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For Jodi,
with gratitude, admiration
and a little bit of fear

PART ONE

TIMBERS

1

NICO

The ground leaped up to smack Nico in the face.

Air exploded from his lungs as he tumbled down a steep slope. The drone barely missed him, buzzing the grass before shooting out over a cliff choked by dark, swirling mists.

Nearly killed by my own quadcopter. Jeez.

Nico heard pounding feet. A wide-eyed Tyler Watson appeared at the top of the rise, sunglasses wedged into his old-school box haircut. A moment later Emma Fairington appeared beside him with the remote in her hands.

'Sorry, sorry!' Tyler gripped his head. 'I think the controller jammed or something!'

'Nothing jammed,' Emma snapped. 'You forgot how the switches work. Press *down* to go up, genius.'

'Who makes controls like that?' Tyler shot back.

A moment later the drone zoomed out of the fog, arcing high above the cloudy Pacific Northwest coastline. Nico

grunted in relief, pushing chestnut-brown hair out of his eyes. 'Good flying, Emma. I owe you the ice cream of your choice.'

Emma nodded in full agreement. 'Rocky Road. Duh.'

'See? Everything's fine.' Tyler heaved a sigh, then held up a finger. 'Now, the *important* thing is that Nico's drone is safe. So let's not waste time figuring out who almost killed who with what.'

'Right.' Nico rolled his eyes.

'Could've been anybody, really.' Tyler was short and skinny, with dark skin and an infectious smile. He peered down at Nico, who was sprawled only a body-length short of a *loooong* drop over the same fog-shrouded cliff. Now that he knew his friend was OK, Tyler could barely contain his laughter. 'You, uh . . . you all right there, Nico? That looked painful.'

Nico felt lucky to be in one piece. He liked to play things cool, but there was nothing cool about throwing yourself down a hill to avoid a streaking fifteen-kilo drone. Not with his dad upriver at a forestry station, and his brother away at college. Twelve was considered old enough to take care of yourself in the Holland family, but not if you ended up in the hospital.

'I'm great.' Nico spat grass from his teeth. 'But next time try not to kill me with my own invention.'

'*Your* invention?' Tyler snorted as he tromped down to lend Nico a hand. 'You'd never have got it out of the box without us.' His laughter escaped, and Nico joined in. That's just how it was with Tyler.

‘It was my fault too,’ Emma admitted as the boys walked uphill to join her. ‘I was giving Ty flight directions. We were trying to re-create that scene in *Rogue One* where X-wings attack the beach.’ Her blue eyes twinkled as she mimicked a dive-bombing action with her hands. Emma was always talking about movies, both her sci-fi favourites and the ones she meant to film some day. Nico usually found it entertaining, when he wasn’t in the line of fire.

‘We got *epic* footage,’ Tyler said. ‘Dude, your face as you ran for your life? Priceless.’

‘It’s really great!’ Emma waved her phone. ‘Wanna watch yourself flip over in slo-mo?’

‘Pass.’ Nico blinked to clear his head. ‘I’m seeing three phones right now.’

Emma’s face fell, but Nico bumped her shoulder with his to show he was kidding. She glanced into the fog behind them and shivered. ‘Let’s check the drone. Maybe we should fly it somewhere else.’

Tyler nodded quickly. ‘Any place away from this nightmare factory is fine by me.’

Nico understood. No one liked being this close to Still Cove. They jogged back across the grass to inspect the quadcopter.

They’d biked to this remote field – five miles north-east of Timbers, beyond even the old fort at Razor Point – because it was the flattest stretch along this area of Washington

shoreline, and the winds were milder there than anywhere else. Plus, it bordered no-man's land, which meant they'd be alone.

Nico glanced back at the mist. Every kid in Timbers had grown up on horror stories about Still Cove, a dead-end backwater ringed by cliffs and covered by perpetual fog. With sheer walls, jagged rocks and odd currents, the inlet was considered too dangerous for boats. And then there were the whispers about the Beast.

Those kept people away for sure. Tourists might chuckle about Skagit Sound's legendary sea monster, but the locals didn't. Too many boats had gone missing.

Yet Nico had wanted calm skies to test his quadcopter. He'd spent four weeks and six hundred quid building it. That was all his money in the world. He jumped as Emma put a hand on his shoulder. She didn't notice, staring grimly into the mists.

'I'll never get used to this place,' she said quietly.

To their right, the air above Skagit Sound was cloudy but normal. Gentle waves lapped a beach far below the bluffs. But dead ahead Still Cove was living up to its name – it was roofed cliff to cliff by a thick carpet of fog, like it occupied a separate ecosystem.

Emma shivered. 'Do you really think the Beast lives down there?'

'Don't talk about it,' Tyler squawked, his good humour evaporating. 'I'm trying not to think about how dumb we are

for coming this close. It's like ringing a dinner bell.'

Nico snorted. 'Dude, come on. There's no such thing as a sea monster.'

'That's what people who get eaten by sea monsters say.' Tyler slapped down his shades. 'Y'all heard what happened to the *Merry Trawler*, right? My sister said that boat drifted into the marina with bite marks *a metre wide*.'

Tyler's dad was the town harbourmaster. His mum was the head of the Lighthouse Preservation Society, and his older sister, Gabrielle, worked on fishing charters during the summer. Overall, the Watsons knew more about the Sound than any other family in Timbers, but Tyler hated the ocean.

'Your sister knows you'll believe anything she says,' Nico teased, but he couldn't help peeking at the mist. *You really can't see through it*. 'Let's get the quad airborne again,' he said, shaking off a chill. 'I want to try some inversions, maybe test its range.'

'Stop using words you don't understand,' Tyler sniped, and they both laughed.

An owl fluttered up over the cliff, landing with a screech and giving the drone a death stare. Emma clasped her hands together as the bird ruffled its feathers. 'Oh, he's *mad*. Is that one of the owls all the fuss is about?'

Nico's grin died. He kicked a pebble. 'I dunno. Maybe.'

Emma winced. 'Sorry, Nico. I forgot.'

A year ago, Nico's father had filed a complaint alleging that

logging activities of the Nantes Timber Company – the town's biggest employer – were threatening the nesting grounds for a species of endangered spotted owls. The court agreed and declared thousands of acres off-limits. The company's owner, Sylvain Nantes, had chosen to lay off dozens of workers as a result.

The firings hurt the entire town. Nico and his dad now got dirty looks everywhere they went. Warren Holland was impervious to the negativity, believing firmly in his job with the park service. Nico, however, felt every single glare.

'Well, I think they're beautiful,' Emma said as the owl flew away. 'They *should* be protected.' Nico nodded but remained silent.

'Let's see how the drone is holding up,' Tyler said to change the subject.

They were inspecting its undercarriage when a new sound broke the silence – a rumbling purr Nico felt deep in his stomach. He thought he recognized the noise, and it wasn't good news. A beat later, two blurs crested the rise across the field.

Four-wheelers. Shiny chrome ones. Nico's heart sank into his shoes.

Only a few kids in Timbers had their own ATVs.

The taller driver straightened in his seat and pointed. Engines roared as the four-wheelers raced directly towards Nico and his friends. They began circling, the drivers laughing and gesturing as they rolled to a halt. The tall one removed his helmet, revealing a sweaty tangle of glossy black hair.

Dark eyes regarded them.

Logan Nantes. Nico ran a hand over his face. 'Look at this!' Logan called out. 'The weirdos have a model aeroplane.'

Carson Brandt laughed, removing a helmet painted like a skull. He vaulted off the other ATV, farm-boy freckles crinkling on his sunburnt nose. Parker Masterson dismounted behind him, flashing a cruel sneer.

'It's not a *plane*.' Tyler took off his sunglasses, his eyes somehow narrowing and growing sullen at the same time. 'It's a Phantom 3 quadcopter. A *drone*, man. We built it.'

'Nobody cares,' Carson fired back. Tyler's head dropped.

Nico swallowed, scanning the newcomers for a friendly face. He found none.

Although, to be fair, Opal Walsh didn't look like she wanted to be there. She dismounted behind Logan and crossed her arms, her long black braid draping over one shoulder. Opal wore the expression of someone being forced to watch a show they didn't like.

Their eyes met, and something moved behind Opal's. A flicker of . . . unease? Sympathy? Embarrassment? It vanished as quickly as it came. She glanced away, making it clear Nico shouldn't expect any help from her.

I shared my pudding cups with you in reception, you dumb jerk. But Nico didn't have time to glare at his former friend. Logan was right in front of him.

'Hey, Mr Animal Planet,' Logan said, drawing laughter

from Carson and Parker. Opal scuffed her trainer in the dirt. Nico wondered what she was doing out with those meatheads, but that was a question for later. He had to focus on the predator in front of him.

Don't be a hero. In fact, grovel like a loser.

'Hey, Logan,' Nico said in a forced-casual voice. 'What's going on? Nice ride.'

'Of course it is,' Logan snapped. 'That's a Trailbreaker Extreme. It's the best.'

Nico nodded like he was impressed, which, being honest, he was. Logan's dad owned the timber company and was the richest man in town. They used to be richer, but Nico's father had put a dent into that, an unpleasant fact Nico felt sure was about to come up unpleasantly.

'Are you guys scouting for exotic birds?' Logan smiled darkly. 'Adding more precious species to the list?'

Nico held in a sigh. *It's never going away.*

'Look, Logan,' Nico began, 'I didn't—'

'Is this your drone?' Logan interrupted, pointing at the quadcopter.

Nico thought it was a ridiculous question, but he answered anyway. 'Yes.'

Logan bent down to give it a closer inspection. 'Pretty nice! Can I have a turn?'

Oh no. Oh no oh no oh no.

Emma caught Nico's eye and shook her head. Tyler's

mouth twisted like he'd bitten into a lemon. But there was nothing Nico could do.

'Sure. Yeah. Just . . . you know . . .'

Logan rose slowly, holding Nico's eye. 'Just . . . *what*, Nicolas?'

Nico swallowed. 'Just be careful. The controls take a little getting used to.'

Logan flashed perfect white teeth. 'Don't worry, I can handle it.' He removed his driving gloves and held out a hand. Reluctantly, Nico passed him the remote. Everyone watched as Logan launched the quadcopter straight up into the air. A genuine smile broke out on his face as he guided it round the field in a huge circle, steering it back to hover over their heads. 'This *is* pretty cool, Nico.'

Nico released a pent-up breath. Maybe Logan honestly just wanted to fly the drone.

'I'm curious though,' Logan said, rolling his shoulders. 'Are drones as fast as owls?'

Before Nico could respond, Logan jabbed the controller. The drone sped straight for the fog above Still Cove.

'Wait!' Nico lunged for the remote, but Logan shoved him back at Carson, who seized his arms. Parker stared down Emma and Tyler. Helpless, Nico watched his drone disappear into the eddying mists.

'Who knows, Holland?' Logan dropped the controller and kicked it away. 'Maybe Still Cove is a protected

breeding ground for crappy machines.'

Nico scrambled after the remote as Logan strolled to his ATV. Nico glanced over his shoulder and found Opal watching him, her expression unreadable. But he didn't have time to consider it. He scooped up the controller and frantically tried to manoeuvre his drone back into the sky.

Laughter echoed as the riders mounted, fired their engines and rode off. Nico desperately worked the switches, but minutes passed and nothing appeared. Emma sniffed.

Tyler put a hand on Nico's shoulder. 'So sorry, man,' he said quietly. 'It must've dropped out of range. Those guys are the biggest jerks in the world.'

Nico shook his head, anger and denial balling in his chest like melted chewing gum. 'No. It's a Phantom! They float. It'll come back up once I reconnect.' But repeated jabs on the remote had no effect.

Emma wiped her eyes. 'Why were they out here, anyway? I was sure we'd be alone.'

'They ride those stupid things everywhere,' Tyler muttered. 'Logan loves looking like a tough guy.'

Nico refused to admit defeat. He rose and stomped towards the fog-covered cliff. 'The problem is distance. I need to get closer. Then I'll catch the signal and everything will be fine.'

'Dude!' Tyler's hand rose in a gesture of hopelessness. 'That's Still Cove down there. We can't even see the water. It's gone, man. There's no way.'