For David

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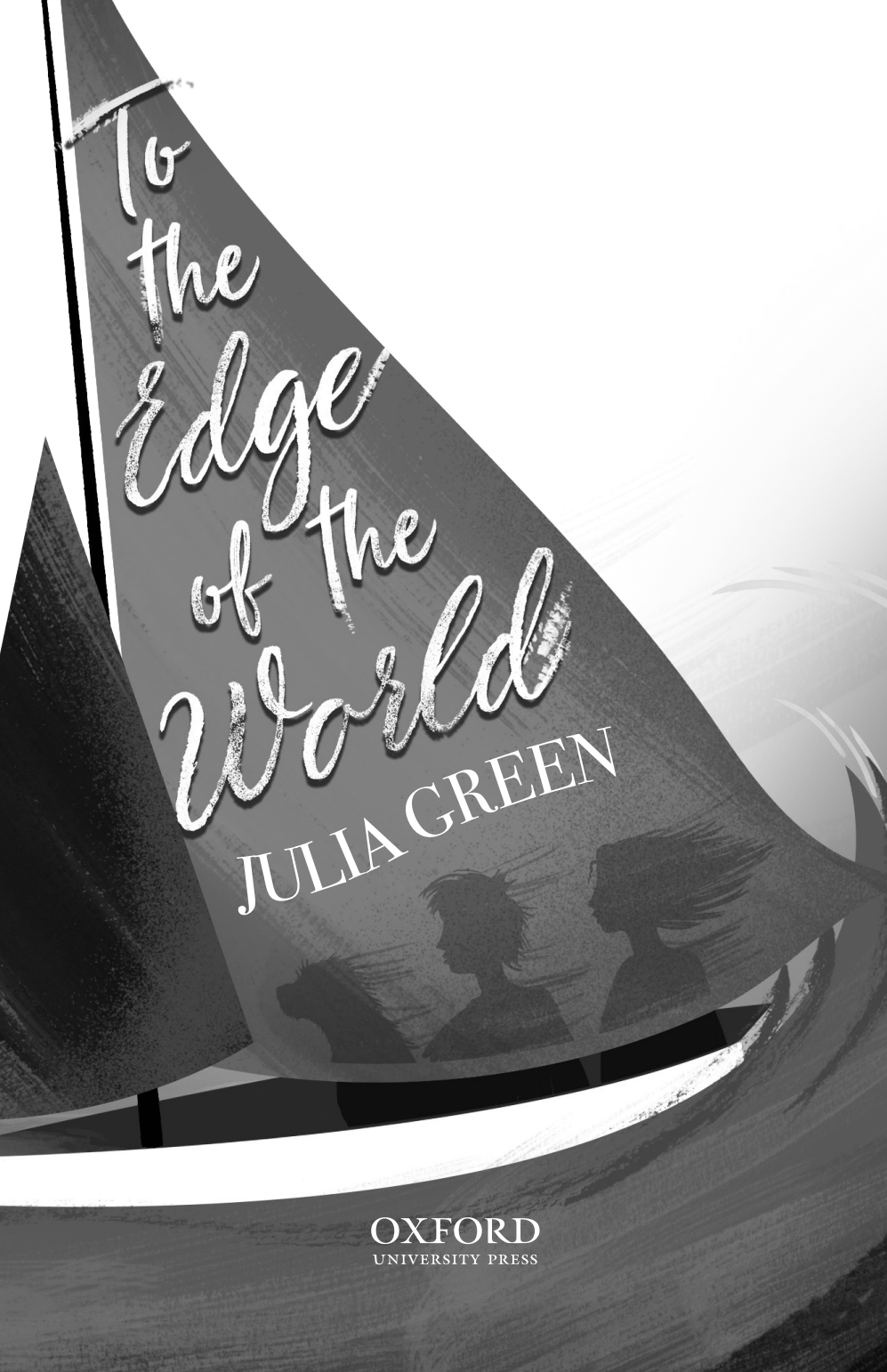
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Mara's House

I kept seeing her, after that. Sailing in the sheltered bay, or skipping stones at the beach, or working the tideline, picking up driftwood and treasures. By accident I discovered where she lived: a strange, small shack at the top of a beach on one of the remote tidal inlets on the west side of the island.

I was cycling back from Rob's house—I'd been helping him and his brother stack peat in the shed next to their house—and I went along a rutted farm track on the edge of a field that wound round next to the sea, just to explore. See where it went. I was still finding my way around the island, discovering new places.

Far from any other houses, this small croft house was more like a shed than a home, but it had a garden and a gate, and

stuff—driftwood, old fishing-net buoys, pebbles—arranged along the top of the wall. A wizened, windswept tree was hung with candle lanterns and strips of seaweed and bird feeders. I guessed straight away it was Mara's house. A bike was parked next to the wall, one of those old-fashioned bikes with a basket. A home-made trailer was hitched onto the back.

I didn't want Mara to think I was spying on her again. I turned back, towards the track near the sea. Something about how small the house looked, and how ramshackle, made me sad. I imagined how dark it would be inside with such tiny windows and the low roof. There were no neighbours near, nobody at all for a long way.

Perhaps Mara and her mum didn't have any friends. They seemed different from everyone else living here. Hiding away, like Grandpa said.

The track carried along next to the dunes, and then petered out. The sand was too deep to cycle through. I pushed the bike through a gap in the dunes, onto the beach itself.

The wind took my breath away. It came in gusts, whipped the loose dune sand into my face. A boat was scudding out in the bay, leaning into the wind. I recognized it—Mara's boat, with the dog on the bows. She seemed to be tugging down the mainsail;

the cloth flapped and billowed about her head, then tumbled down in a great bundle of canvas onto the deck as she let go of the rope. The dog barked and Mara waved and shouted something—she was too far out for me to hear what.

I ran closer. She was struggling to bring the boat in, the wind was so strong. The breaking waves close to the shore were swamping the boat. Before I could think about the danger, I kicked off my shoes and rolled up my jeans and waded in to help. I gasped. The water was freezing.

She threw the rope towards me, but it fell short. I took a deep breath, and waded deeper to catch hold of the rope, to help keep the boat more steady. She got the second sail down, and pulled up the centreboard. The dog jumped off and paddled to shore. I pulled on the rope, waded back to the beach, and the boat finally glided into the shallow water and she climbed out. I was shaking all over.

Mara laughed. 'That was fun!'

She was drenched, her hands red-raw with cold and salt. The boat was full of water.

It hadn't looked fun to me.

It had looked dangerous.

It *was* dangerous.

'Can you fetch the boat trailer?' Droplets of water flew from her hair as she moved, like when a wet dog shakes.

'Where from?'

'At the foot of the dunes, there.' She pointed.

I'd not noticed it, earlier. A rusty old trailer with two wheels, for pulling the boat. I pushed it down the beach for Mara and we lifted the dinghy onto the trailer. She was thin, and wiry, and stronger than she looked. We pulled the trailer up the beach, higher than the tideline, to keep it safe from the sea. She tied the boat rope around a big, flat stone to secure it.

Mara took off her life jacket and unzipped the top of her wet-suit. Underneath, she wore that same thin T-shirt, now soaked. She shivered. 'Come back for hot tea? My house is just up there.' She pointed.

I didn't tell her I already knew. Or that I didn't like tea. I followed her up the beach. I rolled down my wet jeans. My feet were blue with cold. I thought of how deep I'd waded in, to help her. What if I'd slipped?

My bike lay in the dunes where I'd abandoned it earlier.

'Yours?'

I nodded.

'Nice,' she said.

I wheeled it along the track next to her. Mara peeled her wetsuit down to her waist as we went along. She squeezed water out of her hair. Just looking at her made me cold all over again.

At the door, I hesitated. 'Will your mum be in?'

'Expect so. She's working. You'll be OK.'

I glanced behind, to check no one was watching. Who did I expect? Rob perhaps, or Euan. I didn't want them to know what I was doing.

Mara's mum was perched at a large wooden table under the window, a tray of paints spread out in front of her, next to a row of pebbles waiting to become seals and puffins. 'Hello,' she said, and carried on painting. So that was what Mara meant by *working*.

'I'll have a quick wash,' Mara said.

'Kettle's hot,' her mum said. I tried to remember the name Grandpa had told me. Ella? Emmy? Esme?

Mara took the kettle off the stove and carried it through to the bathroom. Weird.

'Sit.' Mara's mum pointed to an armchair covered with stuff.

Did she mean me? I put the pile of papers on the floor, and sat down. Django jumped up on my lap, all wet and smelly, but I let him stay. It was easier with him there. I

stroked his wiry head. Bit by bit I relaxed. The wind rattled the windows and the room smelled of peat smoke, and it began to feel more cosy. Mara sang in the bathroom as she washed and changed, and her mother carried on dipping her brush into the paints, colouring her pebble creatures. I smoothed Django's head.

'How did you find us?' Mara's mum asked. 'I saw you outside, earlier. Did someone tell you the way?' Her voice sounded strange, kind of rusty, as if she wasn't used to talking much.

'No—by chance—' I stumbled over my words—'I was at the farm, at Paible. My friend lives there. And I came along the track by the dunes. Then I saw Mara in the boat.'

Mara reappeared. Her cheeks were pink and she was wearing a thick blue jumper and jeans, now. She refilled the kettle and put it on the stove.

Of course. No electricity. No hot water. No shower. Duh.

Her mother reached across the table and picked up a brown envelope from a pile of papers. 'There's another letter come.' She held it out to Mara. 'You'd better read it.'

'Not now,' Mara said quickly. 'Jamie's here for tea.'

'I should go, really,' I said.

'But you've only just come!'

I felt silly.

Mara's mother picked up her paintbrush. She muttered something under her breath.

'Pardon?' I said. I glanced at Mara.

'Nothing,' Mara said quickly. 'Take no notice.'

'Go! Go!' Mara's mum stared right at me. 'We didn't ask you here.'

'Stop it, Mam,' Mara said. '*I* invited Jamie. I'll make us hot chocolate. Now shush.'

All I wanted was to escape.

I watched Mara spoon hot chocolate powder from a tin into two mugs. We waited for a pan of water to heat up. No one spoke.

Mara's mum had a smear of white paint on her cheek and more on her lip, where she'd been sucking the brush. She went back to her painting.

She seemed different when she next spoke to me. More normal. 'You just moved here?'

'Three months ago.'

'You like it?'

'Yes. Much better than where we lived before. I even like school, here.'

Mara gave her mum a funny look.

'Only it's the holidays, now,' I said.

'How long do they give you?' Mara asked. 'How many weeks of *freedom* are you graciously allowed?'

'I'm not sure. Six, or seven, I think.'

Mara's mum picked up a piece of driftwood, studied the twisted shape. 'What do you reckon? Seahorse? Dragon?'

'Seahorse, definitely,' Mara said. She stroked the wood. 'Head here, this is the tail.'

All I saw was a bit of old wood.

Her mum began to draw on a pad of paper: a quick pencil sketch of a seahorse. It was good, but there was something strange about it, too: the scribbled lines, the way the pencil pressed too deep into the paper.

Mara and I sipped our hot chocolate. No one said anything. I was desperate to get out of there.

The dog jumped down from my lap and went to stand close to Mara. He whined. She patted his head.

I finished my drink. 'I'll go now.'

Mara nodded. 'I'll be sailing tomorrow morning. Want to come? Early, when the tide's high.'

'Thanks. I'm not sure . . . I'll have to see . . . '

'Be here by seven-thirty,' Mara said.



Did I want to sail? I thought about it as I cycled home. Would Mum allow me, anyway? Or should I not tell her?

The bike bumped along the rough track, back the way I'd come earlier. The road went between fields of machair, recently mown. The air was full of that sweet hay smell, and birdsong–skylarks and lapwings. The land was so flat and low, I could see for miles–small white houses dotted about–crofts, each with a small bit of land, and newer houses, built close to the road. Sheets and towels flapped on washing lines. People stacked peat, and raked hay on the fields. A few cars whizzed along the main road, making their way to the ferry, most likely.

It was a relief to be moving along, with all that space and the huge sky above. The wind battered and buffeted me, but it came from the sea, behind, and so it blew me fast towards home.

I imagined sailing on Mara's boat.

All that dark water, underneath. Going deep down, down, down. The wind and the tide pulling the boat out, out, out, away from the shore . . .

And then I remembered watching Mara sailing across the bay

in the bright sunshine; how exciting and free and wonderful it had looked.

Could I do that? Even if I was scared?

Could I?