THE TRIAL

LAURA BATES

SIMON & SCHUSTER

First published in Great Britain in 2021 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
Text copyright © 2021 Laura Bates

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.
No reproduction without permission.

All rights reserved.

The rights of Laura Bates to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by them in accordance with sections 77 and 78 of the Copyright, Design and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd

1st Floor, 222 Gray's Inn Road

London

WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk
www.simonandschuster.com.au
www.simonandschuster.co.in

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN 978-1-4711-8757-5
eBook ISBN 978-1-4711-8758-2
eAudio ISBN 978-1-3985-0016-7

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

DAY 1

A flaming sock.

It seems like such a ridiculous thing. But that's what Hayley is looking at as she lies flat on her back, staring at the bright, blue sky. A smouldering gym sock, twirling in slow motion, trailing a smudge of smoke as it floats gently down towards her.

Hayley tries hard to swallow but there is something wrong with her throat, with her eyes. She can't move her arms or her legs. She isn't meant to be here – this isn't right. *Concentrate, Hayley. You aren't here, you can't be. You're on a plane. Think back.*

Bing

The seatbelt signs were turned off and Brian was first out of his seat, lumbering down the aisle towards the restroom next to the cockpit. The back of his neck looked even paler than usual beneath his ruddy curls, freckles standing out like a smattering of fawn paint drops flicked off a brush.

'Actually, Brian, please take your seat for a moment.' Coach

Erickson ushered him back towards the rest of the team. Hayley saw Brian's eyes bulge a little. Was it just the artificial overhead lights or did he look faintly green?

'I really need to get in there, Coach', Brian mumbled, gesturing towards the restroom door.

'This will just take a moment, son,' Coach Erickson grinned, clapping his weathered hands to attract everyone's attention. Brian collapsed reluctantly into a free seat, cradling his stomach with his hands.

Erickson ran a hand through his thinning hair. Greying now, but the same floppy cut he'd sported since the grainy photos in the school trophy cabinet showed him lifting the all-state high school basketball championship cup forty years before. His face had leathered since; decades of working outdoors sending tiny red thread veins criss-crossing his nose so he looked permanently flushed with enthusiasm.

From her seat over the wing, Hayley twisted to look towards the back of the small, private plane. May and Jessa were fast asleep, their backs pressed together, knees drawn up. May's glossy black hair spilling forward over a blanket clutched in her arms, Jessa's long, plump twists hanging over May's chest as her head lolled back onto her best friend's shoulder. Across the aisle, Shannon was looking out of the window, her back poker straight, one foot automatically rotating and pointing through a complicated series of flexibility exercises.

The boys looked vaguely disinterested. Jason was lounging back in his seat with his legs stretched out across the aisle, playing a game on his phone. Elliot was sitting a little way apart, as always, bent over a sketch book, his eyes flicking up

and down at the other kids as his hand moved quickly back and forth across the page. Brian looked like he was focusing all his attention on keeping his mouth closed.

'Guys, I need your attention for a second.' Slight irritation flashed across the usually placid face of the coach. He put his fingers in his mouth and let out a shrill whistle so that all eyes swivelled towards him. May and Jessa reluctantly disentangled themselves, yawning.

'Jeez you lot. Do we need to talk about what happened last night?' There was a sudden silence, the air practically crackling. Jason shot a glance towards Shannon, who continued to look doggedly out of the window. Hayley thought she saw Jessa jerk as she sat up straighter. Elliot's hand froze on the page.

Erickson gave a sly smile. 'Oh ho, you think a coach doesn't know what happens on the last night of tour? You think this was my first rodeo?'

Brian convulsed slightly and started fumbling in the seat pocket in front of him for a sick bag. Hayley watched curiously as May leaned towards Jessa and whispered loudly, 'Where did you go last night? I lost you halfway through the party . . .'

Erickson beamed and waved his hand dismissively. 'Hell, you can all relax. What goes on tour stays on tour and all that. I know about the last night "rave".' He sketched quote marks in the air with his fingers, and Hayley cringed for him as his shirt rode up a little, exposing a hint of late middle-age spread. She'd never seen anyone look less like they knew the details of what happened at a 'rave'.

'I just wanted to tell you all how proud I am of you,'

Erickson went on, smiling at them. 'I know not all of you are here, but I've already said a few words to the players who went back on the other flight. Of course, we're very grateful to the Angel family for extending the use of their company planes.' He nodded towards Jason who grinned and tipped a small bag of salted peanuts into his mouth.

Erickson cleared his throat. 'Now I know the off-season prep tour isn't the be all and end all of tournaments, but it's an important lead-in to our main season and you all showed up and gave it your all. Ladies—' he tipped an imaginary hat to the back of the plane, 'your enthusiasm and athleticism were outstanding as always. A team is nothing without its cheerleaders. And guys . . . well, what can I say? Not many of you know this, but this is actually my very last tour. I'll be retiring at the end of the next semester.'

Hayley watched Coach Erickson carefully, her chin resting on a cupped hand. Were his eyes getting a little misty? Erickson was a 'drop and gimme twenty' kind of coach; the sort of old-school educator who'd never owned a cell phone and believed there was no problem in life that couldn't be solved by a brisk run and a hot shower. She began to reach for her notebook. That was a good line. There'd be a tribute in the school paper, maybe even a piece in the local press. 'Drop and gimme twenty coach comes to the end of his last lap'. She should get that down before she forg—

It happened so suddenly it was like a light going out. One second, Erickson was talking, his back to the cockpit door, the students staring at him from several rows away. The next, everything moved at once. The chairs dropped out

from underneath them as if they'd been snatched away by an invisible hand. The windows that should have been to the left and right were suddenly on the ceiling, then spinning round to appear beneath her. Backpacks, drinks cans, plastic food trays, shoes, paper cups, phones, magazines – everything was whizzing through the air like the inside of a snow globe, flying debris smashing into elbows and scratching faces. Limbs crashed and tangled into each other, spines bowed, heads whipped helplessly from side to side.

The noise was deafening. A crunching, screeching, shriek of grinding metal; the roar of machinery; the din of alarms all blaring at once. And over the top of it, screaming and screaming.

There wasn't time to think. No time to wonder what was happening, to process or brace, or react. There was only sensation. The lurching, roiling lightness in the stomach. The clench of panicked eyes scrunched closed and sharp scratches sparking hot and angry against the face and forearms. A strange sort of emptiness in the brain, like air pushing against the inside of your skull. No pain, not yet. Then darkness.

And, presumably some time later, a flaming sock. Floating down towards Hayley as she lies on her back, unable to move.

There isn't any sound. It's like watching a TV screen with the mute button on. The sock drifts in and out of focus. Hayley blinks and it has fallen away somewhere else, the screen all blue again. Then a shadow passes over it and she thinks, ludicrously, that the signal has gone, but then her eyes begin to sting and she realises it is smoke.

When it hits the back of her throat, it's like the world has been turned back on. She chokes and starts to retch, acrid fumes thickening in the roof of her mouth, her eyes streaming. She vomits, her head twisting automatically to the side. She finds that she can move and that her whole body is throbbing with pain.

The shock feels like a heavy blanket, weighing down every limb, clouding the air around her, almost making it impossible to see. Slowly, Hayley raises her head, her neck screaming in protest. She lifts a hand to shield her eyes from the white glare of the sun and registers, distantly, as if she were looking at someone else's fingers, that there is a deep wound across the back of her wrist, that her skin is streaked with something black and sticky, that one of her fingernails is ripped and half hanging off. The hand is shaking.

There is sand everywhere. Grittiness in her eyes, between her teeth. Granules between her fingers, prickling the backs of her knees.

In the years afterwards, when Hayley thinks back to that afternoon, she will only ever be able to see it in snatches, like photographs laid out in a line. Moments and sensations: jumbled and out of order, some so vivid she can taste them, others so alien she doesn't know if they really happened at all.

Black skin a metre away, streaked with red. Jessa. A jam-like sticky goo on the side of her arm, every muscle in Hayley's body straining not to look at it.

A twisted carcass of metal, unrecognisable. Wires hanging like streamers. Little fires crackling with sparks.

Bodies scattered in the sand. Some moving. Some not.

Shannon's narrow, sheet-white face inches from hers, shaking her shoulders lightly, asking Hayley something, the sound distorted like she's underwater.

Relief like a liquid gush when Shannon moves to Jessa, puts two long fingers in the hollow under her chin and says: 'There's a pulse.'

The weirdest sensation of hysterical laughter somewhere deep in her chest, as she watches Shannon bending over Jessa, and a sing-song voice in her head intones 'A head cheerleader never cracks under pressure'.

Stumbling to her feet, a clean, hot pain flashes through Hayley's ankle and she drops to the ground again.

Elliot is sitting up, spitting into the sand. He looks at her, nodding mutely and waves her past with a blood-streaked hand as she crawls from body to body, the sand burning grazes into her knees.

Sobs, shuddering, screaming sobs grind into Hayley's ears like someone scraping inside her head with a metal spoon. She wants them to stop so she can think, so she can breathe. She isn't here, she's on a plane. She is meant to be on a plane.

May sits up slowly, the side of her face deeply grazed. Her pupils are like lagoons. Jessa's body shakes and convulses as she screams, her arm sticking out at the wrong angle, black oil running down it and mixing with blood and torn skin.

One day, when she thinks back, Hayley will remember how her girl scout first-aid training flashed into her mind as she knelt next to Jessa. How strange it felt to remember a smiling first-aider in mint green overalls, a blue plastic dummy on the floor.

Brain numb. Clogged, claggy cotton wool. Something about breathing? And circulation? ABC? Or ACE? But that smooth, clinical blue plastic had looked nothing like this. It wasn't meant to be ugly and dirty, sand and blood and a mess like congealed treacle. It was meant to be clean and pleasant. Time for mistakes and starting over and asking for tips. Do I put my hands here or here? How many breaths again? Comforting, firm hands on top of hers, mint overalls swishing.

Someone says they need to set Jessa's arm and holds Jessa down. Elliot pulls, like ripping at a butcher's carcass. Hayley feels useless, standing there trying to remember her girl scout acronyms. She holds Jessa's other hand instead, letting her grip hard, painfully squeezing sand into open cuts.

Even years later, she will know that the noises Jessa made then caused Hayley to vomit again and again onto her own feet. But her brain won't let her remember them.

Time moves strangely. She knows they are on a beach. She knows that the front of the plane is missing, that there is no sign of Coach Erickson or the pilot. She can't remember how she knows this or who told her. The pain in her ankle throbs and rages and she can't walk very far. Sometimes she looks down and sees, in surprise, that her arms and legs are shaking.

She doesn't know how long it is before Jason staggers out of the line of trees along the top of the beach, dragging Brian's motionless body.

'He's alive,' he says, grimly, pre-empting the unasked question on all of their faces.

Jason lets Brian slump limply to the floor and runs to

Shannon, wraps her in his arms, stroking her long, curly dark hair like a child. 'My baby', he murmurs. Seeing the two of them entwined like that makes Hayley feel terrifyingly alone. But there's a stiffness in Shannon's back. Her arms hang at her sides and she doesn't return the embrace.

Time jumps forward again.

Hayley is sitting at the base of a palm where the beach meets the treeline, rough bark reassuringly solid behind her back. A few metres to her right, in the shade of another tree, Jessa is lying, mercifully asleep, her head in May's lap. May is stroking the baby hairs on Jessa's forehead with the tips of her fingers. Jessa usually gels them flat but they've started to curl wispily at the root in the humid air. It makes her look younger, more vulnerable somehow. Jason puts his hands under Brian's armpits, heaving him over to lie next to Jessa.

Palm trees with shiny, rubbery leaves that Hayley doesn't recognise and thick bushes, spread behind them in a dense tangle. The beach stretches out uninterrupted to left and right like a smooth slick of butter. The smouldering wreck of the plane is hunched, gargoyle-esque, 20 feet away, its wing forced deep into the sand. Elliot encouraged them to get away from it, in case there was a fuel explosion, but the flames have died down. It isn't the whole plane, but a torn off hunk, one wing and the tube of its body, the tail ripped and twisted to one side. There is no sign of the nose or the front third of the plane. The beach is strewn with parts as if the carcass of the plane has been ravaged by scavengers, trailing its innards across the sand. Ripped seat cushions dribbling foam stuffing,

metal panels and glass shards littering the beach. A piece of tasteful beige carpet flaps listlessly in the breeze.

In the distance, beyond the wreckage, is a shimmering swipe of pale, golden turquoise that must be sea, though the tide is so far out that Hayley can't make out where the water ends and the cloudless sky begins. The chances of them landing on an island rather than plunging into the sea, were infinitesimally small Hayley realises. Lucky. An odd way to look at it – but they are.

'I shouldn't be here,' Hayley says, to no one in particular, a stream of giggles burbling suddenly and unstoppably out of her. It seems hopelessly, ridiculously funny. Things like this do not happen to Hayley Larkin – everything in her life is perfect, controlled and calculated down to the very last detail. Or at least that's what it looks like from the outside. She wouldn't be here at all if it weren't for the unwelcome revelation from her guidance counsellor that even being on track for valedictorian and maintaining a flawless GPA wasn't enough to guarantee admission to an Ivy League college, without diverse extra curriculars to boost her application.

Her head feels light, somehow, as if there's too much air inside her skull, and she can't keep hold of her thoughts. Suddenly she's back in that drab, airless office, its grey walls closing in on her even as her feet sink gently into the sand.

She expects the appointment be a formality, a check-in on her excellent progress, a pat on the back. She is on track for Princeton or Harvard, she has ticked every box. A major in English with a stint on the college paper, then internships at the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post* in her junior

year and a position as a cub reporter at a local outlet when she graduates. She has it all planned out. So it's a shock when Mr Curtis looks at her file and frowns. 'Right now, on paper, you look like a very . . . *solitary* candidate. What you need is something that shouts *team player*!'

She hopefully suggests debate club and reminds Mr Curtis she is already editor of the Oak Ridge Tribune, but he frowns and gently suggests something 'a little further from your comfort zone . . . less academic'. 'It needn't be long-term', he adds, catching her expression of dismay as she mentally tries to work out how she will cram anything else into her already packed schedule. 'It might even be fun . . . what's the worst that could happen?'

And suddenly she is on a windy field one Monday at recess, tugging her cycling shorts out of her crotch and trying to remember to smile while she high-kicks her way awkwardly through her audition routine.

Which (thanks to two drop-outs and a nasty bout of strep throat) lets her scrape into the bottom of the cheerleading tour squad. Which, in turn, leads her here. To this beach. And suddenly she is back on it, this beach covered in vomit and blood and twisted metal.

Hayley Larkin does not belong on this beach.

The strange thing is that she cannot seem to move. Distantly, she is aware of activity around her. Shannon is moving purposefully from Brian to Jessa, gently lifting their wrists to check pulses, bending down low to feel their breath on her cheek. Jason has wrapped a wet basketball jersey around his face as a makeshift smoke mask and is diving in

and out of the plane's wreckage, pulling out anything that looks like it might be useful or edible and piling it high on the beach. With the sun shining on his muscular, lightly tanned arms and swept back blonde quiff, he looks like something out of a superhero movie.

I always thought I would be the unlikely superhero, Hayley thinks, vaguely, as she feels the sand prickle the backs of her thighs. Sure, she might be the weakest link in the squad, the last one to be invited to social events, more likely to attend prom as a student reporter than somebody's date. But she's always somehow believed when it came down to it, when 'real-life' started, she'd show them all. She'd secretly pictured herself one day becoming the front-page story instead of the person who wrote it. Graciously accepting her Pulitzer for blowing a sex trafficking ring or a corruption scandal wide open, while the cheerleaders, weirdly still in their teens, stood by, mouths open, pom poms hanging limply. She'd daydreamed it, in the long, tedious hours sitting in hotel rooms on the tour, pretending to be glad to have the time to study while she listened to the other girls shrieking with laughter as they watched re-runs of Married at First Sight on cable.

Yet still she cannot move. She wants to sit here with the solid tree against her back for as long as it takes until things don't feel like they are spinning out of control anymore.

She sees May gently ease Jessa's head onto a folded sweatshirt and walk over to help Jason, sorting through the growing heap of supplies next to the plane. Her willowy frame bends and straightens, bends and straightens as she sorts through the items.

Hayley watches as May stacks a small tower of those foil-covered trays of plane food on top of each other, watches as they slide down in all directions, crashing into the sand. She sees the exasperation on May's face as she wipes beads of sweat from the bridge of her nose, running her hand over her perfectly groomed, arched, black eyebrows. Numbly, Hayley thinks that the food shouldn't be left there in the sun. Someone should move it into the shade. But she can't move. 'It'll spoil so quickly in this heat,' her mom tuts, unexpectedly, in her head.

Mom.

Hayley sees her walking towards the front door, frowning, glancing at her watch. Taking off her glasses, wiping them automatically on her sleeve and tucking them in the collar of her jumper. Swiping her dark blonde hair back over her shoulder with one hand as she reaches for the doorhandle with the other. Sees the panic cross her face as red and blue lights cross her forehead. Sees Dad appear behind her at the open front door, place a hand on her shoulder, start barking urgent questions at the police officer as Mom falls silent. Sees the tension in the tendons of his neck, stiffening beneath the short cut salt and pepper hair, jaw clenching, dark brown skin carefully clean shaven.

'A phone', she croaks, surprised to find how sore her throat is. 'Does anyone still have their phone?' Shannon looks up from where she's kneeling beside Brian, one dark eyebrow raised in the sort of patronising expression Hayley has become far too accustomed to in cheer practice.

'Don't you think we've already tried? No signal,' she replies

curtly, tossing her phone into the sand at Hayley's feet with a soft thud. Shannon and Jason grin cheesily in the lockscreen picture, all wide white smiles, his teeth practically sparkling. They look like an advert for All American high-school sweethearts. Shannon's right. No bars.

Shannon moves practiced hands to Hayley's ankle, rotating it expertly as Hayley winces and draws a sharp breath. 'It's swollen but it's probably just a sprain. You wouldn't be able to put any weight on it if it was broken.' And she's so grateful for someone taking charge, to be touched with firm, confident fingers that show her limbs where to move and when, that she doesn't find Shannon's know-it-all tone as annoying as usual.

'The soreness in your chest is probably from smoke inhalation,' Shannon adds, almost smugly. 'Lucky I took my first aid extension certificate last month.'

'Or bruising from the crash?' Hayley asks, indicating a nasty bruise blooming below Shannon's collarbone.

'Maybe,' Shannon agrees, handing Hayley an open bottle of water. She takes it and swigs great gulps, then suddenly stops, the bottle still raised to her lips.

'Should we be . . .' it sounds so silly, so melodramatic. 'Should we be saving our water?' she asks uncertainly.

'I don't think it's going to come to starvation rations,' Shannon smirks. 'It's the Gulf of Mexico, not the Bermuda Triangle – I'd be surprised if someone hasn't found us by sunset.'

'Speaking of sunset,' Hayley glances at the horizon. The sun pulses egg-yolk orange, lower in the sky now, and the incoming tide, while still distant, has crept closer, so that she

can see a faint white line where the frothy edges of the waves meet the shore.

Hayley passes the water bottle to Jason and he swigs thirstily, wiping his lip with the back of his hand, his eyes on Shannon, who is hovering over Jessa again.

'So,' he says, sitting down in the sand with his legs out in front of him, knees bent. Hayley notices little grains of sand hanging onto his sun-bleached blonde leg hairs. They all turn towards him instinctively. It's as if, with Erickson gone, he's the natural source of authority. As if being captain on the court has anything at all to do with this. As if a carefully crafted defensive play is going to help them now. Hayley feels giggles fizzing inside her again. It is all so completely absurd.

Jason holds up seven fingers. 'Shannon, Hayley, May, me – all okay or near enough.' He nods at each of them, folding down his fingers one-by-one as he checks them off.

'Elliot too, though I don't know where he's gone,' he folds down the thumb, leaving a curled fist and two fingers still sticking up on the other hand. 'Jessa – hurt but conscious.' They all turn to look at Jessa, curled in a foetal position, her long, glossy twists splayed on the sand, lips slightly parted to reveal the gap between her front teeth. There's some swelling around her shoulder, but the blood on her upper arm has congealed to a dark paste.

A small fly lands inquisitively at the edge of the dark blood. May brushes it away angrily, glaring protectively at the others as if all this is their fault. Jessa has always been hers, as long as anyone can remember. They've come as a pair since day one of first grade, fingers interlaced in a wordless playground

pact before the bell even rang. Jessa's gentle, considered thoroughness and May's spiky, scrappy boldness somehow fitted together and made a whole.

'The mouth on that girl', Hayley's mom had gasped, half admiring, half disapproving, after she'd stopped by to pick up Hayley after practice one night, just in time to hear May unleash a stream of profanities in the direction of a truck that had blocked her in the parking lot. Hayley has never seen May without a comeback. But she looks shrunken and lost without Jessa awake and alert by her side. Her straight black hair hangs around her shoulders like a silk curtain. Like she's already in mourning. Her delicate features look crumpled, long black eyelashes shining with tears.

They all stare at the remaining finger. Jason doesn't need to say it. Brian's body lies motionless in the shade, his meaty calves and forearms limp, his thick neck looking strangely delicate and vulnerable.

Only a few hours ago, they'd been ribbing him on the plane for having to wear his basketball jersey because he'd run out of clean laundry two days before the end of the tour. He grinned proudly and started explaining how underwear lasts twice as long if you turn it inside out, at which point Hayley very deliberately stopped listening.

Now Brian's arms and legs glow an angry red, his fair skin burned under the relentless sun before Jason found him. The pale brown freckles that usually dust his round cheeks have been swallowed into the new rose pallor, which clashes with the ginger of his messy curls.

'He's breathing,' Jason says, a little too loudly. 'Maybe he

just needs to sleep it off.' Hayley resists the urge to point out that he hasn't regained consciousness yet: that the situation is significantly more serious than an extended nap. She looks at Brian's slack face again and feels a wave of nausea rise in the base of her throat. She swallows it down and looks away.

'OH MY GOD, NAKED TWIN LESBIANS!' Jason shouts suddenly, leaning towards Brian and shaking his leg. Brian's head lolls loosely to one side, his cheek pressing into the sand.

'Yeah, he's genuinely unconscious,' Jason smirks, apparently oblivious to the fact that he's the only one who seems to find this amusing.

'We queer women don't only exist for your amusement, Jason, you might be shocked to hear,' May mutters, without looking up. And Jason at least has the grace to look awkward, though he doesn't apologise.

'Has anybody seen Erickson? Or the pilot?' Hayley asks.

Jason shakes his head. 'I walked pretty deep into the trees looking for Brian. He must have been thrown further from the wreckage because he wasn't wearing his seat belt. But there was no sign of anyone else, or the front of the plane.'

'It probably broke away much earlier,' Shannon says grimly, looking out to sea. Her pale, angular face is serious, dark circles making her eye sockets look hollow and gaunt where usually she exuded an unusual kind of sharp glamour. 'That grinding, screeching noise started a good minute or two before we crashed. It could be miles away.'

'Or it could be somewhere else on the island,' May snaps. 'They could be injured, or worse – they might need our help.'

I don't think so May,' says a quiet voice, and Elliot steps out of the bushes, his curly, chestnut brown hair wild, his arms piled with sticks and twigs. There's a thin diagonal cut across his right cheekbone and his knee-length, khaki shorts are torn. He bends down, carefully piling the wood in the sand.

'There's a pretty steep incline to the north,' he jerks his head back towards the trees and to the right. 'I climbed up far enough to get a sense of the whole island and I didn't see anybody else, or anything that looked like it was from the plane. There's a lot of tree cover across the centre of the island, so I guess it's possible there was something I didn't spot, if part of the plane went down there . . . but I'd still have expected to see some debris; broken branches . . . something. I think Shannon's right. We're on our own.'

There's a surprised silence. Hayley isn't sure she's ever heard Elliot talk uninterrupted for that long. She sees a sudden flash of him skulking into the first joint practice at the start of the semester, head bowed, not meeting anyone's eye.

Then the reality of what he has said hits her like a cold blast. *On our own*. Stranded. Stuck. The enormity of it is so great she almost can't think about it at all. She looks down at her bloodied hand, and notices that her torn fingernail is beginning to throb. Somehow it's easier to focus on that one small thing, the immediate pain, than it is to contemplate what Elliot is telling them. There's a wave of panic hovering, threatening to completely overwhelm her. She picks at the nail and earns herself a sharp stab of pain. The panic recedes a little.

'How do you know that's north?' May blurts it at Elliot

like she wants to pick a fight. Hayley looks at May's dark, glinting eyes and knows that she isn't the only one at risk of being swept away by that wave of fear.

Elliot holds out his arm, showing them a worn leather watch whose soft, threadbare strap is the same sandy golden brown as his skin. 'You can work it out by pointing the hour hand at the sun: a line drawn between the hour hand and 12 points south.' The others stare at him. 'My family camps. A lot,' he adds, awkwardly.

'Anyway', Elliot crouches and starts arranging little twigs and scraps of wood in a pyramid, 'It's going to get dark and cold pretty quickly once the sun goes down. And if anyone comes looking for us, a fire is the best way to get their attention.'

Hayley feels like an idiot. They've been sat here for hours – why didn't any of them think of a fire?

'Nobody has a lighter,' Jason scoffs, shifting his weight forwards like he wants to draw the others back towards him. Heads obediently swivel in his direction. On the court, Elliot might've ducked his head in embarrassment, danced to Jason's tune, but here he ignores him, walking over to the pile of supplies by the plane.

'I said there aren't any lighters or matches, man,' Jason repeats, a tougher note in his voice daring Elliot to contradict him.

Elliot picks up a plastic water bottle, murmurs to himself, and starts walking up and down the beach, picking through the debris. With a grunt of satisfaction, he pulls his sketchbook out from under a pile of clothes and shoes,

flicking past a half-finished picture of them sitting in the back of the plane, and carefully rips out a piece of paper covered in dark pencil lines.

Hayley leans forward to watch, wondering how he can manage to stay so calm. Bending close to the tepee of twigs, Elliot folds the paper in two and holds it in his left hand, then gently tilts the water bottle back and forth using his right hand. A bright spot of light appears on the paper, a circle that grows and shrinks, as he experimentally moves the bottle around. When the light is at its brightest, a tiny, concentrated pinprick, he holds it still, and almost immediately the paper begins to smoulder and smoke. A dime-sized circle scorches out from the centre, the edges curling white. Jason raises his eyebrows and puts his arm around Shannon's waist. 'Nice trick, cub scout.'

Elliot's lip twitches with a tiny smile as he gently waves the paper back and forth, feeding it oxygen, patiently encouraging it until an orange flame flickers up. He pokes it between the twigs he's arranged, pulling a handful of dry, dead grass from his pocket and stuffing it into the gaps.

Elliot puts his cheek to the sand and blows gently and a little spiral of bluish smoke rises up again, chased by tiny tongues of flame licking at the twigs.

There's a low whistle. 'Impressive,' croaks a voice. Brian is struggling weakly to raise himself up on one elbow.

Hayley feels the relief thrum warm in her chest.

'Fuck's sake, Brian. Do you have any idea how long you've been out?' Jason's voice is rough, accusing, even. He wipes his hand swiftly across his face and frowns at Brian like he's

committed five fouls in a game and been benched.

Brian grins sheepishly. 'Where are we? What happened?' He looks around, taking in his surroundings, and mutters 'Jesus.' He raises his hand to the back of his head and winces.

'The plane crashed,' Shannon says, simply. 'We're on an island.'

'Is everyone OK?'

'Everyone except Jessa . . . she's been conscious, but her arm is hurt. We don't know about Erickson and the pilot. We think they went down somewhere else.'

Brian's gaze wanders from the fire to the trees to the plane, then out over the beach towards the sea. The heat of the sun is waning now, a breeze rushing up the beach and into the tree canopy above them as if to whisper that the sea is coming, coming. They can smell it – the wet, fresh scent of salt and seaweed that tethers Hayley to reality, forces her to acknowledge that this is actually happening.

Brian is eyeing Jessa. 'Is it just her arm? Because I saw something like this on Grey's Anatomy where they thought the guy was totally fine because he was awake and talking, but then he had a delayed brain bleed and he just died.' Brian snaps his fingers, 'like that.'

'Oh good', Shannon rolls her eyes, 'I didn't realise we had a qualified brain consultant with us.'

May's eyes shoot daggers at Brian as he shuffles into a sitting position, wincing and rotating his head from side to side.

'What? They have medical advisers to make it realistic, you know.'

*

It's quiet around the fire as they peel back the metal foil from the food trays and start picking at the contents with plastic forks. Cold macaroni cheese isn't exactly appealing but at least it fills their stomachs. Hayley peels the plastic wrapper off a small bread roll and is about to take a bite when Elliot walks out of the trees, carrying another large armful of sticks which he dumps in a pile near the fire.

'What are you all doing?' Elliot pants, gaping at them.

They blink at him, this new, different Elliot who isn't sitting on the side lines with his patched backpack guarding the seat next to him, listening silently to post practice pep talks, emerging from the locker room like a ghost after the other boys have tumbled out in a loud group.

'What do you mean, what are we doing?' Shannon looks at her macaroni and wrinkles her nose 'We're eating dinner, if you can call it that.'

'Guys,' Elliot speaks urgently, angrily. 'You can't just eat everything. We have no idea how long we're going to be stuck here. We need to ration our food and drink.'

'Oh, come on, man,' Jason drawls, taking a bite of a candy bar he has helped himself to from the supply pile.

'No, "man", *you* come on,' Elliot shoots back. 'The plane only had food on board for one meal, plus whatever snacks people had on them. That's it. How long do you think we're going to last if we eat it all at once?'

There's an uncomfortable silence.

'It's only a matter of time till someone finds us,' Jason says, dismissively. 'My parents are going to have people out looking, believe me.'