Eldest. Youngest.
And middler —
worse luck.

THE MIDDLER

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nosy crow

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For Jacqui C.

PROLOGUE



Our eldest, Jed, got born first out of all of us.

Our youngest, Trig – he got born four years later.

And me, Maggie, I was in-between. The middler, worse luck.

MONDAY
1 SEPTEMBER



CHAPTER 1



I took my summer diary out of my drawer. Nearly all the sheets of paper matched. On the very last page I'd drawn a picture of a red admiral. It had black wings and bright red stripes, just like the ones we'd seen up at the butterfly fields.

I straightened the yellow wool bow that held it all together and ran my hands over the front to flatten it down. I wouldn't win Best Diary – an eldest always wins that – but maybe I could get runner-up.

I carried it downstairs.

"You ready, Mags?" Trig had the front door open and was leaning right out of it, both hands gripping the door frame. His diary was on the doormat, tied up with garden string. "We should've left already. Shouldn't we, Dad? We should've left."

"Oh, Maggie." Dad shook his head at my legs. "We really need to do something about that uniform. It's even shorter than it was before the holidays."

He yanked at the bottom of my dress. It shrugged back up again.

"Jed! Jed! Jed!" Trig was turning red with all his shouting.

"Just a minute!" Jed's voice echoed down the stairs.

Mum came out of the kitchen, booted up for a day in the fields. "Leave without him," she said. "It's his own fault if he's late."

"C'mon, Maggie." Trig picked up his diary but I wasn't going anywhere till Jed was with us.

Eventually he appeared, shirt hanging out and jam on his chin.

"Did you remember your summer diary?" said Trig.

"S'in here." Jed turned round and patted his back pocket. His messy, folded pages flapped out of the top.

Dad went to wipe the jam off Jed's face, but he ducked under his arm and we all ran through the door into the warm September air.

Trig was hopeless at running. He held his diary right out in front of him all the way to school. Me and Jed had to stop at every corner for him to catch up.



"*Good morning, Mrs Zimmerman;*
Good morning, Mr Temple;
Good morning, Miss Conteh;
Good morning, Mr Webster;
Good morning, EVERYONE."

The school hall smelled like the beginning of term. Wood oil and scouring powder.

"Smells weird. Doesn't it, Maggie? Doesn't it, Jed?

Smells weird." Trig fidgeted and scrunched up his nose.

"Shhh," I said.

Lindi Chowdhry was in front of us, all cross-legged and straight-backed and long-haired. Her dress had a new frill sewn round the hem. Jed scooted forwards so he was sitting closer to her.

Mrs Zimmerman clasped her hands together in front of her waist. "Mr Webster has kindly spent part of his summer sanding and oiling our hall floor. Aren't we lucky?"

I spread out my fingers and pressed my palms on to the smooth wood. Must've taken him ages.

"Heads down, please, for the morning chant."

"*Our eldests are heroes.*
Our eldests are special.
Our eldests are brave.

Shame upon any who holds back an eldest
And shame upon their kin.
Most of all,
Shame upon the wanderers.

Let peace settle over the Quiet War,
Truly and forever."

Mrs Zimmerman lifted her head, tilted it to one side, and smiled. "Welcome back to Fennis Wick School,

everyone. I hope you enjoyed your break."

We bit at our nails and gazed up at the empty walls while she said all the things that head teachers have to say at the beginning of term.

"As well as sanding the floorboards, Mr Webster has also dug over the toilets for us. Please be sure to use the new ones and leave the old ones to compost. He's left everything very clearly signposted."

We clapped for Mr Webster.

"Miss Conteh has returned to us after having her baby – a little boy, called Michael. An eldest. We're hoping his dad might pop in with him one lunchtime."

We clapped for Miss Conteh.

"Two of our pupils, Sally Owens and Deb Merino – both eldests, of course – turned fourteen over the summer and have gone to camp."

We clapped for Sally Owens.

We clapped for Deb Merino.

"And two more of our eldests are heading off for camp this very Saturday – Jed Cruise and Lindi Chowdhry."

Jed leaned in and nudged shoulders with Lindi.

My hands were getting fed up with all the clapping.

"And just before we return to our classes, we have a special guest here today with some important news." Mrs Zimmerman held out an arm towards the entrance of the hall.

No one came out.

"Er … *we have a special guest here with some important news*," she said again, louder this time.

No one came out.

Mr Temple cleared his throat. He nodded towards the window.

Mayor Anderson was sitting on the wall in the littlests' outdoor play area, feet resting on a go-fast-kart and two hands cupped round an enormous butty. Cheese, by the look of it. She finished up chewing, swallowed her mouthful, and gave us a wave.

A few of us waved back.

Mrs Zimmerman took a deep breath in. "Would you be so kind as to let the mayor know we're ready for her, Mr Temple?"



"O-K." Mayor Anderson stood in the middle of Mr Webster's newly oiled floor, her hair drawn back in a straggly ponytail. "I'm not going to beat around the bush and do all that *what have you learned over the summer* rubbish. I'll leave that to your teachers, eh?" She gave us a wink and got a few sniggers back from the audience.

Mrs Zimmerman closed her eyes.

"But what I am going to do," the mayor went on, "is tell you we've heard reports of wanderers five miles south of the town boundary."

Wanderers?

The sniggering stopped.

Mrs Zimmerman opened her eyes.

A shiver crept across my shoulders.

"Yep." Mayor Anderson nodded. "Yesterday I was up at the city. Met with some colleagues. It's been a while since we had wanderers in our area but their numbers appear to be increasing." She took a slow moment to look from one side of the hall to the other, catching as many of our eyes as she could.

"So," she carried on, "why do we not want wanderers nearby? Anyone?"

Trig stuck his arm up as high as he could get it. Pushed it even higher with his other hand. Mayor Anderson couldn't miss him.

"Go on then – tell us, Trig."

"They're … er…" Trig looked up to the ceiling, the way you do when you're trying hard to remember something. "*Dirty*, *dangerous* and … *deceitful*."

"Dirty. Dangerous. Deceitful." Mayor Anderson boomed the words back at us, counting them off on her fingers. "And to think," she said, "that they're supposed to be on our side in this war."

She clasped her hands behind her and swayed backwards and forwards with her feet stopped still. "Our country is one of the few places – perhaps even the *only* place – that has kept the enemy at bay. Why is that, do you think?"

Trig stuck his hand up again.

"Our geography has helped, for sure." Mayor Anderson nodded at Trig, like he'd given her the answer even though he hadn't. "Along with our land's wonderful capacity for self-sufficiency." She nodded

some more. "But the *real* reason our country survives is *us.* Our very selves." She held her arms wide. "We are an adaptable people. Stoic. Brave. We understand the importance of hard work and sacrifice for a greater good. We have a long history of wartime resilience. It's in our blood. And the bravest of us all, of course, are our eldests."

She looked at Jed and Lindy. They nudged shoulders again.

"At camp," said Mayor Anderson, "our eldests join the Quiet War. They fight valiantly. They fight heroically. They fight so that we, back home, can remain safe. My one and only child, Caroline, went to camp ten years ago this very month. I couldn't be more proud."

We clapped for Caroline.

The mayor held up a hand.

"But," she said, "the wanderers do not send their eldests to camp." She did a slow shake of her head. "They are protected from the enemy by our brave heroes – but they selfishly keep their own eldests close. They disobey Andrew Solsbury's edict that decrees we must ALL send our eldests to camp. They deny their families the opportunity to live in a town in a civilised manner, and they deny their eldests the opportunity to fight for their country. They are dirty, dangerous and deceitful. Do we want their kind anywhere near us, here in Fennis Wick?"

"No, Mayor Anderson." We shook our heads.

"And more than that —" the mayor leaned in towards us and lowered her voice to a whisper — "much more than that – you're aware of the horror wreaked by wanderers the last time they ventured close to Fennis Wick. My own sister was among the casualties."

She dropped her eyes to the floor.

A littlest at the front began to cry.

Trig's knees started jiggling.

"So." The mayor took a deep breath and lifted her head. "What can we do to keep ourselves safe? What's the most important rule of all?"

"Never go beyond the boundary!" Trig burst out the answer.

"Abso-bloomin-lutely, Trig Cruise. *Never go beyond the boundary*. Follow that rule and you'll be safe from wanderers. Remember: dirty, dangerous, deceitful. All right?"

"Yes, Mayor Anderson," we nodded.

She smiled. One of those smiles where the sides of your mouth go down instead of up.

"So how about we sing the boundary song to finish?" Mayor Anderson rubbed her hands together. "Mr Temple? Would you accompany us on the old piano? Still working, is it?"

Mr Temple lifted the lid of the piano. He interlaced his fingers and turned them inside out. The clicking echoed all around the hall.

"Oh – a quick reminder before we start singing."

Mayor Anderson wasn't smiling any more. She ran her tongue across the front of her teeth. "Going beyond a town boundary isn't only a risk to yourself – it puts the whole of Fennis Wick in danger. Your friends, your family, your neighbours. And anyone who puts Fennis Wick in danger could be subject to a very serious punishment indeed. So let's keep everyone safe, eh? Now, carry on, Mr Temple."

The crying littlest cried even louder.



Back in the classroom Miss Conteh talked about the time before the Quiet War and what summer holidays were like then. She said people used to go to other countries on aeroplanes. I doodled a picture of an aeroplane in the bottom corner of my slate. Licked my finger and rubbed it off.

Sometimes I wondered if teachers didn't just make stuff up.

After break Miss Conteh asked for our summer diaries. She walked between the desks, collecting them in and piling them up in her arms.

"I'll be reading through these this afternoon," she said, "and tomorrow I'll announce the winners."

I passed her mine, taking care to keep the bow straight.

"Thank you, Maddie."

Maddie?

Lindi laughed. "It's *Maggie*, Miss Conteh, not Maddie."

"Oh, of course it is. Sorry, Maggie, the baby had me up four times last night."

She put my diary on the pile, then stuck six more right on top of it, squashing the bow.

CHAPTER 2



After school we changed out of our uniforms and went up to the cemetery, right out near the hawthorn boundary. Hunting for wanderers.

It was Jed's idea.

"Come on," he called down. "Who's coming up next?"

He was balanced in the tallest tree, legs dappled by the leaves and the sun. Looked like he was wearing camouflage. The branches rippled in the heat.

Me and Trig and Lindi all squinted up.

"Look." Jed pointed south, past the red-berried hawthorn. Grandad Cruise's watch glinted on his wrist. "I can see for miles."

My heart *kerdunk-kerdunk-kerdunked* under my T-shirt.

"Can you see any wanderers?" Trig shaded his eyes with both hands.

"Course not, not yet," said Jed. "We've got to watch and wait."

He was really high. My stomach swirled just looking at him.

"D'you think the mayor'll give us a reward?" I