when we'd lost Bill. While he'd grown somewhat used to being in charge on board when we were still in Hope Town, he'd always had Jack and Andrew to talk things over with and to share responsibilities. Out on the ocean crossing, we were on our own again, and I could see his old insecurities pushing their way back to the surface, especially after the radio antenna had been damaged and we'd lost contact with those who remained in Hope Town.

At first, Rob talked to me about how he was feeling and the pressure he felt he was under. He was regretting bringing the boys, and now thought he should've left them behind, taking others with more sailing experience instead. He worried about whether we'd be able to find our way to our destination without the help of the GPS satellites to tell us which way to go. He was concerned that the whole trip might fail; that Mingulay wouldn't prove to be the answer to our problems that he hoped it would be ... and what that might mean for those we'd left behind.

As the storms continued, day after day, week after week, I noticed Rob was starting to talk less and less, both to me and to the others, and when he did speak, it was only to bark orders. Before my eyes, he was sinking into himself, just as he had after Bill's death, and this worried me deeply. I needed Rob to keep it together because, without him, there was little chance the rest of us would survive. Yet, I couldn't tell him this because it would just add to the pressure he was already piling on himself, and so make the situation even worse.

Eventually, the storms eased and Rob could finally get some rest, but no sooner had he gone below than the island appeared over the horizon to our south-west. By my reckoning, it would be several hours before we got

anywhere near it, and this left me torn between letting Rob catch up on some much-needed sleep and calling him out on deck so he could see that we might finally be close to reaching our destination. After a couple of minutes deliberating, I came to a decision. 'Jeff, take the wheel. I'm going inside.'

Jeff jumped to his feet and was over at the helm in an instant, eager as always to help. His had been a sailing family and he'd grown up around boats, so despite the fact that, at thirteen, he was the youngest of the three boys, he was generally the one Rob and I turned to first when we needed an extra set of hands. Jimmy was a few months older than Jeff, but he'd never been on a yacht of any kind before we'd rescued him and his brother as they fled from the disease. At sixteen, Mike was the oldest of the three boys, and he'd been gradually building his sailing skills, soaking up everything Rob taught him, but then came the storms and the seasickness, and he'd barely been able to stand much of the time, let alone assist us with running the boat. Looking at him now, I could see he'd lost a worrying amount of weight over the past few weeks and was little more than skin and bone. I made a mental note that we'd need to do something about that as soon as we were able, but before we could, we'd need to rebuild our stores because there was little food of any kind left on board.

As I approached the glass door of the cabin, I noticed my reflection and saw that Mike wasn't the only one who'd lost weight. I'd never been particularly fat, but now my cheeks looked sunken and hollow. Some of the girls I'd gone to school with, back before everything changed, would've given anything to be this thin and would've said I looked amazing, but to me, after all that had happened, I just looked tired and ill. I took a step closer and examined

my reflection in more detail. I couldn't remember the last time I'd looked at myself so closely, and was shocked by the face that stared back. Before all this, I'd been the type of person who'd always had perfect hair and make-up, and a tan to die for. Now, my hair hung dull and lifeless, caked in salt and tied back in a functional ponytail to keep it out of the way. My face was weather-beaten and my skin was flaking away on my cheeks and nose. For the first time, I noticed wrinkles around the corners of my tired-looking eyes and dark bags beneath them, while my lips were blistered and peeling. It was mid-way between my nineteenth and twentieth birthdays, but I looked so much older and more haggard. I shrugged to myself: there was nothing I could do about it and given all the other problems we now faced, my appearance barely registered as something to worry about. Maybe if Jon had still been here, I'd have cared more, but with him gone, there seemed little point.

I slid the door open and stepped inside, seeing Rob curled up on one of the seats, using his waterproof jacket as a makeshift blanket. I left him sleeping for the time being and walked as quietly as possible across to the chart table, to see if I could work out the name of the island we were now approaching, and therefore, where we were. We had a chart laid out on which we'd marked any positions we'd calculated using the sextant, but rather than forming a neat line indicating our route, they were scattered all across the ocean, some of them hundreds of miles apart, even though they were meant to mark positions on successive days. I looked at the one I'd calculated the day before, and tried to work out which island was closest, but the map was not detailed enough, showing as it did, the whole of the North Atlantic.

'What're you doing in here? Who's looking after the

boat? What's happened?' I turned to see Rob struggling to his feet. I wasn't the only one who was looking worse for wear. Rob had the same dark bags under his eyes that I did, and both his hair and beard were unkempt and uncared for. There were flecks of grey in them which I was sure hadn't been there before and, like me, he was starting to resemble someone much older than his actual age of forty.

I did my best to calm him down. 'Don't worry. Nothing's happened. Jeff's got the wheel and it's calm enough now for him to be able to handle it.'

Rob yawned and stretched. 'So how come you're in here?' He was clearly on edge, fretting about what might be going on outside. He'd been like this for weeks and I was worried that if the pressure he was putting on himself didn't let up soon, it might send him over the edge.

I felt my lips crack as I tried to give him a reassuring smile. 'I was just coming to wake you, actually.'

Rob frowned. 'So something has happened?'

I shook my head. 'No. It's just that there's an island out there. I think we might've made it.'

'An island?' Rob turned, weaving his head back and forth as he tried to see it out of the windows at the front of the cabin. 'What island?'

'I was just trying to work that out. It's got a lighthouse ...' I ran my eyes over the chart, trying to see if there were any lighthouses marked on it, but there were none.

Rob scooped up his jacket. 'What does it look like?'

The question confused me. 'The island?'

'No,' Rob moved towards the cabin door, 'the lighthouse.'

I replayed the image of the tall, narrow building in my mind. 'Like the one in Hope Town, but all white.'

Rob nodded. 'That sounds promising!'

Before I could ask why, Rob had pulled on his raincoat and stepped out into the cockpit. I took one last look at the chart, then followed after him. Outside, Rob was already on the foredeck, binoculars raised, taking care not to look too close to the rising sun as he stared at the slowly approaching island. I went forward and stood beside him. He must have felt my presence because he lowered the binoculars and smiled for the first time in weeks. 'I think it's Flannan ... or North Rona. Either way, it's Scotland somewhere.'

I scrunched up my eyes, trying to get a better look at the distant island, but it didn't work. 'How can you tell?'

He held the binoculars out to me. 'Because of the shape of the lighthouse and how it's built.'

I took the binoculars and examined the tower, but I couldn't see anything distinctive. 'It doesn't look that much different from the ones in the Bahamas.'

Rob grinned. 'Exactly! It means they're British. The lighthouses in the Bahamas were designed by the same people who built the ones in Britain: they all have the same basic layout. And if they're British, then there are really only two that are this far out.' He took the binoculars back and lifted them again, this time scanning the horizon to the left and right of the island. 'I can't see any other islands, so I'm guessing it's North Rona. Even if I'm wrong, it doesn't matter, it still means we've made it.' He turned and strode back towards the cockpit, calling back to me as he did. 'Come on. Let's see if we can find something we can have as a celebration.'

I watched him walk away, noticing a spring in his step that I hadn't seen in a very long time. I smiled to myself, knowing that with Rob's spirits back up, we were in a

much better position than we had been when he was weighed down by the responsibilities of leadership.

Chapter Two

'What d'you think?' I glanced at Rob nervously.

He shifted uncomfortably from one foot to the other and back again. 'I don't know, CJ. It wasn't there last time I was here.'

We were anchored in the sparkling turquoise waters of a sheltered bay, fringed with golden-white sand, on the east side of a small island. Off to either side, the island rose in height, rearing up to form towering cliffs that no infected could ever hope to scale. On the shore, lit by the light of the low autumn sun, I could see the crumbling ruins of small stone buildings scattered amongst tussocks of grass. Here and there, sheep grazed peacefully, while seabirds wheeled overhead. Up to the left, a wooden hut stood silhouetted against the background, its well-maintained appearance contrasting sharply with the ramshackle remains of all the other buildings I could see.

The sail from North Rona to Mingulay had, thankfully, been short and uneventful, and now we were here, we were keen to get ashore to see what we could find. Mike, Jimmy and Jeff were already eyeing up the sheep and talking about cooking up as many lamb chops as they could consume without making themselves sick, but Rob and I were more cautious. The hut looked relatively new and in good condition, suggesting there might've been people living on the island when everything changed. If there had been, would they still be there? And would the virus be there with them?

Rob's mood had improved dramatically since we'd finally reached the other side of the Atlantic, and he was almost back to his former, more confident self. It also helped that we'd been able to fish as we made our way

south from North Rona, catching more than our fair share of mackerel, cod and fish that Rob called 'coalies' which I'd never eaten before, but that tasted great. The result of this was that we were all now well enough fed to start putting back on some of the weight we'd lost on the voyage over. The unexpected presence of the hut, however, threatened to set Rob back, and I could see he was starting to fret once again that he'd dragged us all this way for nothing. I knew it wasn't just us he worried about; it was also those we'd left behind. He knew there was a lot riding on our voyage for everyone who was part of the Hope Town community, and our success or failure would pretty much determine the success or failure of the community as a whole. We hadn't been able to communicate with those back in the Abacos since the radio antenna had come down, and I knew they'd be worrying about what had happened to us and whether we'd been lost.

As we'd sailed down from North Rona, Rob had talked eagerly about taking the shortwave radio ashore and setting it up on the island. This would give it a greater range, and make it more likely we'd be able to contact Jack and the others again, but that was before we'd arrived and found the hut. Now, before we could even start thinking about doing anything like that, we'd have to make sure the island was, indeed, uninhabited and free of the infection.

On our arrival, we'd sailed around the island twice, past the impregnable cliffs that formed the northern and southern ends, and the entire west side, past a rocky beach at the south-eastern corner, which was the only other place where you could hope to land, and past a natural arch that reminded me of the one at Hole-in-the-Wall, where we'd had our first inkling that something bad

had happened to the world all those months ago. Mingulay was just under three miles long, and about a mile and a half across at its widest point, meaning it was small, but it seemed to offer us all that we might need: a sheltered place to anchor boats; few places where drifters could come ashore unnoticed in the night; and I could make out what looked like several small streams making their way down to the shore close to the middle of the bay, suggesting a reliable source of fresh water.

A second smaller island lay not far from its southern limit, but this seemed to offer few of the advantages of Mingulay, beyond the fact that it, too, was surrounded by imposing cliffs. For this reason, we focussed our attention on the larger one, and during our circumnavigations, we'd kept a keen close eye on the shore; but apart from the hut and the occasional sheep, it looked as deserted as Rob remembered. The hut, therefore, remained the big unknown: who, or what, might be lying in wait inside?

'D'you think someone's been living here?' Mike was standing next to Rob and me as we gazed towards the island, while Jimmy and Jeff lounged on seats in the cockpit. I picked up the binoculars and examined the hut more closely. It was the size of a small cottage, but it didn't have the appearance of a home. Instead, it looked more basic and functional. 'I don't think it's a house. It looks more like a glorified shed or something like that.'

I passed the binoculars to Rob, and he examined it too. 'Yeah, it's not exactly homely, is it? But that doesn't mean there aren't infected inside. Someone's clearly been doing something here, and they could've brought the disease with them. They could be in there right now, just waiting for someone to be stupid enough to open the door and let them out.'

Jeff sat up, worried by what Rob had just said. 'How're

we going to find out?'

Jimmy sat up, too. 'Find out what?'

'We've come all this way, haven't we? We can't just turn back because there might be infected in there, can we?' Jeff got to his feet and padded over to where the rest of us were standing. 'I mean, it could just as easily be empty,' he looked round. 'Couldn't it?'

I ruffled Jeff's hair. 'That's very true.' I was impressed with how Jeff was coming along. When we'd taken him in, he'd been little more than a child, but now he was starting to develop into an adult, willing to take on responsibilities and take part in discussions about what we were going to do next. I still heard him crying in the night from time to time, but, given what he'd been through, that was only to be expected, and I knew I did the same. Jimmy was growing up too, and while it would have been nice for both of them to have been able to enjoy their childhoods a little longer, in the world we now lived, they had no choice, but to grow up fast. Mike was maturing, too, and becoming a quiet, but sensible young man. As the older brother, he felt responsible for Jimmy, and keeping him alive and safe was his number-one priority. With Jon gone, I knew that Rob and I would have to start relying on him more and more, especially now that it would be just the five of us until the others made the trip across the ocean to join us. And, depending on what was in the hut, that might not happen.

Rob leant forward on the guard rail that ran along the side of the catamaran. 'I guess one of us is going to have to go ashore and check it out.' He turned to face the three youngsters. 'Any volunteers?'

Surprise and shock shot across their faces; much as they tried to act tough, they were still terrified by the merest possibility of encountering any infected, and I

couldn't blame them. The infected had to be seen to be believed: their speed; the anger burning deep in their eyes; the unrelenting violence of their actions as they attacked anyone they could grab hold of, tearing into them, ripping them apart. They showed no mercy, driven, as they were by a virus which had taken over their brains and erased all that had once been human. Now, they were little more than machines; machines the virus used to ensure it was spread as far, and as fast, as possible.

Seeing the looks on the boys' faces, Rob laughed. 'Don't worry, I was only joking. I'll be the one going ashore.'

I felt my eyes narrow as I replied, 'No, you won't; it's too risky and you're too important. I'll go.'

Jeff stepped forward. 'I'll go with you.'

He was trying to sound strong, but the tremor in his voice gave away his true feelings; yet, still he'd volunteered. I glanced at him: he was still growing into his lanky teenage body, and this left his movements clumsier than usual. While I appreciated his offer, I knew I'd be better off on my own. I also knew I'd be able to move faster and react quicker if I didn't have to worry about Jeff's safety as well as my own. While I wasn't *that* much older than him, I'd become like a mother to him and because of this, I felt he was my responsibility in a way I didn't necessarily feel for Jimmy and Mike. It wasn't that I didn't care about what happened to them — I did, deeply — but it was different from how I felt about Jeff. Our shared pain at how, and why, we'd lost those closest to us had created a bond between us that went well beyond how I connected with the others, even Rob, who I'd known the longest. 'Thanks for the offer, Jeff, but I'll go on my own.'

Rob let go of the guard rail and straightened up. 'No,

you won't. I couldn't ask you do to anything that's potentially so dangerous. It'll be me that's going.'

I scowled at him. 'Rob, I know you're the captain, and that means you get the last say, but you've got to act like one. You can't go risking your own life just because you don't want me risking mine. And besides, you're not asking me to go; I'm volunteering.'

Rob folded his arms and said nothing.

'Rob, think about when Bill died. Look at how devastating that was for us. We nearly didn't make it through that.' I didn't like bringing up the subject of Bill's death, but I felt I needed to make my point. 'If we lost you, it would be the same situation all over again, and I'm not so sure we'd make it through a second time.'

Rob stared down at the deck, avoiding my eyes. I knew he still blamed himself for Bill's death, but I also knew this was the best way to get through to him. After a minute, he looked up. 'You're right.' He sighed and sank down onto one of the seats, shaking his head slowly from side to side. 'When did you become so bloody brave, CJ? I remember when I first met you: you were such a quiet young girl, you'd barely say boo to a goose. Now look at you, and what you're offering to do.'

'I'm only doing what I have to.' I smiled at him, knowing that this was his way of saying sorry for arguing with me. 'And besides, I've had some pretty good teachers.'

Whenever I think about how I was before, it always makes me laugh, but sometimes it makes me cry, too, especially when it reminds me of all those I'll never see again. I was completely different back then, but then again, so was the world. When I first met Rob, I was still just a child. I'd

thought I was so grown-up, but with hindsight I could see that I'd been far from it. My upbringing had been sheltered and privileged, so before going on to university, I'd decided to take a gap year and see how the other half lived. In a bar in Cape Town, I'd got chatting to a man old enough to be my father: Bill. It was because of him I'd ended up on the catamaran that was now my home, as part of a crew delivering the newly built catamaran from South Africa to its owners in Miami. And it was almost certainly the only reason I was still alive.

The trip itself had been a nightmare. Jon was a pompous prick back then, and Rob kept himself to himself as much as he possibly could. Only Bill had treated me well, teaching me about life at sea and giving me my first lessons in how to sail a boat. However, while I'd been learning a lot, the longer the experience went on, the more I had been looking forward to arriving in Miami and getting back to my real life in London. Yet, when we reached land again, several weeks after a sudden squall had wiped out all our electrical equipment, civilisation was gone, and with it, everything we'd known before: on the land, humanity had been replaced by the infected, and we had no choice but to remain at sea.

It was only when we rescued Mike and Jimmy that we found out about the disease and what it did to people. While the rest of us fell apart, each in our own way, Bill kept us going, and together we worked out a plan. We'd headed east to the Bahamas to see if we could find any others who, like us, had survived the onslaught of the disease. That was how we'd ended up in Hope Town, although we lost Bill along the way. His loss had been devastating, but after some initial wavering, Rob had replace him as captain. I watched how the others changed and knew that I had to leave behind the

stroppy teenager who'd boarded the catamaran in Cape Town, and do a bit of growing up myself. Jack had helped with that: he was the one in charge of Hope Town, although all decisions were made by the community as a whole, and I had learned a lot from him about how to handle other people, and how to survive.

As we both matured, the animosity between Jon and me evaporated and we started to realise that, underneath the facades we used to protect ourselves from the world, we were actually pretty similar. It would be easy to say that we'd just got caught up in the situation, but it was more than that. I'd never believed in the existence of soulmates until Jon — the real, grown-up Jon — and then he was taken away from me. It was Rob who'd killed him, but by then he was no longer the Jon I'd grow to love: the disease had seen to that.

Now here I was, sitting off another remote island on the other side of the Atlantic, offering to go ashore and check a hut for infected. I'd never have been this brave before, and if Jon had still been here, I probably wouldn't have been able to do it. But now, with Jon gone, I knew I couldn't let him down; I knew I had to step up, just as he had. And with no one else around who could do it — not without putting the survival of our little group, and indeed the remnants of the community which remained in Hope Town, in greater danger — what else could I do?

The rubber dinghy bumped against the sandy shore, and for the first time in more than two months, I stepped onto land. I felt the ground move beneath my feet, but I knew it was just an illusion caused by spending so much time floating around on the ever-moving surface of the sea. The hand-held radio tucked into my back pocket crackled and I pulled it out.

I pressed the transmit button. 'What did you say, Rob?'

I let the button go and waited. It was a second before it crackled again. 'I said, how's it looking from your end?'

I swept my eyes across the beach and back again before replying. 'Everything seems quiet, but I'm nowhere near the hut yet.' I glanced up at it. 'How do things look from where you are?'

I heard Rob key the microphone. 'Nothing's moving, CJ, at least not that we can see.'

'Roger that.' I tucked the radio back into my pocket and looked out towards the catamaran, the cabin's superstructure stretched between its twin hulls and its mast stuck high into the air. The once-white paintwork was now dull, grey and peeling, and I could see long strands of seaweed growing along the waterline. It had been brand-new and sparkling clean when I'd first boarded it in Cape Town, but now, just over six months later, it was a battered and weather-worn shadow of its former self. Given all it had been through, this was no surprise, and I wondered how much more it could take. No boat would last forever, and this was one of the reasons we had to find somewhere where we could live on the land once more; somewhere which was both free of the disease, and where the infected couldn't reach us.

The others were crowded on to the roof of the cabin, binoculars trained on the island, ready to warn me the moment they saw anything which might suggest trouble coming my way. We'd done this type of thing before and we all knew the drill, but there was one difference: last time, Rob had been armed with a hunting rifle, ready to shoot any infected that got too close. It wasn't that we didn't still have the rifle, we did, but we were out of bullets, so it was pretty much useless until we found some more, and I had no idea when that might happen.

I took a deep breath and started walking slowly up the sandy beach towards where the hut stood on the hill high above it. My eyes moved constantly, searching for anything which might indicate infected were coming, but everything remained still. I worried that the sound of the blood rushing through my ears might stop me hearing something important, but try as I might, I couldn't get my heart rate down; the fear and adrenaline surging through my body meant I could do nothing to stop it pounding away like a freight train.

At the top of the beach, I stopped and glanced back. There was about fifty feet of loose sand between myself and the dinghy, and I wondered how fast I could race across it if I had to. My legs were still wobbly and I was walking unsteadily. I guessed I wouldn't be able to run at full speed without tumbling to the ground, and in an emergency, that could be the difference between life and death. I pulled out my radio. 'You got anything I need to worry about?'

For a moment, there was silence. I continued to watch those back on the boat and I could see Rob scanning the island with the binoculars. Mike was beside him, pointing at something and my heart leapt into my mouth. I considered running, just in case, but I stood my ground, hoping I was misreading the signals. Finally, the radio came alive again, but it was Jeff's voice, not Rob's, and I could hear laughter in the background. 'Mike thought he saw something, but it turned out it was just a sheep!'

I breathed a sigh of relief and turned my attention back to the hut. It was a couple of hundred yards from where I stood, and the ground between me and it was covered in uneven tussocks of grass. Between these, narrow trails wove, which, judging by the small piles of dung along them, had been made by sheep and not

humans. In fact, other than the hut, there was no trace that anyone had spent more than a few hours on the island in years. Here and there, in amongst the grass, I could see the remains of long-abandoned buildings: some were little more than heaps of stones; others were more recognisable, with fireplaces and chimney stacks still discernable. I wondered how long it would take until all of what had once been civilisation, for places where I'd once lived, to look like this: abandoned, decaying and overrun by nature. I felt an urge to explore them, but I knew I had to keep my attention focussed on the hut, and on finding out what was inside, before I could do anything else.

I crept forward, placing each foot carefully on the ground, trying to make as little noise as possible. I could hear the cries of seagulls off in the distance as they wheeled and circled above the island, and occasionally the soft bleating of an unseen sheep. Grass brushed against my legs, feeling alien and strange after so long on the boat. I remembered the joy of running, carefree, through long grass as a little girl, chasing others on warm summer days, but that world was long gone. Now, I wondered what might be lurking, unseen, in amongst the long stems, waiting to pounce on me. I did my best to push these thoughts from my mind as I carried on, the hut growing larger and nearer with each and every step.

Before I knew it, I was there, the closed door staring back at me; now was the moment of truth. I reached out my hand and then withdrew it, not sure of what to do next. While the day was sunny, the air blowing in off the sea was chilly, but despite this, I could feel beads of sweat running down the sides of my face. I pulled out the radio. 'Anything?'

Rob's voice came back. 'Nothing.'

I kept the radio in my hand as I tiptoed around the hut, looking for any signs that might indicate what was inside, but I found nothing. There were windows, but they were shuttered, and much as I tried, I couldn't get them to move. I returned to the door and knocked on it tentatively, half expecting to hear the unmistakable sound of an infected echoing back, but there was only silence.

I lifted the radio and spoke into it. 'I think it's clear.'

'Are you sure, CJ?' Rob sounded concerned.

'No,' I readied myself for what I knew I had to do next, 'but I'm going in anyway.'

'Just be careful,' Rob shot back.

I didn't respond. I banged on the door again, this time more forcibly, but still there was no reply. Hesitantly, I gripped the handle and twisted it. It moved, but the door didn't open. I pushed it, first gently and then harder. For a moment, it resisted, then suddenly it gave way and I tumbled forward into the darkness. Even before I hit the rough wooden floor, the smell inside struck me as hard as if I'd been punched in the face. Then I noticed something moving. The only light was coming through the open door, but as I scrambled to my feet I saw a human form moving slowly back and forth. Not knowing what it was, I bolted from the room and out into the daylight, expecting to hear the sound of footsteps chasing after me ... but there was nothing. I stopped and stared back at the hut as Rob's worried voice blared from the radio. 'What's wrong, CJ?'

'I don't know.' I paused as I considered the situation. 'There's someone, or something, in there, but I don't think it's an infected.'

The radio buzzed with static for a second before Rob replied. 'What is it then?'

I searched the darkened doorway as the door moved slowly in the breeze. I thought about the smell and then I realised what I'd seen. I pulled the sleeve of my jacket over my hand and pressed it firmly across my mouth before stepping back inside. In the darkness, the body moved, swinging gently from side to side, suspended from a coarse rope which had been wrapped around a wooden beam. A thick beard told me the body was male, but it was too dark to see much else. I stared at him, wondering how long he'd been there. His flesh was starting to decay and his belly was bloated, but it must have been too late in the year for flies because there were no maggots eating into his flesh. As I turned to leave, I noticed a notebook sitting open on a table, black writing scrawled across its white pages. I closed it and carried it with me as I emerged into the daylight once more.

'All clear?' There was a hint of anticipation in Rob's words as they emerged out of the radio.

'All clear,' I replied, hearing the excitement in my words as I spoke.

As I picked my way back to the dinghy, I thumbed through the pages of the notebook, stopping every now and then to read a sentence or two. It started out as a formal log, a record of the day's events, but gradually, as time passed, it became a diary and then a confessional, before descending into little more than scrawled ramblings. The final page was dated and I tried to work out how long ago the entry on it had been made. I'd lost track of time, but from what I could work out, it had been written only a few weeks before we'd finally reached the island. Perhaps if we hadn't been slowed by the storms, we'd have arrived in time to save him. I flicked back a few pages and scanned the writing. Maybe, by then, it had already been too late. I found the final entry again

and read the single line scratched onto the otherwise blank page in a clear hand: *I can't go on.*

Rob ran his eyes over the slowly swinging figure. 'I suppose we should get him down.'

We crowded round the doorway, staring at the body hanging inside. Once I'd got back to the dinghy, I'd motored out to the catamaran and returned a few minutes later with the others. Jeff and Jimmy had run ahead excitedly, enjoying the feel of the land beneath their feet. Mike and Rob followed, both concentrating on the task ahead. As we'd climbed up the hill, I'd told them what I'd found and together we'd decided what we should do. Since the infected came into our lives, we rarely got to bury anyone we lost and it felt only right that we should do this for the lone man who had chosen to end his life rather than live in the world the way it now was.

The details of his final days were set out in black and white in the notebook. The hut, it turned out, was a small research station for scientists studying the local seabirds. The man was a postgraduate student, not much older than myself, sent ahead to open up the building for the annual field season, which would have started once the birds returned to breed. Yet, before anyone else could arrive, the disease had appeared on the mainland and swept across the country. He had an FM radio and knew exactly what was happening, but there was nothing he could do about it. Soon, he figured there was no one left who knew he was there, and having been dropped off by a local fishing vessel which had then departed, there was no way for him to get off the remote island.

He survived well at first, eating the supplies he'd brought with him and supplementing them with the

wildlife he was meant to be studying, but after a while the birds left for the winter and the last of his supplies ran out. He tried catching the sheep that roamed the island, but they were too nimble for him to corner on his own. His descriptions of the way they'd sprint away as he lunged at them, only to stop a few feet beyond his reach before turning and staring at him, would have been amusing if it weren't for the desperation of his situation. Soon, he was reduced to scouring the shoreline for anything edible he could find, living off a diet of shellfish and seaweed.

As time passed, the pressure of being alone started to wear him down. The radio stopped working soon after the outbreak on the mainland began, or rather it stopped picking up any broadcasts because there were no more broadcasts to receive. In the first weeks and months, he'd occasionally see a plane passing in the distance. While he thought there was no way of attracting its attention, its presence let him know he wasn't the only one who'd survived. Then one day he realised he hadn't seen it in a while. Days became weeks and weeks became months. Each morning he woke, hoping he'd see the plane again, and each night he'd return to the shelter of the hut, his spirits shattered once again.

He became obsessed by the plane, doing nothing but watching the skies, waiting for it to reappear. He built a signal fire on the tallest point of the island, cursing himself for not thinking of doing so before, but it remained unlit. As winter approached and the days shortened, he'd finally abandoned hope of ever seeing another human being again. He became fixated on the idea that he was the last man on Earth, and he couldn't cope with the weight of the loneliness that this piled on top of him.

I wondered if I'd have handled things any differently if I'd been in his position. While I'd lost a lot, at least I still had

others around me. They'd become my family and they helped keep sane despite the madness of the world I'd suddenly found myself plunged into. If I'd been trapped alone on such a remote island, I'd probably have cracked too, and I may well have ended things in a similar way. If only he'd managed to hold on just a few weeks longer, he'd still have been alive when we arrived, but he had no idea of our plans; that we were meandering our way towards him even as he chose to end it all.

Rob stepped into the hut and I followed. While Rob held the dead man's legs, I dragged a chair across the room and stood on it, reaching up to cut the rope with a knife I'd brought ashore with me for just this purpose. Rob grunted as he took the full weight of the lifeless body and then carried it outside before laying it on the grass. In the daylight, I could see his hair was brown, almost black, but beyond that I couldn't make out any other features beneath the bloated and rotting flesh.

Rob wiped his hands on the grass. 'Where will we bury him?'

As I scanned our surroundings, my eyes settled on a place where a stone wall, topped with a cross, still reached into the sky. 'That looks like it used to be a church. D'you think there's a graveyard, too? Maybe we could bury him there. That way, he'd never be alone again.'

The others looked at me curiously. None of them had read the entries in the notebook which I had read, and none of them knew how utterly isolated and lonely he'd felt at the end. Only I knew how important it was for him not to be alone in death as he had been in his last few months of life.

'You see this soil?' Rob rubbed some of it between his hands. It was light and sandy, but with darker flecks mixed through it. 'This is why this island is perfect for us. It's so rich and fertile. It's not natural though. It's been made by people over hundreds of years, thousands even. They'd haul seaweed up from the beach and dig it into the sandy soil, filling it with nutrients from the sea. You can grow almost anything in it.' A chill gust of wind whipped across us, blowing the handful of dirt away. Rob watched it as it went. 'Well, anything which can withstand the weather.'

It had taken only a few minutes to find the old graveyard, the headstones visible above the undergrowth. Some were still readable, none of the dates more recent than over a century before, marking the point at which the island had been abandoned. Others had been worn smooth by the elements, eliminating all knowledge of who was buried there. We found a spot that overlooked the sandy bay where the catamaran was now anchored and dug a grave using spades which we'd found stored in a lean-to behind the hut. We took turns, Jeff and Jimmy tiring faster than the rest of us, and within an hour we had the grave finished.

Rob and I wrapped the body in an old tarpaulin we'd found with the spades, before carrying him over to the churchyard. In silence, we laid him to rest and marked his final resting place with a short plank of wood Jeff had found on the shore. We didn't know his name, so we had nothing to put on it, but nonetheless, we felt it was important to mark where he lay.

Back at the hut, we set about examining it in detail. Using the spades, Mike and Jeff levered open the shutters which had been nailed in place, while Rob and I opened the

windows from the inside. Jimmy hovered by the door, not wanting to enter because of the smell of decay which still hung heavily on the air. With light now filling the wooden building, we could see it clearly: it was part bunkhouse, part research lab, the walls lined with maps and photographs. In one corner, there was a small wood-burning range that, when fired up, would provide heat and warmth, as well somewhere to cook. A roughly made wooden table ran along the wall under the windows, clearly designed to act as a workspace, while against the opposite wall four sets of bunk beds stood, each within touching distance of its neighbour. Two large solar panels lay near the door, next to a small wind turbine, similar to ones I'd seen before on the back of yachts. Alongside them, was a bank of large batteries of the type used to power golf carts. Rob examined these. 'Looks like a pretty good set-up; it shouldn't take us too long to get it up and running again. It's almost like he closed the whole place up, before he ...' Rob's voice trailed off.

I decided to change the subject. 'I wonder what he did for water?'

Rob walked over to the small kitchen area beside the range and turned one of the taps on a small sink, but nothing came out. He turned on the other one, expecting the same result, but instead a slow, but steady, stream of water, the colour of freshly brewed tea, emerged.

I eyed the water suspiciously. 'That looks pretty disgusting.'

Rob cupped a hand under the tap and once it had filled, he lifted it to his mouth and sipped it loudly before letting the rest fall into the sink. 'Not too bad, and perfectly drinkable,' he smacked his lips, 'if a bit of an acquired taste.'

I looked at him disbelievingly. 'But why's it so dirty?'

Rob dried his hand on his trousers. 'It must come from a stream somewhere further up the hill. The peat in the soil stains the water as it runs through it. It always happens when you get water running over peat. It doesn't look too appetising, but it's safe enough to drink.'

He turned the tap off again, but as he did so, I realised that, despite all that was here, something was clearly missing. 'There's no bathroom.' I looked again. 'Or even a toilet!'

'I guess there must be an outhouse somewhere.' Rob peered out of one of the windows. 'Maybe round the back.'

Before we could discuss this further, Jeff and Mike entered the hut, followed by Jimmy

'What is this place?' Jeff was examining one of the maps that were pinned to the walls.

'It's a research station. They used it to study the breeding habits of seabirds.' I walked over to him and peered at the map. It showed an outline of the island, with a cluster of coloured pins stuck in at one end, each labelled with its own unique number. 'I'm guessing these must be nest sites. I wonder what species they are.'

'How'd you know that?' Jimmy was now looking at the map, too.

I pulled the notebook out from where I'd tucked it away for safe keeping. 'I read about it in here.'

Rob took the notebook and flicked through it. 'Anything useful in it?'

'I don't know.' I took it back. For some reason I didn't want anyone else reading it. 'I've only skimmed it so far.'

Mike eyed the notebook, obviously curious about what it might contain. 'Does it say how he ended up here on his own?'

'Yes. He came here ahead of the main research team, to open up the field station and get it set up for the season, but there was an outbreak on the mainland, starting in Glasgow, and no one ever came back for him.' I tucked the notebook away again before anyone else had a chance to take it from me, and looked round. 'You know, we could turn this into a pretty civilised little place.'

Jeff wrinkled his nose. 'What about the smell?'

With the windows open, the scent of decay was already starting to dissipate, but it remained strong, assaulting our senses with every breath. Below where the body had been hanging, there was a damp spot where fluids dripping from it had accumulated. As I walked over to it, the smell intensified. I pointed to the fluids. 'Once we clean that up, I think it will go away.'

Jimmy stared at the damp patch. 'What is that?'

'Liquid human.' Mike laughed as he saw his little brother recoil in horror.

Rob chuckled, too. 'Not the best way to put it, but I guess it's accurate.'

For some reason, their flippancy annoyed me. After all, we were talking about another human life here, but I didn't say anything, figuring we each had our own ways to deal with things like this. Instead, I dug into a cupboard under the sink, finding some bleach, a scrubbing brush and some rubber gloves. Taking these out, I set to work, scrubbing the wooden floorboards as hard as I could. While I did this, Rob organised the boys, and together they took the solar panels outside. Soon, they had them set up and connected to the batteries, and by the time I'd finished, Rob was standing by the doorway, his hand on the light switch. 'Here goes nothing.'

He flicked it and the fluorescent light which ran along

the centre of the room pinged and flashed a couple of times before finally coming to life. The youngsters clapped and whooped in celebration, causing me to smile. It was a small thing, but it marked our first step towards taking back the land — or at least a tiny little part of it that we could hopefully, one day, call home.

'You two go that way, this time. I'll go this way, and we'll see if we can trap it against that wall there.' Mike glanced at Jimmy and Jeff. 'Okay?'

The two younger boys nodded.

'Let's go then!' With that Mike set off, the other two a few feet behind.

The three of them had been trying to catch a sheep for the last hour, but they were having little success. Just as had been described in the notebook, no matter what they tried, the sheep outfoxed them. It would let them get within a few feet, but no closer. The sheep didn't run far, though, and once it felt safe again, it would stop and turn, bleating belligerently at its pursuers. The effect was comical, but I could imagine that for a hungry man, alone on the island, it would have been soul-sapping.

While the boys chased sheep, I continued to tidy up the hut, moving things around, making space here and there for our stuff. Every now and then, I'd come across something of the dead man's and each time I made sure I put it somewhere safe. I didn't know quite why, but it felt like the right thing to do.

When I was finished, I walked to the door and examined my surroundings. Thirty feet from the back of the hut was another, much smaller wooden structure I hadn't noticed before. Above the door, stencilled in white paint, was the word 'Toilet'. Below this hung a handmade

made sign, which said 'Unoccupied'. I wandered over and opened the door, finding a simple wooden bench with a round opening that led to a deep, dark hole cut into the ground beneath. There was no plumbing, just the hole and an aroma to match its crude functionality. I closed the door again, unsure how I felt about using the outhouse. It wasn't what I was used to, and it would be unpleasant to have to venture outside to use it in bad weather, especially at night, but it would do the job it was designed for: keeping the inhabitants of the hut separated from their waste in such a way as to avoid the risk of contamination and disease.

Down below in the bay, I could see the boat riding gently at anchor. Rob was standing by the stern where he had two fishing rods dangling over the side. As I watched he grabbed one of them and started reeling something in. Moments later, I saw him pull a fish about the same length as his arm from the water and drop it onto the deck. I grinned, knowing we'd eat well tonight. I turned my attention to the island itself. The land nearest to the hut was green and fertile, and judging by the number of ruined cottages I could see, it had once supported a substantial population. Certainly, in the past, it had supported more than there were of us, even once the other people from Hope Town arrived. Further off, the island was more rugged, but in a world where infected roamed, this ruggedness was an asset that would prevent them from being able to make it ashore along most of its coastline. Coming here had been a risk, but Rob's gamble had paid off: this really did look like the perfect place to establish a community where we could live our lives, as far from the threat of the infected as was possible.

Chapter Three

'Mingulay calling Hope Town, come in Hope Town.' Rob released the transmit button for a second before pressing it again. 'Mingulay calling Hope Town. Come in, Hope Town.'

Again there was silence. I glanced at my watch; it wasn't our usual check-in time, but there might be someone listening on Jack's boat nonetheless. We were all back on the catamaran, having spent the afternoon exploring the island and double-checking that there really was no evidence of infected ever having reached it. Rob explained the local currents, and how they'd carry any drifters which came from the nearest inhabited islands away, rather than towards, us, making this very unlikely. Now we were anchored in still calm waters, it had only taken Rob a matter of minutes to climb up the mast and re-secure the radio's antennae near the top. Once he'd finished, we went inside to see if this was all we needed to do to re-establish contact with those who'd remained behind in Hope Town.

The radio hissed for a moment and then Jack's soft southern American accent emerged from it. 'Mingulay, this is Hope Town. You can't believe how good it is to hear your voice again, Rob. I was beginning to think we'd lost you. Are you all okay? Is everyone safe?'

'We're all fine, Jack. It wasn't the easiest of crossings,' Rob shook his head, remembering just how bad the voyage had been, 'but the important thing is that we got here in the end.'

'That's great to hear, Rob. You had us all worried for a while there when we lost touch.' Jack sounded relieved, and it was clear that our apparent disappearance had ...

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