THE FOREVERS

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1

Mae expected to feel more the first time she saw a dead body.

She expected blind panic. Breathlessness. Dark clouds and thunder.

Instead gentle waves rolled in beneath a sky so bright she raised a hand to dull it. The world turned like it didn't know, like it didn't care.

She'd skipped English and crossed the hockey pitch to the woodland beyond, found the cliff edge and followed the track down to the beach.

It used to be her place, where she went to forget.

She glanced back and saw him following.

Hugo Prince. Too tall and broad. Too shiny. Too everything.

'We need to talk about last night.' He flashed a practised smile, but when he saw he staggered back, the golden tan drained from his face.

'What is it? Is that –' He tried to grab her arm but she shrugged him off.

'Go and get someone,' she said. Too calm, that's what Hugo would later tell the policeman. Mae was too calm.

He went to speak but she cut him off. 'You really want

people to know why you followed me down here?'

She watched the shame fill his eyes.

'Say you heard me screaming. You came to help.'

'Listen, Mae . . .'

She hated that he knew her name, that he looked at her at all. He existed in an alternate dimension where being good at sport meant you were good. Where girls laughed at your crappy jokes, played with their hair and pouted their way onto your arm.

'Just go. Run.' She raised her voice and snapped him from it.

He broke into a sprint, climbing higher, sending birds from the treetops as he burned through the woodland.

The dead girl lay face down, ashen hair fanned out like she'd been posed. Some kind of terrible masterpiece Mae knew she'd never forget.

She found the girl's bag, inside was a purse. Mae pulled out the notes and stuffed them into her pocket.

Waves crossed and broke, a thousand blues pared back to white as she took a deep breath and turned her.

Abi Manton's eyes were as empty as her soul.

On her wrist Mae saw the tattoo creeping from behind Abi's gold wristwatch.

Dark scrawl over blue veins.

Forever

Mae looked down at her own wrist and saw that same word, like they were two parts of the same whole.

The third body in a month.

James Wilson and Melissa Rowen, they'd been found together, hanging from the oak tree by the school gates.

Mr Silver talked about suicide like it was contagious, some kind of pollutant that smoked through impressionable minds, replacing hope with despair. He told them inner strength was a choice, during the kinds of assemblies where teachers dabbed at their eyes and shook their heads in disbelief.

All the while Mae and the others exchanged wary glances.

They all knew it would come.

They all knew it was just the beginning.

2

They said when the news broke Mae walked out into the garden and looked to the sky like it was on fire.

Seven years old, first day of summer, her worries limited to mastering cursive, number bonds and what to wear to Abi Manton's party.

It seemed like a hundred years back, not ten.

Sometimes she would close her eyes and try to remember before, when minutes and hours dripped into an endless pool of future and history. But then she thought maybe life began and ended the night her parents stood side by side in front of the television as BREAKING NEWS edged out the movie they'd been watching.

She felt her father turn and stare at her.

He held her mother's hand tightly, their fingers interlinked.

They didn't tell her, not till later, but hearing talk of space, she dropped her book to the floor and walked outside.

She stood barefoot on the grass and faced the moon as fireflies sparked from the heathland behind.

Either side the neighbours did the same.

Stan and Mary. Luke and Lydia.

And Abi.

They stood in a line separated by low picket fences and watched the dusk air like Selena wasn't a billion miles from them. It didn't feel like the end then, more like a phenomenon, a miracle born from impossible fate, odds so spectacularly long they could only have been preordained.

'Are we going to die?' Abi said.

'No,' Mae said.

Abi reached through the fence.

Mae took her hand.

Over the coming days the newspapers bulged with expert opinion, doomsday preachers and armchair scientists. The man who first saw it, he worked for NASA and his name was Juan Martin Morales. He was the person who stood in front of the microphones, dabbed sweat from his forehead and rubbed at three-day stubble while a selection of carefully vetted journalists lobbed questions at him.

Morales named it Selena.

Its real name was Asteroid 8050XF11.

They would later learn Selena was the name of his daughter, and that she'd died at the age of three, from a disease so secular Morales ignored all reference to last judgement and laid out simple fact.

If this was ever going to happen, we'd always hoped to spot it early enough to do something about it.

We have a decade to save our planet.

That last sentence would echo through Mae's childhood and beyond. She would see it graffitied on the bus stop each

morning as she walked to school. They would play it on the radio, on the television, and print it on the cover of a thousand magazines.

Though they looked at time differently, it went on, unknowing, uncaring. Seasons changed, sun to snow, trees shed leaves as school years ended and began.

Mae watched the trouble from her small town, so far from the cities it was like the rioting faces belonged to another species. Each night the news was painted with rage, fear and faith.

On the morning of Mae's tenth birthday she huddled on the sofa, her hand on her mother's growing stomach. The dawn chorus sang as they switched on the television and watched a rocket break the sky but nothing more.

Morales became the face of a world, the combined hope of every nation. After each attempt at salvation he would take to the podium and field questions like an ailing politician, while most would read the failure in his tired eyes. He'd scratch his beard, long and peppered with grey now, and he'd say Selena would be easier to tackle the nearer she came.

And come she did.

She blazed a relentless trail, shrugging off solar storms and recoil. Millions of miles away but her impact was felt each day in countless ways. In science Mae would learn about gravity tractors and impactor probes, in maths it was relative velocity and the necessary angle of deflection. She learned they would need to slow Selena by a centimetre per second to send her off course. Each night Mae would hold her thumb and forefinger a little apart.

A centimetre is almost nothing, she would say, as her father stood by the window and watched the stars like they were blinking out before his eyes.

As the world reeled from a new kind of terror, Morales and his team sent up the Saviour 3 spacecraft in another attempt to change their fate.

Mae went into London to watch the launch on the large screen by Tower Bridge. In a crowd of a million her grandmother gripped her arm tightly as fireworks lit the Thames and weary men peddled glowsticks and commemorative T-shirts. Her sister slept through it all, at peace in her pram, too young to breathe the panic in their fleeting air.

The carnival lasted two weeks.

And then Morales took to the world stage and once more shook his head.

Before then Mae had never seen her grandmother cry.

Most nights Mae would lie on the beach with Abi and Felix and watch the night sky in all its perfect, endless glory. She wondered about faith and its limitations, its blindness to everything she knew and everything she hoped for.

Lauda finem, the Sacred Heart school motto.

Praise to the end.

In English Mae stared at the whiteboard and the bold lettering:

If you take away consequence, if you can do anything, right any wrong, however slight, how would you spend your final days?

The topic was ethics. The debate turned so fierce Mr Norton had to hold Liam Carter and Sullivan Reed apart.

It was a question that Mae dwelled on. It was the answer that kept her awake at night. Though it would take until the failure of Saviour 9 before she allowed herself to face up to the overriding, overwhelming facts.

She was seventeen years old.

She would die in one month.

3

Welcome to Wonderful West-on-Sea.

The sign swung gently in the breeze, hinges creaking as Mae stood beside it and watched a storm cloud edge in.

Rusting fishing boats bobbed in a marina that opened to a vista of girls turning cartwheels on the beach, the falling sun blinding through the V of their legs.

When the heavens opened they screamed and lay back on the sand, arced like angels as rain pinned them down.

They hadn't yet heard.

Another dead girl.

Another reminder of paradise lost.

In the small police station Mae took a seat opposite Beau Walters. His uniform swamped him so totally he looked like a child dressing up in his father's clothes.

He placed an old tape recorder on the desk and hit record with a shaking hand.

'Was Abi Manton depressed?'

Mae picked dark varnish from her nails. 'Depression is the inability to construct a future. Seeing as we have no future, we're an army of depressives, Beau.'

He cleared his throat. 'It's Sergeant Walters now . . . I'm acting . . . till my dad comes back from the city.'

She glanced up at the photograph on the wall, Beau's father, the chief constable, glared back.

'We'll stop Selena.' He'd been to the school and spoken to them like the badge qualified him to predict their fate, like he hadn't been sitting where they were a few short years ago.

That hope, that belief. Mae guessed it was what Morales told people to keep from total social breakdown.

This was a close call.

Life had stalled, but this was not the end.

This was a time for self-reflection.

'What were you doing in the woods with Hugo Prince?'

'You want me to draw you a picture?'

He slid a pencil and paper across the desk, calling her bluff.

She got to work, then slid it back.

He glanced down once, then again. 'That's disgusting.'

Three deaths in a month.

On the desk a stack of newspapers told of skyrocketing suicide rates. Mae reasoned people wanted to take hold of their own mortality. In RE Miss Lock said it was cowardly, as if black and white were the only shades left. And spoke of being stuck in purgatory, like they weren't already. Her faith was equal parts admirable and confusing, since Mae caught her in the supply cupboard with Mr Hobbs, the caretaker.

'I need you to tell me what you saw.'

Rain drummed on the roof. 'There was blood by her head. Her foot was twisted. Her bag lay on the left.' She spoke without emotion, like she was reading from a schoolbook.

'You didn't see anyone else there?'

'No.'

'Footprints?'

'The tide.'

He nodded like he'd already thought of that. 'When was the last time you spoke to her?'

Mae shrugged, though remembered Abi's sweet sixteen. Her father hired a yacht, seventy feet of gleaming white. The invitation had been placed in her locker, a long time after Abi left her behind. Mae put on a dress, headed down to the marina, only to see the boat leaving without her. Abi stood on the deck, raised a hand and mouthed, *Sorry*, like it was accidental Mae's invite had the wrong time printed on it.

'Hugo said he heard you scream and came to help. I'm not sure I believe him.'

'Why not?'

'I can't imagine you screaming.'

An old fan turned the close summer air.

'You and Hugo . . . it doesn't make sense to me. I see him with Hunter Silver, the headmaster's daughter. And she's . . . I don't want to say the opposite of you, but . . . she's the opposite of you.'

'Maybe he wanted to slum it. Maybe I'll do things Hunter won't. Or maybe Hugo just heard a damsel in distress.'

Out the window the rain stopped as suddenly as it began.

Dusk fell.

Bruised sky over purple water.

She caught her reflection, dark hair and light eyes, a body that clung hard to a childhood she'd never known.

'She called you.' He held up a clear bag, inside was Abi's phone. 'Three times last night.'

'Talk to Hunter, she knows . . . knew Abi better.' The thought of the headmaster's heavenly daughter being dragged to the police station almost made her smile.

'Tell me about Abi.'

Mae took a cigarette from her bag and gripped it between her teeth. 'She was a bitch.'

He snatched it from her. 'Please, Mae. The Mantons . . . they're broken.'

She thought of Abi's parents, felt her jaw tighten as she stared at the desk and finally talked. Abi used to live in the house next door. Her father built shelters, panic rooms, bunkers. The failure of Saviour 8 made him rich overnight as people scrambled for the illusion of safety. The Mantons moved to an Ocean Drive beach house and Abi jumped several rungs up the social ladder. Her hair, her clothes, the parties she held.

'So you're saying she was popular.'

'She was bland and beautiful and hateful. So, yeah, Abi was popular.'

Mae watched a fishing boat carve waves.

'Abi's boyfriend is . . .' he checked his notes, 'Theodore Sandford. The boy from the choir. I saw him sing last autumn at St Cecelia. That voice . . .' He tapped his pen on the desk like he was lost in the memory. 'I forget where the song is from –'

'*The Marriage of Figaro*.'

He raised an eyebrow, she turned back to her nails.

'Abi would have left before the dance. The Final – morbid name. Are you going?'

'Yeah, I'm spending my last night at a school dance.'

'Abi was wearing a ring. A purity ring. And Theodore wears a matching one.'

'Her faith was pure,' Mae said, fighting a yawn.

'You know you can talk to the school counsellor,' he said.

Mae thought of Counsellor Jane and her taut church smile, imploring eyes and beige trouser suits.

And how does that make you feel?

'She's not a real counsellor. She records the conversations, and if she's worried then she sends them to someone qualified.'

'Resources are stretched.'

'No kidding,' she said, glancing at his badge.

Her mind ran to his father, the kind of man who looked cold to the touch, who bled judgement from his unforgiving eyes.

'Hugo . . . he said the popular have targets on their backs now. What does that mean?'

Mae looked down at her worn sandals. 'They're trophies. The kid that gets bullied can get his revenge. The hot girl that treated the boy like dirt, he can get even. What's the worst that can happen? Maybe it'll all be over long before punishment is served.'

'It's not the end, Mae.'

'The way things are going, maybe we should all pray that it is.'

He looked sad then, like she'd told him a truth too cruel.

'One last question. It's just a formality. Where were you last night, Mae?'

She swallowed.

And then the windows begin to rattle as the ground shook beneath her feet.

4

Mae followed him out into the street.

The first rumble was slight.

The second stopped the town dead.

She crouched low and pressed a hand to the road, the trees across barely swayed, the air eerily calm.

She imagined the clouds parting right then, catching them all out unawares.

A streak of red and yellow, a white flash bright enough to blind.

And then the roar.

Thermonuclear.

The Earth would split apart. Nothing would survive.

She'd watched a documentary that told her how she might die. Sat alone in the living room, her sister and grandmother asleep upstairs, her sweatshirt pulled over her knees as she fought the shiver, not knowing if it was the cold or the fear. CGI impact depicted boiling oceans and cosmic radiation, too fast to fear. The kind of event they could trace back sixty-five million years, like beginning and end were one and the same.

Mrs Abbott came out of the hairdressers', the foils still in her hair. She looked at the sky, then at the ground. 'Just a tremor.'

Dog walkers moved on, beach girls lit a fire as a plane crossed their sky, the air thick despite the coruscation of rainwater on the road.

Mae stood in the haloed shadow of St Cecelia and stared up at the clock tower, at the creeping minute hand.

A board sat outside the newsagent's, a bold red *31* splashed across it.

Mae could recall a time when it declared one thousand, the day Mitch Travers placed it out with a smile on his face. Maybe he thought the countdown would be stopped long before it took on meaning.

Beside was West Video, where Mae worked shifts alternating between flipping through magazines and pointing prescient summer people towards the ARMAGEDDON display, where they could get their fix of last-gasp salvation against a banging score.

She crossed the street towards the rambling rectory as an old Vauxhall pulled onto the driveway.

'Did you feel it?' Mrs Baxter said, climbing out. 'Maybe Edmund Tully was right.'

Mae remembered the day the old vicar, Edmund Tully, lost his faith and his mind in spectacular style.

He had been reading a passage:

LUKE 21.11: THERE WILL BE EARTHQUAKES, AND IN VARIOUS PLACES FAMINES AND PESTILENCES. AND THERE WILL BE TERRORS AND GREAT SIGNS FROM HEAVEN.

He'd stopped still and looked to the roof of the old church like it was about to fall in. And then he'd stripped naked and sprinted down the aisle as parents covered their children's

eyes and elderly ladies gasped in horror. Mae ran outside with the others and watched Edmund baptise himself in the frigid sea, then kneel on the beach and beg to be spared. The stuff of West legend, a decent payback for being dragged to church each Sunday for a decade.

'Global warming, Mae. It's like we've broken our world.'

Mae opened the boot and grabbed a shopping bag.

'Pineapple this week, gone like it never was.'

'I don't remember what it tastes like,' Mae said.

'Is it true what they're saying?'

'Abi Manton?'

'Lord.' Mrs Baxter wore emotion like a badge. 'Three children.'

Mae opened the garage and fumbled for the light switch.

The boxes were stacked. Crates of food rose floor to ceiling, packets of rice, cereal, tins of soup and vegetables. Freezer chests lined the far wall.

'I thought greed was a sin,' Mae said.

'He takes it to the shelter in Newport.'

They both turned as an ambulance crawled up the hill, no lights flashing. Mrs Baxter dipped her head.

Mae walked out onto the street as it passed, her faced mirrored in the black glass. She thought of Abi in there, zipped into a bag.

'Jesus,' Mrs Baxter whispered. 'She was seventeen. There'll be nothing left to save. Nothing at all.'

Inside Mae heard the television in the lounge. BBC News rolled every hour of the day in the Reverend Baxter's house.

It had been a year since Felix's father last spoke to his son. A

year of awkwardly passing each other in the hallway, of dinners eaten in different rooms and eye contact avoided at all costs.

She climbed the creaking spiral staircase and found him by the window, his forehead pressed to the glass. He stood an angular six five, wore glasses too large for his face, and was the kind of skinny that had old ladies trying to feed him after Sunday service.

'It's not true, is it?' he said. 'Tell me it isn't true.'

She nodded once.

'Jesus, Mae. What the hell is going on in this town?'

A group had gathered by the church. She recognised some of Abi's friends huddled together as their parents stared off towards the cliffs, towards the blue flashing lights of an idling police car, the yellow tape, the white tent.

'She jumped? That's what I heard. But then Sullivan said she was pushed. And Ian said . . .' He looked down at her, eyes as dark as his skin. 'Ian said you found her.' He spoke softly.

She wondered where they'd take Abi; if they'd lay her on a cold metal table, slice her open and see there was nothing inside.

'He also said you were with Hugo Prince. Don't tell me you're fu—'

'Ugh.'

'Sleeping with the enemy. You know he hangs around with Liam Carter. And you know Liam goes out with –'

'Candice Harper.'

'And she should be going out with –'

'Felix Baxter. But he's too much of a coward to talk to her.'

'I'm biding my time.'

'Because we have so much of it.'

Sea breeze stirred the curtains as they watched Sergeant Walters arrive at the church, head down as he spoke choice words to the group. Mae guessed he confirmed it, because one of the mothers crumpled as her husband ran to prop her up.

'People are falling apart,' Felix said.

'Like they were whole to begin with.'

'What happened to Forever?' He looked down at the solitary *F* on his wrist.

'You cried before I could –'

'You said stick and poke, nothing about actual needles. And they weren't tears, I told you. The ink won't take. My skin is too dark, and too pure for it.'

'That's not a thing.'

'My father's the goddam Reverend. That practically makes me an angel.'

Mae grabbed a copy of *Playboy* from beneath the bed and held it up. 'Angelic.'

'I just read the articles. Not much else I can do with them. I can't . . . I can't love myself any more.'

'I'm sorry . . . what?'

She followed his eye and there it was, right above his bed. His father's latest attempt to capture his son's lost soul. A small, wooden crucifix.

'I came home from school and saw it. He's fixed it with glue. My father is a sadist.' He reached for a small bottle, shook out a pill and swallowed it dry.

Mae didn't know exactly what was in them, just that Felix took one every night, and that one pill was powerful enough to keep him from sleeping.

The theory was as simple as it was stupid. Time was running out, Felix didn't want to waste a single moment of it.

He snatched the magazine from her and looked longingly at Vanna White. ''87 was a fine vintage.'

'Bathroom?'

'He's put Mother Teresa above the toilet.'

Mae shrugged. 'She's bound to have seen worse on her travels. Lepers and –'

Felix dropped the magazine. 'What if there's a murderer in town? What if he comes for me next? I can't die a virgin, Mae. That'd be the real tragedy.'

'What makes you think it's a he?'

'Ninety-six per cent of murderers are male.'

'Boys make everything worse.' She reached for a half-empty bag of popcorn. 'So if she didn't jump, then it was a man.'

'Likely her boyfriend. It's usually the husband or the boyfriend.'

'Maybe if her boyfriend wasn't Theodore Sandford. I think he might be an actual saint.'

Felix picked up a pencil and chewed the top. 'Maybe it was a tourist. Some guy chased her through the woods. She lost her footing. His was the last face she saw as she fell. Maybe the waves stole her screams so no one heard.' His eyes widened in fear.

Mae picked up a paperback lying on the carpet.

True Crime: A history of unsolved murders.

'And maybe you should lay off these for a while,' she said. 'Your brain is fried. Can you actually live without sleep?'

'Eleven days – that's the record. But don't worry, I sleep for forty-five minutes each afternoon, that's just enough to keep

me from expiring.' He walked over to the large blackboard fixed to the far wall and began to write:

Theodore Sandford – boyfriend. Possible saint.

'You're a cop now?'

'More of a cop than *Sergeant* Walters. You know there'd be anarchy if his father wasn't coming back.'

Felix checked his watch then switched on the television.

Morales stood before a dozen microphones as cameras flashed in his eyes. He raised a quietening hand.

We don't stand by and wait. We have the most capable minds studying every part of her. The probe we landed, it sends back data every second, and from that data we have formulated Saviour 10.

It will be different. There will be casualties but the devastation won't be total.

He paused to the sound of journalists scrambling to be heard as Felix hit mute. 'I'd rather he just said we're all doomed, go have some fun.'

'Panic sex, it's your only hope now.'

'I've got Candice right where I want her.'

'Unaware of your existence?'

'I just need to engineer a chance encounter and then –'

Mae silenced him by reaching into her bag and taking out a piece of paper.

His mouth fell open. 'You got it?'

'Printed it during my last shift. A list of every single movie Candice Harper has ever rented.'

He went to take it but she snatched it back. Felix rolled his eyes then took a bottle of communion wine from his wardrobe and the exchange was made.

Mae went back to the window. 'The Mantons.'

Together in silence they watched Abi's parents. Her father, hands shoved deep in his pockets as he looked around like he was in some kind of daze. Abi's mother was swallowed by the group, all keen to hug the shock out of her.

And then Mae saw Theodore. Instead of joining them, he crossed the road, dropped his head low and walked away.

'No way she jumped. Not Abi. She's a Forever.'

'We didn't even know her, Felix.'

'Sometimes I miss . . . I just miss –'

'What?'

'You. There was the Mae before, and she was messed up, but at least she laughed sometimes. And at least she was . . . she was here. She lived –'

'So I'm not living?'

He smiled but she caught the sadness in his eyes. 'You're existing, Mae. We've got, like, no time left, and you just exist each day. You should be getting ready for the Final. You should be looking for *him*.'

She frowned. 'Who?'

'Everyone gets one, and one only. I'm talking gut-wrenching, all-consuming, can't-live-without-you one-true-love.'

She picked up a battered copy of *The Notebook*. 'No more Nicholas Sparks for you.'

Mae turned back to the TV, to a still of Saviour 9, the trail of fire and light, like a nebula hanging in the predawn sky.

'I remember the Forevers,' he said, pushing his glasses up his nose. 'And I know you do.'

'That was a long time ago.'

'We did it for the creeps and the weirdos. And I know you're still weird.'

'So I guess that makes you a creep.'

She reached a hand out and felt rain on the roof tiles. She thought of Felix's father and all that balled-up disappointment that his son wouldn't follow in his sacred steps. And she looked at Felix and knew how good he was at fronting, how he took all that hate bouncing around the walls of his room and turned it into something purer.

'You, and Abi, you said we didn't belong here. Here . . . That makes it sound like we do belong somewhere. But we don't have the time to find it. That place.'

'We were that place.'

'You've forgotten how it felt, how it was . . . everything.'

'You can't turn back time, Felix.'

'I know. I just . . . some days I just want to be seen. I want Candice to see me.' He took off his glasses and yawned.

'Get some sleep,' she said, as she headed for the door.

'I'll sleep when I'm dead.'

'And that will be . . .'

'Thirty days.'

'And sixteen hours.'