

A SURVIVAL EXERCISE TURNS REAL
IN THIS ADVENTURE ROMANCE

THE ISLAND BETWEEN US

WENDY
HUDSON



CHAPTER 1

New Year's Eve, 1999

THE WORLD WAS GOING TO end at midnight.

That was the headline that greeted Georgia on landing back in Scotland. Rather than the usual talk of prosperity and resolutions, the millennium bug had taken hold of the wildest imaginations and the press were happy to feed them.

Georgia didn't believe any of it, yet she still boarded a bus to a small town in the north-east of Scotland with the idea that if the world were to end, she wanted to be somewhere she loved.

Three hours later, after replenishing supplies, her feet hit the dense sodden sand of Balmedie Beach. She breathed in the salt-soaked air, filled her lungs with it as she scanned the towering dunes ahead. The further apart her visits became, the more the dunes seemed to shift and move, moulded by the powerful storms that rolled relentlessly off the North Sea.

Georgia knew them as innately as the lines on her palms, the patterns of pathways cutting through and across the sandy mountains burned into memories from toddler to teenager. She shifted the weight of her backpack and pulled her hood a little tighter before heading for the highest peak. The breeze whipped tufts of sea grass against her legs as she climbed, and the sand became dryer, finer, causing her to intermittently skid a few steps backwards every time she lost traction.

As she crested the brow and the rolling grey waves came in to view, she loosened her hood and let the wind tear it down. It splayed her hair at every angle as she threw her arms up to the skies and tilted her head back.

At twenty-two, Georgia had already travelled across more than thirty countries, but she had yet to find somewhere able to assault her senses in quite the same way as the battering, cutting, wind and rain of her homeland.

“Woooooooooo!”

Her shout caught and drifted away on a gust. She smiled and took off down the other side of the dune, her legs propelling her the way she remembered as a kid. Almost too fast, out of her control, the only option to go with them until the dune faded along with her momentum.

She set off across the beach at a brisk pace. It was only early afternoon, but the light was fading fast, and by four o'clock it would be lost. Coves and crags stretched ahead, one in particular calling to her. There was never going to be any competition on New Year's Eve for the cove that was her destination.

She dropped her bag and plonked her arse down on top of it, taking in the view and stretching her legs out after the workout crossing the sand. The cove sheltered her on three sides, and the surrounding dunes offered further relief from the prevailing wind.

“Fire. Water. Shelter. Food,” she muttered, running through what she would need to see out the night in freezing temperatures. “Get your tent up. Gather wood. Put hot water on. Stay dry.”

Georgia set about her tasks with conscientious efficiency. More than a decade of practice in a multitude of wild situations had already honed the basics. It had been her way of life since childhood and was as much a routine to her as it was for others to pop the kettle on or flick on a light switch.

Her trusty bow drill would expend a lot of energy in these challenging conditions, but she always kept a small tin of dry tinder, and within a few strikes of a flint, Georgia had the beginnings of a fire warming her fingers. She fed it slowly, building the heat until it could take a hefty-sized log and she was able to finally sit back and relax.

The setting sun had long ago split the grey sky with hues of orange and red that rippled and glowed through the twilight, stretching the horizon. The clearing mist gave form to the dozen or so boats in the distance that had anchored for the night or waited for their spot in the harbour. It was a scene she was familiar with, the coastline twinkling with the lights and shadows of ships and trawlers, from Aberdeen to Fraserburgh, and beyond.

The repetitive crunch of sand nearby caught her attention.

The wind took the sound away for a moment, but when she heard it again it was closer and seemed to be speeding up. Georgia stepped from her shelter and rounded the dune as a girl came in to view, her arms and legs pumping furiously as she sprinted as if being chased.

Georgia flinched as she eventually stumbled to a stop thirty metres or so away and doubled over, one arm across her stomach, the other propped against her knee. She couldn't tell if the girl was about to be sick or was trying to catch her breath.

The heaving sobs drifting her way answered the question. The girl stood upright, closed her eyes and turned towards the crashing surf. With her head tilted to the brooding sky, she let out a strangled scream. It tore the air with anger and desperation. Georgia took a few steps towards the girl as she screamed again, consumed with a need to console her.

But she held back from calling out, unsure whether to intrude on the moment and feeling awkward that the other girl was unaware of her presence. Trepidation fluttered in her stomach as the stranger began kicking at pebbles and seaweed, inching her way towards the water. Whitewash lapped the toes of her trainers before fully encasing her feet to her ankles.

As the frigid water began to hit her shins, she strode more determinedly, as if the icy onslaught wasn't even registering, slapping her hands against the incoming waves and shouting unintelligibly at the moon.

What the hell is she doing?

Georgia's reticence disappeared as she picked up her pace, cupped her hands around her mouth, and shouted, "Hey!"

The stranger stumbled as the water swept around her upper thighs and Georgia broke into a run, panic building along with her heart rate as she tried to fathom the girl's intentions.

"Stop!" she called out again. "What the hell are you doing? Get out of the water."

The girl twisted around, clearly startled by Georgia's presence, and lost her footing again as another wave broke. The water fully engulfed her as she fell, sucking her further out to sea. She cried out and began to choke on the salty onslaught.

"Fuck." Georgia tore off her jacket and jumper as she ran. She braced against the shock of cold and her breath came rapidly through gritted teeth

as her legs smashed through the surf between them. She tried to time the waves, planting her feet as each one thumped against her in an attempt to stay upright for as long as possible.

Her progress was steady, but it didn't feel quick enough as her determined stare stayed pinned on the girl, who continued to thrash and claw at the air in a futile attempt to find some sort of firm footing. Georgia cried out when the girl's head went under and only hesitated a moment before she dived forward below the next wave, aiming for the same spot.

The salt stung her eyes and there was no visibility. Georgia surfaced and sucked in a gulp of air before diving straight back down again, her hands searching blindly until finally they grabbed hold of the girl.

Georgia yanked them both to the surface, twisted the girl's jumper in her fist, and thrust them towards the shore as the girl flailed and choked. Her feet eventually found the seabed, and she was able to hook the girl under the arms before half lifting, half dragging, her mercilessly beyond the sea's grasp.

They fell back on the sand in a tangle of leaden limbs, breathless and soaked.

Georgia was the first to recover. "Shit, are you okay?"

She sat up and reached out a hand to pull the girl up beside her, but she scrambled away, still heaving for breath and spitting out water.

Georgia frowned and rubbed furiously at her arms as a mixture of cold and shock prickled them with goose bumps. "What the hell were you doing going in the water on a night like this?"

The girl looked to be younger than Georgia, maybe eighteen or nineteen, with long blonde hair now drenched and caked in sand. Her pale skin was blotched from crying and her lips had taken on a worrying tinge of blue.

A baseball cap hung from her ponytail and she fumbled to get it back on her head, pulled it lower over her brow, and waved dismissively in Georgia's general direction as she shuffled further away.

"I'm fine," she mumbled. "Please leave me alone."

"Are you kidding me? Someone who's fine doesn't go for a December swim in the North Sea fully clothed."

Her words met the top of the girl's head as she bowed it to her chest, pulled her knees to her chin, and wrapped her arms around them.

“You scared me, and I fell. That’s all.” The words were whispered, yet somehow laced with annoyance.

“Are you saying it’s my fault?” Georgia was incredulous.

“No, that’s not what I meant. Please.” Red-rimmed eyes peeked from under the cap and bore into Georgia. “Thank you for helping, but I want to be on my own.”

There was no way on earth Georgia was going to leave the girl, a sodden, frozen heap in the sand. A shiver ran through her again as she became acutely aware of her own wet clothes. She stood and reached out a hand. “No chance. Come and get warmed up.”

The girl squeezed her arms tighter and rocked back a little, staring out at the spot Georgia had dragged her from.

Georgia kept her hand out. “You don’t have to talk to me, but at least let me stop you catching hypothermia. My camp is over behind that dune.”

She looked at Georgia’s hand suspiciously, but when it was clear Georgia wasn’t going anywhere, she eventually slipped her own into it. Worried she might try to run off, Georgia let the girl walk a step or two in front of her as she gathered her discarded clothing and they headed to the camp.

Dread sat heavy in Georgia’s stomach and she had no idea what to say. What was this girl running away from? What might have happened if Georgia hadn’t been there? Would she have kept wading into the sea until it swallowed her whole?

Dark jeans, high tops, and a pink hoodie were her only protection apart from the hat, and the clothes now hung heavy with water off her small frame.

Okay, think survival, Georgia. She’s cold and potentially hypothermic, so the first thing is to get us both warm. Fresh clothes, then feed the fire, and make a hot drink. Take it one step at a time.

As they reached the camp, the girl curiously surveyed Georgia’s set-up. She pulled her sleeves down over her hands and inched a little in the direction of the fire. “What on earth are you doing out here? Are you camping in this weather?”

Georgia laughed at the surprise in the question given what she had just witnessed. “Are you *paddling* in this weather?”

That wasn’t the whole story, and the weight of what had happened stifled the air between them, stretched a moment’s silence until it was clear

Georgia's question wasn't going to be answered. The girl looked down, avoiding Georgia's gaze, and her body began to shake.

Georgia pulled a small towel from the top pocket of her rucksack and waved the girl closer. "Here, take this. Come and get some heat while I find you dry clothes."

She took the towel without a word and removed her hoodie. Her T-shirt clung to her torso and goose bumps pebbled her arms.

As Georgia rummaged for extra layers and a blanket, the girl vigorously rubbed at her hair and face, gradually gravitating towards the fire. With a tentative smile, she accepted the trousers and thick woollen jumper Georgia offered.

"Thanks."

"I'll go collect some more wood while you change."

Georgia put a dune between them and half-heartedly gathered a few pieces of driftwood. She hoped the girl would still be there when she returned, but her mind whirled wondering what to say and do if she was. Should she call someone? She'd only recently bought a mobile phone and wasn't even sure it would have battery, never mind signal. She had no car but would happily find a way of getting her to a safe place.

Georgia had told her she didn't have to talk, so maybe she should stick to that. Focus on warming her up, making her feel protected, and see where it led.

She returned as the girl was shrugging into Georgia's favourite jumper, a deep green, Fair Isle design that her father had brought her from Shetland. The clothes were a couple of sizes too big and she'd had to roll the trouser legs up. She seemed to shrink even more beneath them, and barefoot, with her hair now hanging freely, innocence emanated from her.

Georgia couldn't imagine who or what would have caused her to be so reckless.

"Are you going to tell me why you're camping out here on New Year's Eve?" The girl kept her eyes on the fire, rotating her hands and wiggling her fingers, and Georgia wasn't sure if she really cared whether she got an answer or if she was merely trying to distract from talking about herself.

"I didn't have anywhere else to be and I love to camp. The weather isn't an issue if you're prepared." Georgia kept busy and quickly changed her

own clothes before salvaging a couple of tin mugs from her pack along with a small pot of chocolate powder.

As she added hot water to the mugs, she decided making this girl safe might not only mean giving her warmth. She needed to find out what had driven her towards the darkened depths of the sea.

“I’m Georgia, by the way.” She handed over one of the mugs with a smile. “Fancy telling me what that was back there? Maybe I can help.”

“Thanks.” She cupped her hands tightly around the mug. “But I’d rather not.”

Georgia tried another tactic. “You know, if someone’s hurt you, or if you’re in trouble... Maybe talking will help you find a way out? A different way out other than...you know...” Georgia struggled to find the words to console or reassure.

A soft gaze met Georgia’s, filled with sorrow and what seemed like a small measure of embarrassment. “I’m not about to run back into the sea if that’s what you’re thinking. I told you I didn’t mean to go out that far.”

“I’m not thinking that.” Georgia looked for another way to let her know she could talk. “You know I’m not judging you, right? I mean, I don’t know you or anything about your life.”

“I know. I...” She spun the cup in her hands and sighed. “I lost myself for a minute there, that’s all. I just had this urge to...” She shrugged. “I don’t know what I was thinking, but I’ll be okay. You don’t have to worry.”

“Can I at least try to call someone? Take you somewhere?”

The girl shook her head. “Please, I’m all right. I really don’t want to talk about it. Can I just stay here a while and be quiet?”

Georgia wasn’t about to let her slip away back in to the night until she was sure she meant what she said. That it had been accidental, that she’d been startled, and that her rash foray into the water had been nothing more than a misguided mistake.

“Aye, of course you can.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else that would change the girl’s mind about accepting further help, but she could at least offer her a little solace. “Will you at least tell me your name?”

For some reason, the question elicited a glare of suspicion. “How about we don’t do that either.”

For a second Georgia thought she was joking, but her expression stayed

neutral, still not meeting Georgia's gaze as her eyes fixed firmly on the flames lapping close to her fingers.

"Huh. I share my precious Swiss hot chocolate and I don't even get a name? Some people are so ungrate—"

Georgia had thought her tone was teasing, but the girl blew out an exasperated breath before clunking her mug down on a rock.

"You know what? Don't worry about it." She started tugging the jumper over her head, her voice muffled beneath it. Still she raged in Georgia's general direction. "Take the bloody clothes. Keep the hot chocolate. I don't need anything from you. I don't need anything from anyone. I'll... Oh for fuck sake..."

Georgia tried not to laugh when she realised the girl was stuck.

"Whoa there." She met some half-hearted resistance as she helped tug an elbow free and pulled the tight-knit bundle of warmth back down over the girl's head. It didn't last long; the girl stood limp and defeated as Georgia adjusted it on her shoulders and drew the sleeves back down her arms. She kept her hands cupped gently around the girl's wrists until she looked up and met Georgia's gaze.

"It's okay. I'm sorry if I hit a sore spot. We don't have to talk about anything you don't want to, and you don't have to give me your name, but you should still stay for a while."

"Why?" The girl looked confused. "I'm a complete stranger you risked your life to haul out of the sea and I repay you by being a total ungrateful arse when all you're doing is being kind."

With her single-minded focus on getting the girl back to her camp and dealing with the aftermath of the rescue, it was the first time Georgia had really considered what she'd done. There hadn't been a moment's thought for her own safety as she'd thrashed through the water, only knowing that she had to stop the girl before she reached the point of no return.

Georgia shook off the thoughts of what might have happened if she hadn't been there. The main thing was they were both out of harm's way, and if it happened again, Georgia would keep pulling her out over and over if she had to.

Georgia swept an arm around the cove. "I mean, I'm not exactly tripping over company right now, and you clearly need somewhere to be that isn't

home. How about we sit for a while and enjoy the peace together, simply strangers on a beach?”

“Strangers on a beach?” The girl raised an eyebrow. “Sounds like a bad movie title.”

Then to Georgia’s surprise, she smiled.

A wonderful smile that warmed Georgia in places the campfire couldn’t reach and burned a path from chest to toes. It transformed the girl’s features, her body language softening along with the steel in her eyes.

Suddenly all Georgia wanted in the world was to be sat beside this girl; her name no longer mattered. The fraught moment they’d shared had forged a bond of protectiveness within Georgia and she had to get her to stay.

“You’re going to hang about for a while then?” Georgia looked away, mortified by the pleading tone in her voice. She rolled out a thermo mat in the space between her tent and the fire, picked up her mug, and took a seat, gesturing for the girl to do the same.

“Well, I suppose, as you’ve already poured the hot chocolate. I guess it would be rude not to.” She needed no further invitation before scooping up her own mug and joining Georgia on the mat.

Georgia studied her features side-on as she took a tentative sip. A small quirk in the corner of the girl’s mouth suggested she liked what she tasted. The chocolate would feel like velvet goodness in her mouth.

“You’re definitely happy about staying now, aren’t you?”

The girl said nothing, simply sipped and stared out at the darkened waves.

The silence felt easy and Georgia honoured it for a while despite still having a hundred questions burning her tongue. Georgia was afraid of scaring her off, but eventually intrigue got the better of her and when she was sure the girl was settled, she caved and broke the quiet.

“Won’t there be people wondering where you are? Will they be worried?”

“Probably.”

“You don’t seem concerned about that.”

She tipped back the last of her chocolate before leaning back on her elbows, still focused on the thundering waves. “Apparently my life is one big worry for them to handle. This won’t be anything new.”

“When you say them, do you mean your parents?”

“Aye, among many, many others. All with my best interests at heart, or so they like to constantly tell me.”

“Have you done something to make them worry? I mean, apart from tearing off down the beach in the dark?”

The girl shot her an aggrieved look. “What makes you think it’s my fault?”

Georgia was immediately sorry and held her hands up. “I didn’t mean that you might have done something wrong. Only I was a teenager not so long ago and I figured it was a safe assumption knowing how adults overreact about everything.”

A cynical laugh escaped her lips. “I wish it was that simple.”

Georgia stayed quiet, giving her space to keep talking if she wanted to.

A few minutes passed before the girl sat up again. Casting a sideways glance Georgia’s way, she scooped up some sand and let it trickle between her fingers.

“Most people my age are out getting pissed right now. Doing stupid crap and sticking two fingers up to the so called “millennium bug.” Meanwhile, my mum is booking meetings and conference calls and plane tickets and basically deciding my entire future without me. What’s infuriating is, I kind of want it, but on the other hand, I hate how she’s making all the decisions while still treating me like a child. As if I couldn’t possibly have any idea what’s best for me or know what I want my future to be. My dad is absolutely no help at all, in fact I think he makes her even more determined, and so this weight has been bearing down on me, crushing and suffocating me. I needed to get out of there. I needed to feel something. Okay?”

The words had tumbled from her in a rush and now she glared at Georgia as if daring her to challenge what she had shared. “Now if you don’t mind, I really don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

“O-kay...” Georgia was baffled. Several possibilities ran through her head that would explain such control being exerted over a teenage girl’s life. “What are you? A superhero or a child genius or something?”

This laugh was different and seemed to take them both by surprise. Georgia laughed with her as the girl softly shook her head until only a trace of it remained, crinkling the corners of her eyes.

“That’s the thing.” She sighed sadly. “I’m really nothing special. I’m

merely a girl sitting on a beach, sharing hot chocolate with a stranger. Why does following my dreams also mean I have to be more than that?"

Georgia had no answer and didn't think she was expected to give one. Tears pooled again in the girl's eyes and she was afraid more questions would spill them over. Instead, she reached out tentatively and laid a hand on her arm.

This time she didn't flinch, didn't shrug off the concern that Georgia's touch tried to convey. Instead the girl covered Georgia's hand with her own but still didn't say anything as they both stared into the fire until the tears eventually retreated.

"What are you doing out here alone anyway? What about your family?"

"Ah, that's also a complicated question."

"I told you mine." The girl offered her a cheeky smile.

Georgia studied her a moment as the smoke drifted and tangled in her drying hair and some pinkness returned to her cheeks. Behind the girl's smile there still lay unsettling sorrow and Georgia thought maybe if she shared, it would help her do the same.

"They're here and there. My parents are on an island in the Outer Hebrides, packing up ready to move in the spring. A couple of my siblings are in South America somewhere, and I think another one is in Italy. The others..." she shrugged. "I've no idea. We mostly keep in touch through my parents and it's been a couple of years since we were all together."

"Wow. You've got a lot of siblings."

"Yup."

"Don't you do family gatherings this time of year?"

Georgia sighed. "Nah, we've never really followed any of the regular holiday traditions. Maybe more when we were younger, but I guess you'd call my parents hippies, so it depended where we were. They raised us all over the world. On communes, remote foreign villages and islands, the hidden parts of the world that only a few are lucky enough to experience."

The girl looked at her with what Georgia thought was a little awe. "That sounds amazing. I've barely been anywhere."

"It has its pros and cons and it made us all pretty self-sufficient. We work when we need to and know how to live off the land to stretch what we have. My maths might be shite, but I know what mushrooms will kill you."

The girl laughed and Georgia joined her. "You're Scottish though?"

“Aye, my parents and their families are both from the north-east and I was born in Aberdeen. We left when I was a baby.”

“Why aren’t you with your parents on the island or travelling with your siblings?”

Georgia glanced in the direction of the small village beyond the beach. “My grandparents lived local to here. Their cottage was the only place I ever really called home growing up. It was the only place that never changed no matter how long it was between visits.”

“Was?”

“It’s sold now. I think it’s a holiday rental. I wanted to keep it but financially it didn’t make sense with how little time I’d spend here.”

“Is it by any chance the one at the end of the lane with all the cherry blossom trees in the back garden?”

Georgia was surprised. “You know it?”

“That’s where I’m staying. We’re up from Edinburgh for what was meant to be family time, before it became plan-my-entire-future time in between my parents arguing.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault. At least I love the cottage. I’m in the wee bedroom in the back.”

“Wow. That was always my room. I’m not sure why, but that feels kind of weird to know. I still imagine it with my grandparents there. They passed a few years back only a couple of months apart, but this beach still feels like home.”

The girl leaned in a little, pressing their shoulders together. “I’m sorry.”

“Thanks.” Georgia cleared her throat. There was no point becoming maudlin thinking of the past. Her father would always say, “Learn from the past but never look back, it’s only by moving forward that we can stay in tune with the world.”

Who knew what he’d been smoking when he came up with that one?

“I figured if the world was going to end tonight this is where I wanted to be.” She glanced at her watch. “It’s three minutes until midnight.”

“New year, new start?”

“That’s what they say.”

“Maybe it’s advice I need to take.”

“Assuming we survive Y2K.” Georgia offered her a wry smile.

“They’ll definitely be wondering where I am now.”

“Let them wonder.” Georgia leaned back and snagged a blanket from the doorway of her tent to drape around them. “How about for tonight you get to be a girl, simply sitting on a beach sharing hot chocolate and stories with a stranger. Then in the morning you can decide if you want to be more than that.”

The girl smiled in a way that told Georgia she had said the right thing, and as the clock struck midnight and the first firework exploded in the distance, she moved closer again and allowed Georgia’s arm to settle across her shoulders.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

CHAPTER 2

September, 2019

Day 1: 7.55 a.m.

GEORGIA SAT ON THE SEA wall as cars and passengers slowly disembarked from the early morning ferry. She liked to keep her distance for a few minutes, playing a private guessing game of who might be part of her group. No matter how many times she did this or how much experience she had, with each new group a tingle of nervousness always crept through her, and she found a moment of quiet observation gave her a chance to settle any fleeting reservations.

A few cars peeled off from the queue heading elsewhere on the island while others pulled into the car park across from where she sat. Some of these would be hers.

A young couple clambered out from a tiny red car, barefoot, wearing loose vests and jean shorts; she clocked them straight away and smirked. She'd bet everything she had they were Clara and Sebastian. He made a fuss of stretching while his girlfriend simultaneously ate a banana and stuffed a variety of items from the back of the car into well-worn rucksacks. Georgia hoped they had brought something more than shorts and flipping sandals to wear.

She turned her attention to a teenage boy leaning against his car with his nose in a foraging book she recognised. An older woman fussed around him, checking and rechecking their bags between staring at a piece of paper in her hand and looking around at the other cars pulling in. She seemed nervous, and Georgia guessed they were the mother and son pairing. She'd

had several calls from Sylvia to check that the packing list was *really* all they were allowed to bring.

A young woman in her early twenties wandered past a harried Sylvia and headed towards the sea wall. She hopped on top of it a few metres along from Georgia but made no attempt to acknowledge her presence. Instead she sat still, staring out at the waves churning around the moored ferry with headphones clamped firmly over her ears. Every item she wore looked pristine, including her pack. She was clearly a first-time camper but looked calm, almost disinterested.

Georgia guessed this was Havana.

The girl hadn't been in direct contact with her but from what her parents had said, her current state belied the "handful" that they claimed she was. This was their idea of sending her to boot camp and Georgia expected some resistance to surface.

As other tourists got their bearings and departed for different parts of the island, excitement finally took over and Georgia jumped off the wall, falling in behind her group as they started heading in the direction of the meeting point.

On the jetty her assistant, Austin, was finishing the last of the preparations on her boat. Two guys had joined Clara and Sebastian, one of them animated, shaking hands and smiling as the other held back and looked as if he wanted to be anywhere else in the world.

Noah and Isaac, local brothers from the Inner Hebrides who should be familiar with the environment they were about to spend two weeks exploring. The older one ruffled the younger one's hair and she swore, if looks could kill, he'd have dropped on the spot.

It was rare she misidentified anyone based solely on appearances, but what took longer to find out was their motivation. Why on earth were these people voluntarily paying her money to take them to a remote Scottish island to "survive" for a fortnight?

Havana eventually left the sea wall and caught up with her, pulling her headphones down to settle around her neck as she ambled closer. "You're Georgia?"

"I am. It's nice to meet you." Georgia held out a hand.

Havana took it a little reluctantly and only held on for a split second. "I guess. Is it time to go?"

“Sure is.” Georgia gestured for her to lead the way to the jetty.

Austin was already exchanging smiles and pleasantries with the others by the time Georgia and Havana reached the boat.

Sebastian turned towards her and held out a hand. “Sebastian. Good to meet you.”

“Likewise.” Georgia took it and refused to wince at his overzealous grip.

“Are you ready to survive in the wilderness?” he asked in an almost mocking tone, as if what they were about to do was some kind of game. He clearly assumed she was another group member and not their leader; he wasn’t the first to think Austin was the one in charge.

“I certainly am. Are you?” Georgia didn’t even attempt to hide the edge in her voice. This trip wasn’t a joke, and the sooner he realised she wouldn’t suffer them, the better.

Before Sebastian had a chance to reply, she jumped onto the boat and stood on one of the bench seats, calling them all to attention. Sebastian looked a little startled, which Georgia couldn’t deny was satisfying.

“As most of you will already have guessed, I’m Georgia Hamilton and I’ll be your guide and your teacher for the next two weeks.” She gestured in Austin’s direction. “This is Austin, my trusty apprentice, and this...” She patted the boat, “...is our means of getting to our final destination. If you can pass your packs one by one, we’ll get them stowed away first and then get you all on board.”

“Aren’t we missing someone?” Austin took a quick headcount. “There’s another solo member due.”

As they both looked up to scan the path down to the jetty, a car pulled into a space near the top of the ramp. The driver, clearly harried and conscious of being late, scurried out and quick-stepped it to the boot of the car. She relieved it of a large pack, and it took a couple of heaves before she managed to settle it on her back. After shoving a pair of dark glasses on top of her head, she stood hands on hips and huffed out a breath, looking down towards the boat.

“This must be her.” Austin waved towards the figure. “Down here,” he called.

“Sorry I’m late,” the woman said as she approached. “I turned right instead of left when I came off the ferry and couldn’t find anywhere to turn around.” The sunglasses now covered her eyes, but an itch of recognition

irritated Georgia's memory. The register said her name was Kelsey Campbell, but that wasn't as familiar as the woman's face.

"No problem." Georgia held out a hand and helped her aboard. "I was about to start the safety brief, so get yourself comfy and put this on." She handed over a life vest.

"I know you." They were the first words Havana had uttered to anyone but Georgia. "You're—"

Kelsey gave a forced cough and shook her head firmly at Havana. "Kelsey. It's nice to meet you." She held out a hand in Havana's direction as Georgia looked between them, confused.

"Do you two know each other?"

"No." Kelsey was firm.

"Yes. Well, I don't know her personally, but I know who she is." Havana sat back with arms crossed, her expression showing interest for the first time since her arrival.

"You're that detective. On that show...what's it called?" It was Clara now, excitably bouncing on the spot.

"*Code Blue!*" Noah called out.

"That's it. I love that show." Clara thrust her hand out and grabbed hold of Kelsey's, shaking it for an awkward length of time as she stared in awe. "You're amazing in it."

Kelsey's cheeks coloured and the others started bombarding her with questions. Havana remained on the sidelines, observing. Georgia had no idea about *Code Blue* or who this woman was, but clearly she was the only one. Television wasn't something she had ever had in her life, but it was obvious Kelsey was some kind of star of it.

"Right." She clapped her hands together to save Kelsey from the onslaught. "I'm sure Kelsey appreciates you're all fans of her show, but celebrity status won't keep her alive. Nor will it help you. So how about we get on with this?"

Everyone sat back in their seats, still glancing surreptitiously in Kelsey's direction. It piqued Georgia's interest why a celebrity might be on her course, but she hoped it wouldn't be too much of a distraction.

"Did you all follow the kit list Austin sent out a few weeks ago?" she asked.

Nods all around confirmed they had.

“Can I trust that you all have everything on the list, or do I need to check your packs?”

There was another round of nods and muttered yeses, but it was unlikely that they had remembered everything. Well, apart from Sylvia. Georgia had spares of the important stuff, and a lack of other items would simply teach them a lesson.

“Great. Now for the hard part.” She unrolled a waterproof sack and held it out. “I need all your electronic devices. That means phones, headphones, gaming consoles, tablets, cameras. Apart from torches, if it has a battery, I want it.”

A few groans rumbled through the group, but most began to reluctantly switch off phones and drop them in to the sack. Clara clutched a camera to her chest.

“C’mon, Clara, put the camera in the bag.”

“But...I wanted photos for my Insta, and it’s not like I can call anyone on it.”

“I don’t care. You signed the contract, and it said no cameras.”

“I thought you would only mean phone cameras.”

“I mean all cameras. Now either hand it over or take it and yourself off my boat.”

“Give it to her, Clara.” Sebastian reached to prise it from her fingers and dropped it in the bag with an apologetic smile. Clara gave one last huff but said nothing more.

Havana handed over her phone and headphones without a word, but her look of disgust said everything, whereas Kelsey seemed to relinquish hers with a sigh of relief.

“Where we’re going, there is no phone signal, never mind Wi-Fi. They’re all useless to you anyway. Plus, stopping to take pictures only causes distraction and I’m sure there are some folk here who don’t fancy being plastered on your social media feed. If everyone agrees, we’ll get a group photo before we leave, and if we need it, Austin and I have means of communication in an emergency, along with the radio on the boat. If I catch anyone with a device not on the list, you’ll spend what’s left of the fortnight in a tent by yourself. Are we clear?”

The nods this time were much more emphatic, and Georgia tried to hide a laugh.

“Okay, Austin, let’s get this boat moving.”

CHAPTER 3

Day 1: 12.27 p.m.

IT WAS FOUR HOURS BEFORE the island came into sight.

Nervous energy rippled around the group as they approached. A swell of pride filled Georgia's chest as she marvelled at the island's beauty. Birds soared above the ragged coastline, with its imposing cliffs and hidden coves that cast shadows over pure white sand. Theo's mouth hung slightly open as he watched hungry gannets dive into the glistening water, enticing and emerald-coloured in the midday sun.

Awe etched their faces as the group slowly came closer to shore and the hills beyond the coast grew majestically before them. The sloping towers of lush greenery cut through blue sky that would otherwise seem to stretch forever, and stark open meadows capped the clifftops, dancing and swaying in the breeze with spirited late summer colours.

It reminded Georgia of the first time she'd come here, the excitement that had bubbled between her siblings as the prospect of new adventures quickly overcame any sadness at leaving their old home.

"Welcome to Eilean Dhuinne."

"Sorry, what?" Sebastian's eyebrows furrowed as he tried to pronounce it in his English accent.

Noah chuckled. "Eilean means island or isle. It's spelt E-i-l-e-a-n but you pronounce it "El-uhn." A bit like the girls name Ellen but with a 'u.'"

A few of the group repeated what Noah had said a few times and Sebastian eventually got it.

"What about the other bit?"

Noah shrugged. “My Gaelic is pretty rusty.” He turned expectantly to Georgia.

“It’s spelt D-h-u-i-n-n-e, but it’s pronounced ‘Du-when.’”

The natives picked it up easily enough, but Clara and Sebastian struggled a little.

“What does it mean?” Kelsey asked.

Georgia smiled. “Loosely it means, *an island for us.*”

She jumped onto the rubber jetty and pointed to a dense line of trees around a quarter of a mile back from the shoreline. “Up there is our new home.”

Austin joined her and tied off the boat before they formed a human chain from bow to beach to transfer the packs and additional supplies. With everyone loaded up, she let Austin take the lead as they marched in single file further inland.

Kelsey lagged behind the group and came to a standstill a few feet ahead of Georgia. She bent to snatch a handful of sand, letting it trickle through her fingers before removing her sunglasses and scanning the length of the beach.

“Wow.”

Georgia came to her side. “Stunning, eh?”

“I think I’d forgotten how beautiful Scotland could be.”

Her tone was pensive as she looked back out to sea. Her voice still had the unmistakable Scottish lilt underneath, while leaning more towards a soft American twang.

“This is only the beginning.” Georgia heaved her pack higher and started them moving again. “The island has a few wee surprises for us to enjoy over the next couple of weeks. Assuming we’re surviving.”

Kelsey laughed softly and the memory itch began to niggle at Georgia again. She was sure she’d never seen this woman on TV, but if that wasn’t it then why did she have an overwhelming feeling that they weren’t strangers?

“Have we met before?”

Kelsey glanced at her before putting the sunglasses back on. A shy smile played on her lips. “Perhaps.” And with that she strode ahead to join the rest of the group, leaving Georgia thoroughly confused.

“Hey, wait.” Georgia made to catch up, but Kelsey never looked back and was soon in conversation with Sylvia.

The sand beneath Georgia's boots gave way to the debris of the forest floor as Austin led them to their usual clearing. Woodland in the Outer Hebrides was relatively uncommon, and they were lucky to have terrain other than the hills and peaty moorland. The sun glittered through the thick canopy of Scots pine, Douglas fir, beech and ash trees, and Georgia breathed deeply, their herb and citrus scents intermingling to freshen the air in heady bursts.

Once their bags were dumped, Georgia directed everyone to retrieve lengths of fallen tree trunks and stumps she had scattered purposefully throughout the immediate woodland, then helped place them to create a seating circle. Some tasks would be set up in this way to preserve the landscape, but nothing would be made easy for them.

"First of all," Georgia called out, and the group quietened and began to settle around her. "I want to tell you a bit about what I expect from you all on this course; how it's going to work, and what you should expect from each other. Then we can do some proper introductions. How does that sound?"

There were murmurs of agreement all around, and Austin, who had been busy unloading a variety of supplies, stopped and moved to her side. He was her eyes and ears to everything that happened either when she wasn't around, or when group members tried to hide things from her. Austin had a knack for quickly becoming their friend and when tensions rose, as they inevitably would, people generally went to him before Georgia. She was the boss, and she had to present a more serious front to keep the group safe, which in turn made her slightly less approachable.

Austin was affable and carefree, with a zest for life and learning that made him glow. He was someone you wanted to be around, and she could guarantee there'd be one or two in the group with a little Austin crush by the time the course was done.

He was important to her and helped to keep her finger on the pulse of the group dynamic. The trip was meant as something of a survival simulation, but when clashes happened or when someone didn't pull their weight, escalation was rapid and could put them in a real-life dangerous situation.

"This experience is meant to be fun." Georgia smiled at the group;

she'd given this speech so many times. "But it is also meant to teach you the basics of survival, and I'm here to tell you that survival is hard."

A few of the group shifted uncomfortably on their logs and Clara's hand went up.

"I'll take questions in a minute, but for now I ask that you listen." Clara's hand dropped without argument and Georgia continued. "Survival doesn't care who you are or what you do." She glanced in Kelsey's direction and felt bad when the woman immediately looked down at the ground.

"For the next two weeks you're all students brought together for a common goal. Each of you will contribute in your own unique way, and you will respect each other's skills as well as limitations. This course won't make anyone an expert, and arrogance and ego have no place on this island. We are a team, and if you remember that, we will achieve so much more together. You will be kind. You will be helpful. You will remember that your survival depends on each other."

She grinned mischievously and looked around the group. "It also depends on me, and if you follow my instructions you are in for a great time. I've been living this way my whole life and learning these skills since I was old enough to hold a knife correctly. You will get dirty, you will probably bleed, you won't get much sleep, and you will be hungry."

A few groans rumbled throughout at the hunger part. That always happened.

"That's all part of it I'm afraid. I want you to love this as much as I do. I want you to appreciate this beautiful island we are on and everything it can provide you with. I want you to immerse yourself in the simplicity and joy to be found in taking care of your basic needs through imagination and endeavour. But I also want you to understand that it takes work, it takes time, and it takes a community."

Kelsey was staring intently now, and Georgia held her gaze a moment longer than normal, trying to convey an apology for her earlier comment. She was sure her words had captured the woman's imagination, and it galvanised her to know at least one member of the group seemed to understand what she was offering them.

"Okay, I know there have been some initial hellos, but how about we go around the group and get names and reasons why you're on this trip?" She gestured in Clara and Sebastian's direction.

Sebastian cleared his throat and sat a little more upright, pushing out his chest. His voice was deep and throaty, and she wondered if he'd grown the beard especially for the trip.

"I'm Sebastian and this is my fiancée, Clara. We drove up from Hertfordshire yesterday which is where we're both from. We work in finance right now but are planning to quit our jobs in the next few months and travel Europe in a camper for a couple of years."

"Of course you are..."

Georgia caught the eye roll at the end of Havana's jibe. "What was that, Havana?"

"Nothing." The girl folded her arms and sighed indifferently.

"That's what I thought." Georgia directed a pointed glare in her direction. "Thanks, Sebastian. Would you like to add anything, Clara?"

"When do we get to eat?"

Georgia chuckled. "All in good time. Now who wants to go next?"

"I'm Noah." The older of the brothers bounced a little on the log, reminding Georgia of an excitable puppy. "This is my little brother, Isaac." Noah threw an arm around Isaac's shoulders and pulled him into a side hug before ruffling his hair. The look of disgust from Isaac did nothing to dampen Noah's enthusiasm. "This one has had a bit of a rough time lately and I thought some time away with his favourite brother might help."

Isaac grunted. "Aye right, crapping in the woods for two weeks is exactly what I needed."

At a glance you wouldn't guess they were brothers. Where Noah was tall and lean, his body filled out and facial hair thick, Isaac was gangly and awkward, sporting a few pimples and an unruly mop of hair along with a tuft of light fur on his chin. With so many siblings of her own, Georgia could spot a sure case of sibling rivalry from a mile away. The way Isaac looked at Noah flicked between admiration and irritation and Georgia felt a little sorry for the younger brother.

"I take it the great outdoors isn't your natural habitat, Isaac?" Georgia joked, trying to coax a smile from him.

"Are you kidding?" Noah answered for him. "He'd never leave his gaming chair if I didn't kick him out of it once in a while."

Isaac said nothing. He seemed to hunch into himself even more and wouldn't look anywhere but at the fingernails he was systematically picking.

“Well, challenge accepted.” Georgia rubbed her hands together. “If I haven’t made a survivor out of Isaac by the end of this, I’ve failed in my job.”

He looked at her a little suspiciously then but also somewhat surprised. Georgia guessed he wasn’t used to being the focus of anyone’s positive attention.

“Who’s next?”

Sylvia tentatively raised her hand. “Teddy and I...”

“Don’t call me Teddy. It’s Theo. I’m not a child.”

“You’re only sixteen...” Sylvia’s cheeks coloured a little at Theo’s surly tone.

“I still don’t like you calling me Teddy.” He sat with a noticeable gap between them and fidgeted with a small twig. There was clearly more to their story, and Georgia hoped it didn’t cause too many issues.

Sylvia sighed and threw up her hands in exasperation. “I’m sorry, Georgia. His mum used to call him Teddy and I slip sometimes.”

“Don’t talk about her. How many times do I have to tell you that?”

“Okay, I’m sorry.” Sylvia looked around self-consciously. “Stop making a scene.” She uttered the last words through tight lips. When he didn’t say anything else, she continued. “As I was saying, *Theo* and I thought it would be a good way to bond a little. He loves his plants and foraging. He’s very knowledgeable about their uses, what’s edible what time of year, and where to find things. I’m a doctor and work quite long hours, so we thought this would be a good opportunity to get away from it all and try sorting through some of our, erm, differences, without the usual distractions.”

“Correction, *she* thought it would be a good idea.” Theo’s flicked the twig away in irritation. “I’m here against my will because apparently I’m still a child.”

Havana snorted. “That makes two of us. I’m here entirely under duress.”

“Want to talk about it, Havana?” Georgia asked, glad to deflect from what seemed to be an impending stepmother/stepson domestic.

“Not really, but I wouldn’t mind talking about why Kelsey Campbell is here.”

Kelsey shifted uncomfortably. “It’s really not that interesting.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m stranded on an island with a celebrity. I’d say that counts as interesting.”

“I’ll share if you share,” Kelsey challenged.

“We’re not stranded, and nobody has to share anything.” Georgia interjected. “I’d suggest, in the spirit of being a team, that you both tell the group at least something about why you’re here. They’ve all been gracious enough to say a little about themselves.”

Havana crossed her arms defiantly but muttered her agreement. “Fine. Kelsey first though.”

Kelsey sighed but gave in to the request. “The same as the rest of you, I think. I wanted to get away from it all for a while and take a bit of time for myself to sort through a few things. I came across this course online and here I am.”

“That’s it?” Havana wasn’t giving up. “You’re rich and famous and literally could have gone anywhere in the world. You could be lying on a tropical island drinking a steady stream of cocktails while lapping up the sun, but instead you chose here? Why?”

Kelsey laughed. “You’re right, but there were other reasons why I chose this place that I’d prefer to keep personal.”

It was the laugh that finally clicked everything into place, and Georgia stared at Kelsey in surprise. She was instantly transported back to the eve of the millennium more than twenty years ago and the night they’d spent together on Balmedie Beach. As the embers had died in the early hours, Georgia had drifted to sleep, and when she had woken the girl was gone.

They were strangers on a beach and now on an island together.

She wondered if Kelsey had recognised her or had perhaps also struggled to remember their brief connection all those years ago, which is why she hadn’t admitted they’d met when Georgia asked. Surely Georgia hadn’t been that easy to forget? If only due to the circumstances of their meeting.

“Georgia. Georgia!” Austin threw a piece of bark at her that snapped her back to the present.

“...more Scottish than I’d expect. Was it hard learning an American accent for the show? What about that dude they keep trying to pair your character up with? Is he as big an arse as I think he is in real life? And what about the cliff-hanger last season? Are they really going to kill off your sister? I mean, your relationship with her is the best part of the story.”

“Whoa there, Havana. Take a breath.” Georgia jumped in to save Kelsey from the barrage of questions. “We have plenty of time here together and

I'm sure Kelsey will be happy to answer a few questions once she gets to know you. For now, remember what I said about respecting each other."

"Okay, okay, whatever."

Noah chuckled but Havana's glare immediately cut him off.

"You still haven't told us your deal." Clara pressed. She and Sebastian now lounged back against a tree trunk, holding hands.

Havana shrugged. "My parents made me come. They want me to 'learn about what's really important in life' and apparently that doesn't include hot showers or my mobile phone." She shot Georgia an aggrieved look.

Georgia didn't take the bait.

Hands on hips, she scanned the circle, trying to lock in all the details she'd learned so far and tuck them away for future analysis. If she was going to get through the next fourteen days safely with this random bunch of people, she needed to learn them quickly and learn them well. It was important not only to anticipate their environment but also how the group might bond and work together.

Her gaze landed on Kelsey, who now seemed to be fielding more whispered questions from Havana. Kelsey's presence was sure to make things interesting, for the group and for Georgia, assuming the woman remembered her. She had so many questions about what had happened to her after that night.

What had happened with her family? Had she been allowed to make her own decisions in the end? What had she really been thinking that night as she started wading into the water?

At least one question had been answered at last.

Georgia finally had a name.

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THE ISLAND BETWEEN US

BY WENDY HUDSON

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