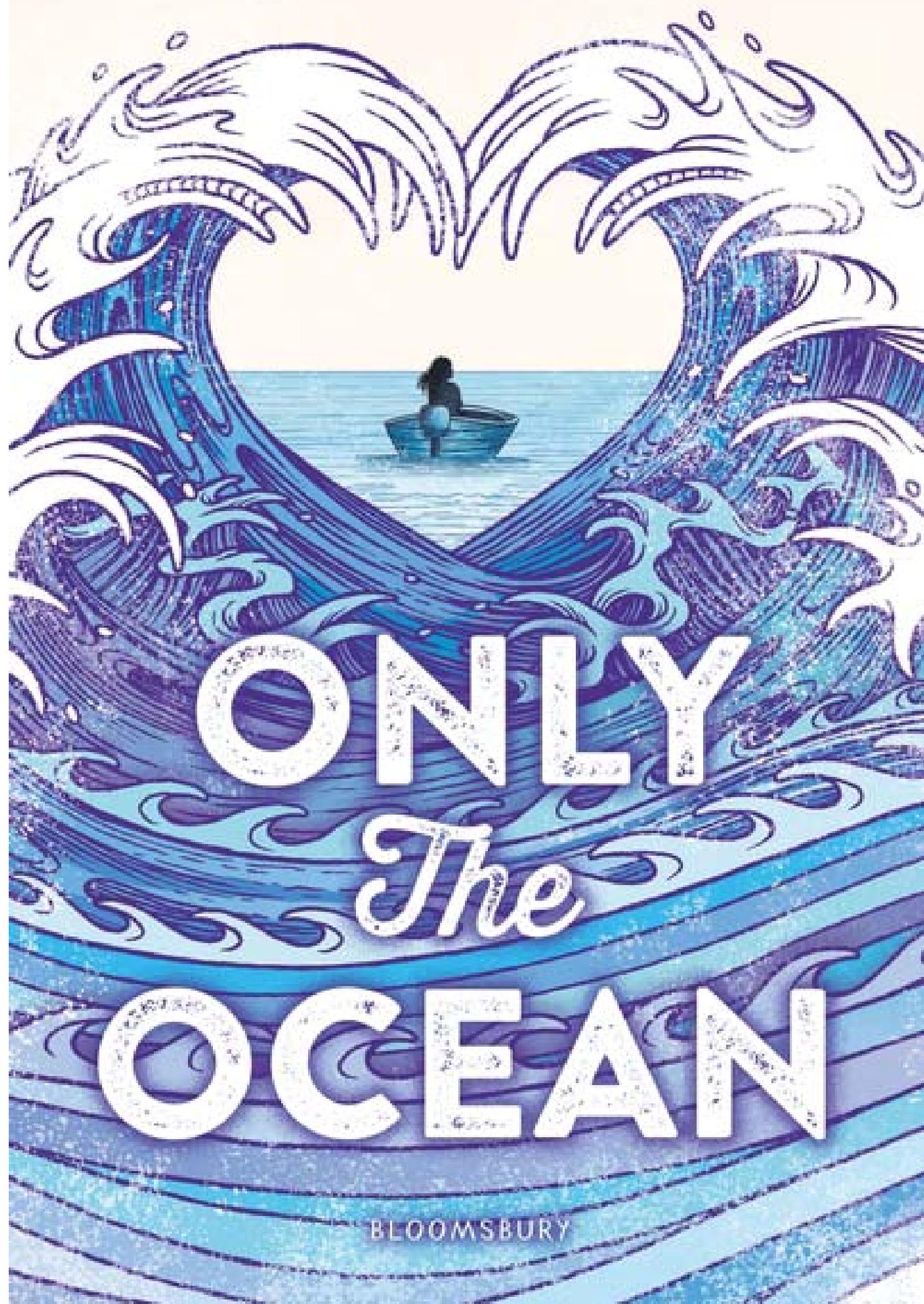


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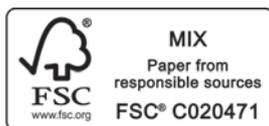
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Chapter One

The decision to run from the shack was the right one and the only one available to the girl and she took it without a second thought.

She packed her bag and sheet-tied the baby to her back and she ran toward the gate, the gate that had been busted by looters and hung loose and merry in the wind.

The baby cried out with the sudden smack of cold and the girl reached around to slap it shut the same way Dad and the others always did. Maybe the girl knew it was wrong someplace inside but she had yet to learn another way.

She ran with her best-boots only-boots stabbing at the swamp-slop ground and lifted her legs high so as not to get pulled down into the muddy suck. If she could escape from the shack and the forest completely she would have a shot at the plan she had been working through.

When she was clear of the home track that slit the woods clean in half the girl paused for breath and she told the baby

whether it was listening or not that they were heading down to the river town, because that was where she was meant to meet the man that had set the plan in motion. The man that came to the shack occasionally to buy goods had set her a task.

It was a plan that was meant for her and her alone; it had a name scribbled clean through it like a stick of rock and the name was Kel Crow and that was her name.

Kel stood at the edge of the woods where the canopy sheltered them a little and she took her raincoat from the bag and hooked it over both their heads. She looked at the stream below her that used to be a lane and she walked the bank above and kicked a clod of wet earth into it and in the end she closed her eyes and jumped across the body of water.

The other side of the stream used to be open farm land, or so they said. Kel could not remember a time before the floods and the constant rain that kept on coming whatever the time of year. These days the few crops still grown were planted in the disused gas drums that drifted above the ground. There was nothing left of the farm land but mud-sup plains; forever-fields of brown water, stagnant and still.

Kel stood a moment on top of a once-was wall. Her eyes walked its thin winding line in the direction of the town. The early morning sky was much like every other: heavy heaving clouds circling and spitting gumball lead that caught on the wind and fired furious like bullets. Seaward to the west of the town she could see the towers, the barred communities where the grand folk lived; mini societies where the air was

filtered and luminous lights splashed into their domed skies like newly formed planets. In the minds of the swamp inhabitants the towers were another world entirely. Neither side mixed. Neither saw how the other half lived. Some days Kel wondered about them, but most days she didn't have the time, the energy. The towers were like mountains, distant.

When the baby cried out she took one of the biscuits she had been hoarding and stuck it into its mouth, and when she thought she might cry too with the effort of exertion and escape combined she stuck a biscuit into her own mouth the same.

If she could just get to town before anyone noticed she was gone, before Dad had time to realise the gate was still bust-broke and that the barbed wire had come down enough for the girl and the baby to get gone. If she could just walk the wall into town, keep her eyes away from the rising water and find the man who'd met her and liked her enough to hire her for the job.

Kel Crow was on her way and she felt like shouting out loud for all the hot-head scheming that was seared through it and so she picked up her feet, set a course along the rutted wall and started to run.

Kel entered the town as the boy who rang the bell for tips hung from his window to chime out twelve o'clock. She had been walking for three hours, if it wasn't for the risk of rot getting to her feet she could have gone on as far as forever. She untied the baby and put it to the ground in order to

return life to her back and she stretched all ways to loosen the knots and bent to pick up the kid and she carried it in her arms through the plank-board streets whilst she observed her surroundings. The rivers and the streams and the memory of fields that once worked for something backalong were now linked one way or other with walkways and reclaimed pallets and planks and boats meant for stopping and idling: stepping stones precariously placed to make something of a community, no matter how unhinged.

To Kel community meant nothing more than disease and feuding and thieving and fearing just about. When people saw her they looked away because most knew Kel and her family. The Crows were drug-runners, pushers, the worst kind of swamper. Most had heard of the Crow girl with the wild streak running, she had danger in her eyes, same as her dad, and it was those eyes Kel fixed on the river bar, the one place on that sprawl of water-borne pontoons that passed for town where she knew the man was waiting for her.

Kel stood a minute outside the drifting, bumping clapper-board hut and she lit herself a cigarette to steady her nerves right for talking and when the baby griped at the smoke she blew more until its eyes closed tight.

The bar was a place of open any-old trade. People sat intent and pressed into each corner of the small stuffy room, men and women and youths like Kel who had grown wise with the work of a wretched life. Kel thinned her eyes to adjust to the smoky, candle-lit haze and she stood at the bar and asked to see the owner and said that he would be expecting her.

‘One of em Crow kids, int you?’ said the woman.

Kel shrugged the usual ‘so what’.

‘The girl, only Crow girl I heard of.’ She looked at the baby. ‘See you bin busy. I got some goods from you backalong for me old mother before she passed, came highly recommended.’

‘Is that so?’

‘I reckon.’

The woman told Kel to help herself to a beer whilst she went out back and Kel sat the baby in one of the half-barrel chairs and went behind the bar, poured herself a drink and then she waited.

She had waited her whole life for an opportunity such as this one. Fifteen years longing to escape. She wished it had come earlier, two years earlier, two years before the stupid me-me-me baby that never gave up on the whining and the crying out. She looked down at it and sighed and wondered why she had bothered to lug the thing along with her.

It bothered Kel that she might have weakness cracking within, but if she hadn’t taken the baby its life would have become *her* life, lived all over again. Even a stupid baby didn’t deserve that.

‘You dodged a bullet,’ she told it. ‘I might not like you and you sure don’t like me but I’m tellin you this is better un that cus that int no fun.’

‘What int?’ asked the man.

‘Life,’ said Kel, and she swung around on the stool to face the man standing behind the bar.

'You're right there.' He nodded and poured himself a beer and stretched close. 'So, you ready?'

'Born for it.' Kel stood tall. It was her way of showing how prepared she really was.

The man took a gulp of his pint, his eyes on Kel. She kept her eyes on him.

'So –' he set the glass down on to the bar – 'first things first, you remember the name of the ship you're meant for?'

Kel nodded. '*Kevothek*.'

'Remember what it means?'

'Cornish for "powerful".' She kicked at the sawdust on the floor and wondered if the man thought her stupid cus she wasn't.

'And the girl's name?'

'Rose. I also know to find her in the captain's quarters cus the captain sleeps in his office and she's his daughter.'

'And where's his office?'

'Bow room.'

The man smiled. 'That's it, he eats sleeps shits counts his money in there accordin to my source, calls himself a captain but em tower folk don't know nothin bout hard graft.'

Kel took a gulp of her beer and when she saw the baby looking she gave it a little on the tip of her thumb.

'And I told you it's a cargo ship?'

'Course.'

The man set down his beer and came around the bar. 'There's no room for error here, you know that, don't you? We all got somethin ridin on this.'

Kel nodded. If he only knew how much she had riding; it was the difference between life and death. 'I'll see you in three days at the docks, midnight, and you don't have to worry. I'll have the girl in tow.'

'And don't rough her up, I know what you Crows are like. Roughin up int part of the deal.'

'I int no animal,' said Kel and when the baby squealed she looked away. 'I bin over this a hundred times, I won't be seen, won't smack the girl, not even a hair. Three days and we'll be waitin for you at the gates, Falmouth docks.'

'And you sure you got a boat to get yourself down there?'

Kel nodded. That was the easy part.

The man smiled. 'OK then, Kel Crow gets a good job done, int that right?'

Kel shrugged a maybe but it was true. Nothing was too much for a girl with nothing to lose. Everything about the plan had brilliance carved into it and like a fairytale promise it was about to come true.

'I knew you were the one for the job.' He bent to pour them a whisky each; in the swamps a shot was as good as a promise and a handshake combined. 'Good for the job cus you're as strong as any lad I know but you got the cunnin of a girl, int I right?'

Kel nodded and she tried to agree but the whisky had its daggers in her throat.

'Strong as a boy and cunnin as a girl and twice over bein you're a Crow and all.'

Kel said yes and in her mind she knew she was good for the job on both accounts, but she had more driving force propelling her than that. The plan would lead to goods for keeping to herself, keeping and doing and selling as she pleased, and she put her hand to her heart to feel it beat out the irregular rhythm as always. She had always thought her heart would be the death of her, but now it was her life.

‘You all right?’ asked the man.

‘More un.’ She downed the whisky and the last of her beer and she told him she would never be anything other than all right again.

‘Perfect,’ he smiled. ‘Perfect cus the *Kethovek*’s come in and it’s about to back-turn.’

Kel nodded and she fingered the last tip of jar whisky and rubbed it on the baby’s gums and then she tried her hand at smiling and said goodbye.

In three days Kel would have the first part of her plan completed. It seemed like forever had been planned and in a way it had, and she told the baby as they went to sit at the river edge that it had to be on its best behaviour, because this was it, this was the plan that would change their lives. If not, her heart was due to bust and break soon as, and if it did the baby would be good as dead the same.

Kel asked every bit-bob boat that came close enough for shouting to if they might be heading toward Falmouth Bay, but she knew she looked like trouble and that was fair enough because she just about was. She would have to go at things another way.

She sat back on the pontoon that was like every pontoon floating and settling beside the rivers in that part of Cornwall, and she watched the water run wild and rapid toward the sea beneath her swinging boots. No matter how much water fell from the leaden slate-pit sky it seemed there was always room for more in the dirt-crack fissures of the earth.

She wondered if there were other parts of the world worse than this sucking circle of landslides and rising tides and forever floods, and whether she might see some of that other world and not just dream about it. The floods were the worst; they washed and rubbed everything russet red with mud. They had split what they called civilisation in two. A fissure that had the swamp people grapple with the wash-away water whilst the rich slept high and happy in the clouds; clouds that circled the towers and surrounded them with trenches and walls the height of forever. Now Kel was that bit closer she could clearly see their beauty, the trees that circled the perimeters, the ivy that draped from the walls like curtains. She wondered what secrets they held.

She sighed and when the wind picked up and made waves in the river she unstuck the baby from off the tread-boards and stood to keep the wet from catching in her boots. She waited outside the bar and retied the baby. Then she climbed the ladder that clung for all its life was worth to the side of the river bed.

She spotted a speedboat that some fool had left ticking with the key still dangling and decided to steal it, even though she could see from its livery that the speedboat was also a

law boat. If she could defeat the swamps and their death-rot squalor she could get to the coastline quickly and to the ocean that would lead to better things. She climbed aboard and strapped the baby in next to her best she could and she sat back against the hessian spring chair that had been skinned of its leather and with both hands tight to the steering wheel and her foot jammed to the floor she ran herself headlong speeding toward the south coast.

She gripped the wheel of the stolen boat with the whites of her knuckles flashing occasional red and she thought about her plan. She ran the details back and forward until it was set down clear as day. It was a good plan and more than that it was a doable plan; it had to be, because if it did not work she knew she would die.

Death in mind, this was how she negotiated the river; whooping and calling out to whoever-whatever that she was ocean bound and when the baby cried she whooped all the more to put happy into its ears. When at last the boat collided with the harbour wall of the docks she counted out her breathing, told her heart to quit with the run around, that it was made for action. Kel Crow, fierce on the outside when inside she was breaking bit by bit.

She put her hand to her chest and tallied back from ten. The heart was the start of it; born with a defect that made her fear for her life each day and then when the baby was born everyone said it was a done deal, game over. It was then that she first thought of escape, a last-ditch attempt at saving herself, all because of the stupid baby and her stupid heart

that beat wrong and was shaped wrong and had wrongness stretched clean through it.

Kel grabbed her saddle bag, swaddled the baby and jumped from the boat. The solid ground felt good beneath her feet and she took a moment to glance at her surroundings. Evening light fanned dust shadows across the wet alleyways, and smoke from the boat's engine crept up the sides of buildings and caught beneath the gutters. Everything in slow motion, when all Kel could think of was speed.

She told herself to take a minute, stay hidden in the shadows and wait to see if anyone had noticed her or the police boat that was still smoking out on the water.

'OK,' she said to the baby, 'let's go,' and she tied it to her back and coiled her saddle bag around her neck.

Slowly she made her way toward the centre of the docks, the row of cargo ships jostling for space, their rigs and cranes so closely packed Kel couldn't see where one ended and the next began.

And all the while the sound of sirens getting nearer. They sounded like screams; it made her shudder, she'd never heard so many or so close, they rarely strayed far from the tower perimeters. Something was happening up ahead and instinct was to turn around, but Kel had come too far.

She was no longer alone, people stepped from the shadows and as they pushed past running in her direction she went with them. For these swamp people, to reach the ocean was to get to a boat and have half a chance of escaping from

whatever this was. Perhaps it was a crime they had or hadn't committed, perhaps it was more than that.

Either way, Kel had never seen such mayhem. Something must've happened in the swamps. Kel had been so focused on her escape she hadn't given it heed, but now thinking back to town, the way folk looked at her and the way they looked at each other, there'd been something boiling beneath the surface, heat unnoticed.

There was always some kind of trouble brewing between the two sides, but this seemed different, worse, and whatever it was had the police armed and ready on the docks and the masses fearing and running for their lives. She wondered if the rich had prepared for this latest uprising, or if they even knew it was happening right beneath their feet. She doubted it.

Kel told the baby not to believe that there was no way out. That though they existed at the root of the rot and sat in the muck and the stench of the thing, still life went on, there were ways to make life go on. Kel didn't want what the tower people had; she wanted only two things, a heart she could rely on and freedom from kin.

As it was, the harbour and the docks in general had nothing to offer the screaming masses except the usual rough-neck looting trawlers and the cargo ships that ran guns and stolen goods back and forth across the Atlantic. Kel knew about the ships because she'd been thinking about them long before tonight. She reached into her boot and pulled out her notebook. The plan was set and firm, and she told the baby what it was she was meant to do in order to hear the plan out loud.

‘Board the ship,’ she whispered. ‘Board the ship that’s meant, then when out sailin merry in the ocean proper steal a dinghy and kidnap the girl.’ She tilted her head to see if the baby was listening and it was. ‘Now this is the best bit, swap the girl for the bag of goods and head out to Bottom America, then sell the drugs for the money that’s gonna pay for the operation.’

She returned the notebook to her boot and smiled at the baby and told it to go back to sleep.

It had been her idea to ride out to South America for a long time now. Organs and operations were cheap out there, the only place for fixing up for a girl like Kel. She’d had the idea in place for forever, had read about the operations on a square of newspaper ripped for the loo, and it annoyed her now to have to find the ship the man had told her to board amongst so much panic. It was just her luck that today her running idea had become everyone’s idea. She told the baby to hold on and she ran with the crowds a little, but Kel knew better than to straggle under the harbour lights. She could hear warning shots blast the night air, knew well not to ignore them. Soon the crowd would be dispersed and all folk gone back to idling, pleading with a god that did not exist. Kel was more than cynical; there had been a million scares and threats to the tower folk before and she’d concluded that fear for fear’s sake was the culprit.

She ran on toward where she thought the ship would be, the vessel that would bring her safely to a new life, her destiny. The one-two-three fortune story that went: get the

girl, swap for drugs, sell the drugs to pay for the operation. She went over it again and again like a chant. One-two-three and her life would start over again. A new life in a new country with a partway new kind of heart, fixed and ready for whatever. And it didn't matter what stage of chaos the new country was in because it wasn't *this* one and more importantly it wasn't her chaos.

She circled the docks and filtered out through the crowd and onward toward where she knew the cargo ships were moored. When she reached the clapperboard warehouses she found a cubby of tarred, useless nets and settled herself to watching and waiting. How many ships? It was hard to tell; she counted eight – nine maybe – each one pushed against the next, stacked with steel crates and what names she could see she said out loud but it didn't help. Where was her ship, where was the *Kevothek*?

'Shit.' Kel stood up and climbed the dune of nets. Somewhere out there was her ship, it had to be; she had not planned for anything other than victory. One more scan of the horizon, one last-ditch attempt to find something of meaning ...

It was then that she saw it; a flag in tatters, but its name was unmistakable.

'The *Kevothek*.'

The black of dark and acrid smoke combined shielded Kel from the clutch of watchful deckhands and she watched the armed guards patrol the ship. She observed where they stood and counted out the time between each one's circuit as she

double-tied the baby tight to her back. The third man to come round walking the third time had the longest space tailing him. He walked too fast and the man behind walked too slow and into that timeless void Kel ran and jumped with the bag and the baby strapped and saddled wrong and she hit the deck with a crack.

Chapter Two

Kel lay on her front and waited for her something to start hurting. When nothing did she reached around to check the baby, clubbed a hand to its mouth and listened for the wet slap skid of running footsteps, and when none came she pushed herself fully beneath the hot beating purr of stirring engines. She slowed her breathing down to an easy-draw beat and waited for her heart to fall in the same and then she furthered back between the huge metal crates that towered all around and there she paused for thinking time.

She could hear gunfire, a warning shot, and the screams of people running-rabbit at the main harbour side a few hundred metres back. She imagined their footsteps slipping on the wet ground, getting closer to the *Kethovek*, and she prayed the ship set sail before they had a chance to get down to this end of the harbour. Kel knew the chaos would not end tonight; it never did. She untied the baby and lay in the

snuggle-warm with it lying near to her and when survival instinct returned she sat up.

A bit of fresh salt air was blowing, waking her and Kel was happy to sit up and wait. She'd wait for evening shadows to pull the cargo containers snug around her and when night came fully she'd think over the next stage of her plan and she would think it over good.

She wasn't just running for the sake of freedom: she was heading toward a future set out in perfect star formation and she couldn't wait to get fixed up, have a pin put in her heart or whatever it was to bring its size back down to normal. Some fool-folk reckoned it was a good thing to have a big heart; it wasn't.

With good thoughts settling she lay back on her bursting saddle bag that housed all and everything she had in the world, and she turned it buckle down so there was some comfort for her head within the dip of material. She watched as a drift of ripped black-sack clouds crept across the thin wedge of sky above. Their silent wandering had Kel float out in her own mind and she closed her eyes to enjoy sudden solitude, even made something of cuddling the baby. Kel could hear the curl of ocean as it licked and sucked at the ship's hull and the slow clink of chain as it retreated and pulled the anchor free of water. She imagined the lift of each of the other vessels' bulging bellies as the sea caressed them with tender hands, the beckoning mystery of foreign lands whetting their appetite for the unknown, along with that of

every man and runaway and crazy that stood onboard their decks.

Kel had no such appetite. She only wanted what should have been hers; health and a simple life just being. Adventure was not for her. There were enough wilds in her as it was; enough of the unknown to declare herself uncharted, a stand-alone live-alone island, a rock, no matter how she crumbled inside.

She pulled the baby close.

The last of daylight slid by unnoticed. Bit by bit the sky dipped dark and grew void of colour, nothing but the mix-black palette of midnight in the middle of nowhere. Kel listened out for the constant burp and banter of harbour seagulls but there was none. All she heard was the whirr of engines punching and clocking up speed. The ship was finally moving. She sat up and pulled her denim jacket from the bag and wrapped it about her shoulders and she tucked the bed-blanket and the raincoat around the baby to keep it from rolling and she scanned the sky in the hope of star camaraderie, but the black night gave nothing away.

She looked down at the sleeping kid; it was the worst kind of companion. 'You better be on your best behaviour,' she said and she shoved it into hiding and stood to stretch the cold deck floor from her bones. She had work to exact, no time to lose. Everything was in place.

The first thing on her list was to locate the girl, it wouldn't be hard. There was no other girl on the ship besides herself. Rose would be a flower amongst thorns, a sore thumb

sticking out. Kel would sneak around under cover of darkness until she'd pinpointed the girl and sourced a lifeboat. Then Kel and the baby would need somewhere safer to hide and wait, ready for when the time was right for kidnapping. In Kel's mind it was as pure as quartz; it held all the light she needed to see it clearly.

She set off following the maze of storage crates that stretched wall-high and were everywhere about the ship. Kel could tell they were heading down the English Channel; the thin leaving light on that scoop-curve of horizon port side told her so. The faint wash of pink and orange hues leaked into the forever ocean like a snaking oil slick, spoiling the black ink with its rainbow spillage.

Kel stepped into her new world with all the command she thought was in her possession. The ship and its thump-and-threat din and the firm grip of deck beneath her feet were a million miles from home and it was perfect.

She looked around at her surroundings and was careful not to step too far from the shadows, told herself that no matter what she would keep to the plan. Two nights to make sure the ship was away and heading, two nights to keep the head down and the eyes watching; see the girl, get the girl and get gone.

There were plenty of people onboard ship with heeding ears, not just everyday people but strangers and stragglers and plain old crazies, working the ship for cash because they were all out of chances on the mainland. Men who couldn't get work or a life that fitted right would hit the high seas

with a two-bit coin between their teeth and a little hope in their hearts. Kel knew about that kind of hope, she had it big and ballooning in her chest just the same.

She leaned to the railings and peered down toward the waves that lifted the hull and she looked at the diminishing lights of Falmouth and raised a hand goodbye, told it to wait for her cus in two days she would return, she promised it this.

Kel said goodbye to the flickering candy town for the sake of maudlin and moved on from the railings so she could see something more of the ship. If the plan was going to work she had to know its gangways, the secret tunnels and the rough-neck workers who inhabited the oily spent place. She would watch their every move and fill the idling gaps between with her movement, keep a hundred steps ahead to keep from being discovered. She followed the starboard railings that penned the edge of the ship and was careful not to slip on the greasy deck. Tonight she would find the captain's quarters and see the girl to stamp the last detail of the plan into being.

She kept to the thin elevated shadows and turned her ear from the noise of the smash-and-grab waves and the constant clank of gearing engines and she made sure to be nothing to the men but empty space.

Suddenly she heard a shout somewhere on the upper deck. A fight was breaking out, she knew the sound all too well. She climbed the steel ladder that clung to the side of the quarterdeck and was careful with the footing, and when

she reached the top she hooked her arms between the metal bars and wedged herself against the warm purr of a generator and this was where she saw them properly for the first time.

Men and boys were jostling for space out on the deck. They pushed and shoved back against each other until a circle was formed around two fighters and Kel turned and wiggled into position so she too could watch the battle, even though she knew not to expect to see the girl there. She was a prim-posh tower girl; a kid like that wouldn't understand the primal need to fight.

Kel ducked each time eyes idled her way and she bit down on the nerve that wanted to run so she could see the victor suck up the win, taste the sugary-sharp brilliance that violence brought. Kel knew about blood and bone and the beat that exposed both and she wondered why anyone would want to fight for anything other than survival. Not that it mattered; their stupidity was her gain. It would give her the chance to explore the ship while they watched the blood get sluiced from the deck and they fixed their eyes on the next two men and turned their minds to the placing of new bets.

Kel took her time to walk the length of the vessel toward the captain's quarters. She guessed it was at the front tucked out of the way.

'Somewhere quiet,' she told herself, 'somewhere hidden.'

She reached the bow and saw the last remaining feature on the ship: a small hut-like structure studded to the deck and the sign on the door read 'Captain's Mess' so this was the place.

Kel stood close to the door and held her breath. She hadn't expected to find it so easily, she needed time to work out what she was doing. She felt for her notebook in the back pocket of her jeans for reassurance.

'Just a recce,' she whispered. 'See the girl to know that she exists.'

Kel told herself to think of her as the enemy, or, even easier than that, cargo. The girl was just goods after all, a component in a long line of workings that joined together, would fill all four corners of her beautiful, faultless plan.

She put her nose to the window and squinted to see if she could see light and turned her ear for noise, but nothing. Maybe the girl was asleep. She'd heard that tower kids were lazy, useless. Kel reached for the handle and found it gone but in its place a key. She unlocked the door and went in.

Two rooms, one for sitting and one for lying down. Kel knew the girl was not here, of course not, the door had been locked from the outside and there was not one sign of anybody at all, no sign that any girl had ever been there.

Kel left the cabin the way she found it and decided to head below deck; if the girl wasn't here perhaps a room had been made up for her down there. Since the menfolk were above deck then not many would be below and Kel acknowledged the situation as a chance to plunder food whilst she looked for the girl.

She retraced her footsteps and saw that the men had settled to other entertainments: a wooden chest upturned, a pack of cards produced. Men and boys all cut the same took

their places around the makeshift table, some with money some without; they circled the action, roped around three times like a noose. Cards were dealt and matchsticks counted out for that'll-do chips, and when all heads dipped to the silence of the ocean's push and pull Kel crept fully toward deck and she tiptoed from one shadow to the next until she found the hole that led down toward the main living quarters and she put her boot to the first rung of the ladder and climbed down.

Below deck the drill of engines turning over seeped into every corner of the ship. Every vent and pipe, every wooden crate rattled with the sound of movement, a floating gun-laden death ship bound for unfamiliar things on the forever sea. Kel bent to one of the crates and wondered what they were carrying. The sign said Food, Kitchen, but the way the contents knocked together sounded all wrong for tins and supplies. She stood back. The first time she met the man at the river bar he told her not to wonder what the ship was carrying, but when pushed he told her it was guns looted from the naval base in Plymouth and at the time Kel had thought them stupid: drugs were one thing, but guns were another, they were instant, bang-bang, game over. Kel'd bet anything that the contents of these crates were weapons.

She hurried through the squash-gut gangways with the fluorescent lights that flashed on and off and kept her nose in the air, but if there was food cooking Kel couldn't smell it for the thick tang retch of oil and diesel that was everywhere.

She went on looking and listened out for anything other than grinding cogs and when she stumbled across the dining mess she took a minute to assess her surroundings, the jumble of empty cups and plates, and she didn't worry about what it was to be a girl if she was discovered standing there because she was a big bully-boy type of girl. Kel took to rooting and was quick to find bread half ripped and a slab of cheese just sitting and she took off her jacket and bundled them into it and grabbed a carton of milk from the cooler and she stuffed the lot beneath her arm. If there were other things worthy of the steal she would have taken them but what was left of a meal was bit and spilled and smeared, and Kel was happy with her plunder and happier still to be close to eating it. She hadn't eaten much in recent days and she could feel the brittle snap of frailty in each and every bone.

She left the room and traced her way back through the narrow muddle-maze and up to the deck. Maybe it was the spin of giddy-greed hunger that had her mind single-tracked but she went at a pace about the ship and she forgot to mind herself completely.

As Kel made her way back to her little hideout amongst the crates she imagined the food sandwiched and stuffed and the milk swilled to dregs and her mouth juiced with hunger.

At times she heard laughter jab the surrounding night air. The men's whereabouts confused her, made her jump, the milk slipped and wasted. 'Shit.'

She lay on her chest and wriggled beneath the metal pipes that tangled and spiralled across the upper deck.

She stuck close to the ground and pulled the food close, her eyes following the stud-line of rivets that pushed against her cheek until she found the ladder. She pressed her ear to the stick-grit floor to listen for shouts and the thud-thud of catching footsteps but there were none.

Kel found the baby and struggled further beneath the hot turning machines, she wished she hadn't dropped the carton of milk she had been looking forward to it, now all that was left was dry bread and cheese, wet clothes. She rolled the bit of food between her fingers and chewed and swallowed over: the cheese tasted of salt and the bread tasted of nothing at all. The stodge mopped moisture from her mouth and it fisted and forced its way into her chest with a punch.

Kel could hear the engines step up gear and she knew they were running at full speed now, she could feel the vibrations in every bone and her stomach buzzed with loose fitting. For all her Cornish blood she hated the sea. To see the ocean was one thing, its moated border meant protection and security, but to be on it was another thing entirely, it meant danger and at high speed double danger.

She pushed the remaining food into the space behind the baby and closed her eyes and blocked her ears partway to the ratatat but the shake was in her and she could feel the rise from her gut to her throat. She slide from her hideout and ran to the railings with the sick racing from her. In one brief moment nothing else mattered but the purge; to have her belly sucked clean down deep within the coop of riding rib-bone.

Kel lent into the railings and doubled over with the retch and she hung in weary desperation until serenity returned. She breathed the wet sea spray and pulled it into her lungs and it was a blast of smelling salts. Her stomach unclenched and she spat the bitter from her mouth and wiped with her sleeve and she wished again for something more than nothing to quench her thirst.

The night had come in fast and with it a mist as thick as netting cloth and Kel could feel the damp curl her hair and take what dry there was from out her clothes. She stared into the roiling dark and it tangled her and caught her where she stood and there was so much of the spin about her that she felt less of herself than what was usual. She looked beyond the ocean to where the lights of land had been and lifted the collar of her jacket. She pulled up her sleeve and her left hand felt for the self-inflicted scars on her arm and she took comfort in them. The ridges lay like tracks and were etched deep into the skin and each one told a story of the spirit that was in her.

It was a journey that ran up and down her arm like a runaway carriage, crashing and burning and crashing again. Kel's life was a trainwreck, a tangle of metal and detritus that indicated a life lived far from civilisation. The lines on her arm were mapped for a reason, if only she could read them, understand what they told her in regards to where she had been and where she was heading. She looked again toward the cloak of mist that had thickened to rain and closed her eyes to let the water wash her clean, one

moment of calm to wish it beneath her skin and cleanse her soul the same.

Kel went to check that the baby was breathing after so much quiet and it was. She fed it with her own milk and changed it and returned it to the warm snug hole and she lay down beside it and her mind settled on the girl and Kel thought about her long into the night.

She wondered about the journey that awaited them, some kind of fate tying them together in the secret knowledge that they both existed somewhere on the ship. Where was the girl, she had to be someplace. Kel had no other plot, no other way of thinking.

When sleep finally came it was the kind without dreams. The dark night seeped into her pores and settled just below the skin. A thin layer of dark matter, of misery and despair that tried to take her, turn her. Kel pulled her jacket tight to stuff the gaps with body warmth and she blocked out the dreamless night with optimism. Without optimism life wasn't worth much more than standing in line and sitting out time and lying and waiting to die.

Soon the girl would be swapped for drugs without her kin knowing what or when and they'd be back out on the ocean soon as. Kel only hoped whatever was happening on the mainland had finished happening by the time they got back. This was the positive drill that bore down in her when she lay to sleep and that was how she remained until morning.