



two

"Els Island," Zoe said to herself. "I still haven't got a clue where I am."

There were so many questions she wanted answers to. She still had no idea how this ragged bunch of people survived. The island was little more than a tiny strip of mud in the middle of the sea.

All she knew was that she had finally left Norwich for ever. It had been her home for all of her short, strange life. The houses her parents had grown up in were both under water, now.

The house she'd been born in was a ruin. When it got too dangerous, they'd moved further into Norwich, to higher ground. Zoe was about seven at the time. It meant moving closer to other people. Zoe's parents didn't really like this. Other people generally meant trouble. As a result Zoe had had few friends. There had been one or two, but gradually their parents had given up and taken the supply ship to the mainland. Every parting had been hard for Zoe. After a while she made sure she never let herself like anyone too much. Because sooner or later, they'd leave too.

When they came to move house there were so few people left that there was plenty of space. And plenty of huge old houses to choose from.

"Which one do you like, Zoe?" her dad asked her.

They were standing at the end of a long street of large detached Victorian houses. All of them were unoccupied and they had all been looted too. What they needed was a roof over their heads, and a large garden to grow food.

Zoe looked carefully. Finally she saw a house that seemed a little more friendly than the others.

"That one," she said, and walked up to the gates.

"Seems okay to me," said her dad.

"Beats raising a mortgage, doesn't it?" said her mum.

After the night when her parents had sailed away without her, Zoe hadn't wanted to go back to the old house. It was too much. She'd spent a long time moving from place to place, but nowhere seemed right, so she always moved on.

One day at the allotments, Natasha suggested that they live together.

It wasn't long after Zoe had lost her parents, and the allotments were still being organized fairly well. There was a group of men and women who ran the allotments. They guarded it at night to stop people stealing the produce, and in the daytime they organized the work. For a few hours work you could earn yourself some vegetables, or some tinned food from their own store if there was nothing fresh to be harvested.

Zoe and her parents had made good use of the system while their own garden was not producing the goods. It worked fairly well for a few years. Not like later when things really started to go to pieces. Then there had been the fights, and people raided the allotments' food store rather than work.

Natasha's parents were dead, but she lived with some other people in an old block of flats. Zoe thought about her offer, but turned her down. She didn't like the set-up, and didn't like the other people. After that night on the shore, when she'd been separated from her mum and dad, something had changed in Zoe. The fight, the desperation, the fear on people's faces. She'd seen that everyone was only out for themselves and she knew no one really wanted her around anyway. They saw her as a rebel and treated her as a bit of an outcast. But that suited Zoe more or less. Let them think she was a tough loner, and they'd be more likely to leave her alone. There was some truth in it, but really, she was just too scared to trust anyone. She didn't want to be with anyone else. She just wanted her parents.

Then Zoe had found the boat. She'd been searching for food. Most places had been scavenged for all their tins of food already. Shops, warehouses and so on. So Zoe had been forced to try the most dangerous part of Norwich. Here there were some old warehouses that were in a really bad state. Bits of them were always collapsing, and there wasn't a bit of ground anywhere that wasn't covered with piles of rubble. It meant stumbling over heaps of fallen buildings, but at least Zoe was safe from one thing. Other people. She knew no one else came here, simply because of the dangerous buildings.

She hadn't found any food and was beginning to think of giving up for the day. Then she had spotted the side of a boat sticking up through the mud in the old warehouse. The warehouse was right by the sea's edge, which was just a few feet below it. Boat and mud must have been washed in together in one of the high points of the floods, and now the mud gripped the boat like glue.

Despite the danger from the ruined buildings all around her, she decided to make a new home for herself in the warehouse. She knew her mum and dad would have been horrified at the risk she was taking, but Zoe was more scared of other people than she was of falling bricks and stones. Later she would change her mind, as the building started to groan horribly in the slightest wind. Then, she would move her boat to the safety of the shed in the graveyard, but for now the old warehouse would be her home.

She moved house into a tiny room in the roof of the warehouse. It had been an office. Clearly no one had been there for a long time. The room must have been abandoned when the floods came, and there was still paperwork and office furniture sitting just as they had then. There were even some tins of tomato soup in a small cupboard in the corner. Zoe took this as a good omen, a sign that it was the right place to live. She was very hungry, and there and then she took the small pack from her back. It contained her most precious possessions: two water bottles, some bits of clothes, her compass, a bottle of vitamin pills she'd found, a pocket torch without batteries, a small blanket and an old book, in which she had meant to keep a diary, but hadn't. Finally, she found what she was looking for. She took her penknife and skewered the top of one of the tins of soup. Two holes; one to drink from and one to let the air in, so the soup came out more easily, just like her dad had showed her. She swigged the cold soup. It tasted great. She couldn't finish it in one go, so she carefully poured the rest into one of her water bottles, which was empty.

Water was the hardest thing to find – much harder than finding food. She used the bottles to collect whatever drinkable water she could find. Though occasionally she had



found some bottles of mineral water, she mostly drank rainwater. She had hidden a series of tins and pans in various places. On rooftops and behind collapsing buildings – anywhere that no one else went. She would collect the water after every rainfall and store it in her bottles.

She felt safe in the office-room, and could keep an eye on the boat, too. She spent days digging it out, working as quietly as she could, just in case anyone was around. But she saw no one.

One night there was a terrible crash. Zoe's fragile room shuddered and the whole warehouse with it, as she realized that a nearby building was falling down. She clung to the floor and prayed that her room wasn't about to drop to the ground with it. The noise was awful, and seemed to take forever to finish, but finally it did. She didn't sleep for the rest of that night, but lay awake listening to the sound of bricks occasionally slipping and then settling again.

Next morning she worked even harder on the boat. At the beginning, it was just something to do, to stop her from going crazy. But as she uncovered more and more of the boat she saw that it was in good condition, and she began to have real hopes of making it float again. Finally one day it was free, and she began to wash the slimy mud from it. As she washed the bow, a single word appeared: LYCA.

"Hello, Lyca," said Zoe. And she felt herself smile.

She'd set out to sea in Lyca, but now she was separated from her. A sudden fear took her, but fumbling in her pocket she found she still had the compass. It was all she had left.

Mentally she made a list of what to do. She would try and find out where she was. Then she'd get some food, and as soon as she could, she would go back to Lyca and escape. Try and find the mainland, and maybe then she would find some

trace of her parents. One thing she knew for sure, she didn't intend to spend any time on Eels Island.

"There's something bad, here," she said quietly. "Lyca, I won't be long."

But she didn't get the chance to do anything.

Two girls came up to her almost as soon as Dooby left. They were both tall, and scrawny. They were dressed a little better than most, but their clothes were more a matter of improvisation than anything else.

"I'm Molly," said one of them. "This is Sarah."

"Hello," said Zoe.

"We've got to look after you," said Molly. She made it clear they hated the idea.

Molly turned to Sarah.

"Dooby says so, doesn't he?"

"I don't need looking after," said Zoe.

"Oh yes, you do," said Molly. "Dooby said we should stay with you all day, show you around. God knows why."

She turned to Sarah, again.

"Why Dooby didn't just have your boyfriend do her like all the others . . ."

"Yeah, my Spat's the man for the job," said Sarah, grinning.

"Stinking water rat, isn't she?" added Molly, looking at Zoe.

"And ugly, too," said Sarah, with spite.

Tempted as she was to hit her, Zoe put on a false smile.

"Well, maybe there's somewhere I can wash . . . ?"

"Go outside, take your lovely clothes off and wait for it to rain," laughed Sarah. Molly joined in.

"Silly little . . ."

Again, Zoe just smiled. If she couldn't get away for a

while, her only chance was to be accepted on the island. It seemed that the only person who didn't want her 'done' was Dooby, and that didn't make her feel any better. She wondered what he wanted her for.

"Well, if Dooby says you've got to show me around . . ." said Zoe.

"Yeah, all right," said Molly. "Come on, then. Get a move on."

The mention of Dooby's name brought an instant reaction, just the way Spat and Munchkin had jumped at what he said. This was different though. It wasn't fear, but something else. The two girls' voices softened when they spoke his name. By the time they'd shown Zoe half the way round the cathedral, she knew what it was. Love, pure and plain.

"This is where Dooby stands when he tells us what to do," said Sarah.

"Over there is Dooby's room," said Molly, pointing at a side chapel with a newly-made door.

"This gate here is where Dooby killed the last of the Dogs."

It was as though they were talking about a god, not a boy.

"Another tribe?" asked Zoe.

"Of course," said Molly, as if Zoe was stupid. "They tried a final raid on the island about a month ago. But Dooby made sure we were all right. His plans always work. This one Dog had sneaked inside, and Dooby saw him and stuck a pike into him."

"Then he chopped off his head and stuck it on a spike on the roof," said Sarah.

"Along with everyone else who's come visiting," added Molly.

Zoe couldn't tell if they were joking, or not. They were older than she was, but seemed like serious little children. Just in case they weren't joking, Zoe prayed that her parents' ship had come nowhere near.

If civilization was starting to leave Norwich, it had left here a long time before.

All day they kept Zoe busy. Once or twice she began to think they had relaxed a little towards her, but then she would ask something and they would laugh at her, or tell her about the fate of other 'visitors' to the island.

"So watch it," said Sarah, "or I'll get Spat to sort you out." She laughed.

Only once did they ask Zoe about herself.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" said Sarah.

In spite of herself, Zoe couldn't help answering. She was tired, and her defences were down.

"Looking for my parents."

"What do you mean?"

"I lost them . . . they left . . ."

"Without you?" Molly said, laughing.

"No, it wasn't . . ." Zoe began, but it was too late.

"They left her!" said Sarah to Molly.

"So why are you looking for them, then?" said Molly. "They obviously wanted to get rid of you!"

"No!" said Zoe, trying not to let them get to her.

"No? When was this, anyway?" asked Sarah.

"I don't know . . . a few months, maybe a year . . ."

Zoe wished she'd kept her mouth shut.

"A year! They left you a year ago and they haven't come looking for you!"

"See, they don't want her," Molly said to Sarah.

"Yes, they do!" Zoe shouted.

"That's right," Sarah said to Molly, "that's right. That's not the reason they haven't come to find her . . ."

Molly stared at Sarah, who seemed to be defending Zoe all of a sudden.

"The reason is . . ." Sarah continued, ". . . that they're dead!"

Sarah and Molly collapsed into laughter.

"No!" Zoe shouted. "No! It's not true!"

Tears started to burn her eyes, but the two girls just laughed more.

"Of course it is," they said, "Why else didn't they come to find you?"

They laughed again. Zoe tried to ignore them, but the awful possibility that they might be right was too painful.

Sarah and Molly stayed with Zoe for the rest of the day, until late evening. A horn blew, a strange low sound which echoed around the vast old building.

"Right," said Sarah, to Molly, "come on then."

They got up, and started to leave.

"Wait!" said Zoe. "Where are you going? What's that noise mean?"

"Curfew," said Sarah, without looking back. "Doors closed for the night."

And with that they were gone.