

WHERE
THE
TIDE
LINES
LEAD

For the Ibiza kids

LITTLE TIGER

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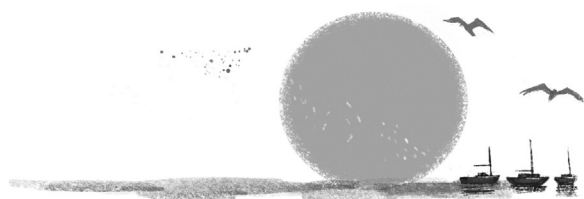
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SOPHIE
CAMERON

WHERE
THE
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LITTLE TIGER
LONDON





BEFORE

ONE



Another kid went missing on the first day of August. That made seven. Three boys, four girls. All vanished, like drops of water evaporating into hot air. All just ... gone.

I was at the beach when I heard the news. Everyone on the island has a whole collection of where-were-you-when stories from this summer. The first time it happened, I was playing Xbox at Carlos's house when his older sister went to join a search party for a tourist who had disappeared. Another time, my dad's assistant burst into our villa while we were having breakfast, his face as pale as my mum's egg-white omelette, and stammered something about guests who couldn't find their son.

But that Friday I was at the beach, watching my friends leap into the water.

"I'm going to try a backflip again." Adri pulled himself on to the wall and pushed his wet hair out of his face. "This is the one. I can feel it."

We were at our usual spot, the stone wall that rose above the water on the west side of the beach. Above us, the sky was the exact shade of my favourite oil paint, manganese blue. Adri took a breath, positioned himself on the edge of the wall – then tripped over the back of his flip-flop and fell into the water with his arms flailing.

Carlos, Luca and I all cracked up laughing. Adri had been trying to do a backflip all summer, and every attempt was a massive fail. He broke through the surface a moment later, red-faced and coughing.

“Nice one,” I shouted down to him. “Do you think you’ll be ready for the 2028 Olympics, or are you going to leave it until 2032?”

Luca scoffed. “Go on then, Elio. You show us how it’s done.”

I kept my smile still, but my fingers gripped the edge of the wall. I was born on the island, but I’d never liked the sea much. I fell over the side of a yacht when I was two and almost drowned, so it was probably because of that. Or maybe it was in my genes; my parents both grew up in the French Alps, hundreds of miles from the ocean. The drop down from the wall was only a few metres, but I’d never done it. To me, it would have been like leaping off the edge of a skyscraper.

Carlos stretched out his leg and kicked Luca in the shin. “Let’s see yours first.”

I let out a breath and relaxed my hands. Luca turned round, bent his knees, then sprung up and spun backwards into the water. His light brown hair almost brushed the stone on the way down, and I wondered what we'd do if he cracked his head open. There was no phone signal at the beach. All the restaurants and *chiringuitos* were closed that summer, and there was hardly anyone around – just a few old ladies sitting on folding chairs further along the shoreline, and some people from the sailing club tugging a Zodiac towards the water.

“It’s so weird, seeing it this quiet,” Carlos said, as if he’d read my mind. “Doesn’t feel like August.”

Any other year, the beach would be packed on a day like this. Tourists sizzling like strips of bacon on the sand, their kids splashing in sun-cream-streaked water. People selling lukewarm beers and dodgy sandwiches from picnic coolers, and club promoters sweating in stupid outfits handing out half-price tickets to events we were too young to get in to. The beach was never normally so deserted until November or December, after the season had ended and the last tourists had gone home. But this summer hadn’t been a normal summer.

“Come on, Carlos.” Luca’s shorts puffed out around his legs like neon-yellow jellyfish as he treaded water. “If Elio’s too chicken to jump, it’s your turn.”

Carlos walked to the highest point of the wall, his arms stretched out for balance. For years, he'd been the shortest of us four – so much smaller that people used to think he was Adri's younger brother. But over the last year he'd grown loads, all skinny limbs and bony joints. From where I sat, his dark curls blocked out the sun and turned his body into an almost-silhouette, outlined in gold.

Before he could jump, there was a noise in the distance. A voice, then multiple. They leaked through the pine trees bordering the beach, drifted over the sand and into the coves. They were shouting the same thing over and over; a sound that grew louder and morphed into a word.

A name.

We all knew what that meant, but Carlos said it first. "Another one."

Three police officers appeared at the end of the path. The old ladies twisted their heads round like owls. One cop went to talk to them, another to the people from the boat club. The third officer saw us watching and jogged across the sand towards the wall. He was one of the older brothers of Maria Riera, a girl in our class – Ramón or Raúl, I didn't know which.

"We're going to have to ask you to move, boys," he called up to us. "We're closing off the entire coast for an investigation."

Luca climbed out of the water and reached for his

backpack. “There’s been another one, hasn’t there?”

Ramón-or-Raúl paused, weighing up how much to tell us. As if the news wouldn’t have already split into a flock of different rumours and gone flitting around the island, landing in every single house by sunset.

“A Dutch tourist has been reported missing,” he said after a moment. “A girl. Her parents only noticed that she wasn’t in her room half an hour ago, so it might be nothing. Hopefully she’ll turn up soon.”

The cops had said the same thing about all the other kids at first: that they’d probably got lost in the hills, or slipped in the coves and been injured, or run off with some other tourist for a summer romance. But it had been weeks, months for some of them, and not a single missing person had been found.

Adri reached for his T-shirt and pulled it on. It was late afternoon, still hot, but goosebumps had rippled across his arms.

“What do you *really* think happened to her?”

That was the question the whole island had been asking. The whole world, even. Extra officers had been flown over from Madrid and Barcelona, and the countries the tourists came from had sent their own detectives to help, but still no one had found anything. There were usually a few sightings, a bit of CCTV footage, sometimes a trace of the missing person’s DNA,

and then nothing. The chief of the island's police was called José Antonio Iniesto, and the Spanish press had nicknamed him Capitán Inepto – 'Captain Useless'.

Raúl-or-Ramón grimaced. He looked a lot like Maria when he did that. They had the same thick eyebrows and pale, straight lips. Serious, unsmiling faces. Serious, unsmiling people.

"We don't know yet," he said. "But remember, this might not be like the others. It could be something different, or it could be nothing at all. We can't make any assumptions."

He told us to call the station straight away if we saw or heard anything that might be useful, reminded us that the 11 p.m. curfew was still in place for under eighteens, then jogged off to help his colleagues look for the missing girl. None of us said anything for a moment. The atmosphere had gone fog-thick, like a storm was brewing behind the bright blue sky.

"Another one," Carlos said again. Because we all knew that's what was going on, and Raúl-or-Ramón did too. Whatever had happened to those six other kids, wherever they were now, this Dutch girl had gone to join them.

Across the beach, the police officers kept shouting her name. It sounded a bit like the English word 'break'. *Break*, the sound of a family cracking into a before and after. *Break, break*, like this strange August, our island, a whole season shattered.

TWO



Our town was built around a bay on the south of the island. Like almost all the others, it was named after a saint: San Antonio, the patron saint of lost things and lost people. When Luca pointed that out to us a few months ago, Adri had laughed.

“Not doing a very good job, is he?”

We were sitting in the plaza, watching a flock of pigeons fight over crumbs. Carlos looked up from his phone to stare at Luca. He believed in signs and fate, and he always wore a Saint Christopher medallion given to him by his grandma in Colombia.

“Maybe that means something! Maybe – I don’t know, maybe the missing people will turn up here eventually.”

Luca snorted. “How would that work? I doubt whoever’s taken them is going to drop them back off at the bus stop.”

I laughed at that, even though the idea of someone ‘taking’ the missing kids left a sickly feeling in my stomach. But Carlos’s eyes had lit up.

“Think about it. San Antonio is way smaller than San Rafael or Santa Catalina, but more than half of the missing people have disappeared from here.” He stared around the plaza: the whitewashed walls, the balconies overflowing with plants and flowers. “I think there’s a connection.”

By the time we had left the beach and arrived at the plaza that first Friday in August, someone had already stuck posters of the missing girl up all over town. Brechtje – that was her name. Brechtje de Bries, sixteen, from Rotterdam. Her face smiled at us from lamp posts, bus stops, shop windows. On the post box by the park, four copies had been taped over old notices about other missing people – so many layers, you couldn’t even see the yellow surface underneath.

“Well, you’ve got to admire the Netherlands’ ambition,” Adri said, putting on a football commentator voice. “They’ve got no chance of catching up with the Brits this late in the game.”

Luca laughed as he got off his bike. “Let’s not start jumping to conclusions just yet, Álvarez. There’s still everything to play for.”

Three of the missing tourists were from the UK, and

the others were Italian and German. Someone local had vanished, too, a boy called Dani Martínez from the north of the island. After it happened a third time, Adri started treating it like a tournament. He'd even made a chart, points for each country beside badly drawn flags. He'd bet Luca that he'd get to five British tourists by the end of the season.

"I'm still hoping for a late French entry." I swung my leg over my back wheel and leaned my bike against the wall. "We might have lost the World Cup, but we could really shine here."

Luca shot me a sharp look. "What are you talking about, Elio? You *want* someone from your country to go missing? That's messed up."

My cheeks flushed. I hadn't meant it, obviously, and Luca knew that. He would have laughed if Adri or Carlos said the same thing. I opened my mouth to say so, but I couldn't find the words. Carlos shoved Luca in the shoulder.

"Shut up, bro. You and Adri are the ones treating this like it's Fantasy Football." He pointed to Brechtje's photo. "Imagine how her family are feeling. Imagine it was one of us. It could be, you know. It's not just tourists."

Carlos had said the same thing before, but the tournament was still going strong. It wasn't that Adri or

Luca or I thought any of it was funny; we'd helped put up posters and shared posts online like everybody else. When I actually stopped to think about it properly – about what might have happened to the kids, about all the dark rumours that were floating across the island – I got all sweaty and panicky. Making jokes about it made it feel smaller, somehow. Further away.

“Maybe I'll go missing and score a point for France myself.” I grinned at Adri, who was laughing at Carlos's disgusted expression. “Or would I count for Spain? Do I get to choose?”

Luca rolled his eyes. “Like you've got anything to worry about. You're going to Switzerland next month. You'll be miles away.”

Switzerland. Right now, saying that one word was like throwing a grenade into my good mood, and Luca knew that. Before anyone could reply, Adri looked at his phone and smacked a hand to his head.

“Crap. I need to go. My mum's on nightshift. I have to look after Sara.”

He hopped back on his bike and sped off towards home. Luca gave Carlos a fist bump goodbye but only raised his chin in my direction before cycling away too. He had been acting weird with me since his dad was let go from his gardening job at Red River, the resort that my parents owned. I'd told him I was sorry a million

times, but when someone handed Luca a grudge, he sunk his teeth in and wouldn't let go.

"Don't worry about him," Carlos said, reading my mind again. "He'll get over it."

"He acts like it was my decision." I kicked my foot against my bike tyre. "It's not as if I'm there in the boardroom with my parents, telling them who to fire."

"That'd never work. You'd sleep through all the meetings." Carlos grinned at me. "I'd better go too. See you tomorrow."

There were a few hours until the curfew kicked in, so I cycled around to kill some time. A weird, thick atmosphere hung over San Antonio. It was too quiet. Tons of cafés and restaurants were boarded up, and boutiques and souvenir shops had already shut for the rest of the season. Hardly anybody wanted to come to an island where so many people had gone missing.

Red River was the same. According to my dad's assistant, only eight per cent of the apartments were taken that month, and one of those was by a family whose daughter had disappeared. That was part of the reason I didn't want to go home yet – the vibe at the resort was too strange, too sad.

So instead, I kept cycling. I weaved my way through the old town, under the stone archway where I once fell and cracked a tooth, then towards the steps leading

to the clock tower. Étienne Desrosiers, this French kid who'd moved to the island a few months ago, sometimes hung out there with Maria Riera and the rest of their friends. But that afternoon, there was only a woman sticking up a poster of Brechtje on the noticeboard outside the church, and a black cat licking its paws on the bottom step.

I sat down beside the cat and scrolled through my phone for a while. The news about Brechtje had already spread across the internet. Every third or fourth post on my feed showed an influencer-investigator pulling a shocked face next to a caption like 'SEVENTH teenager goes missing from Spanish island', usually with a string of exclamation marks or scream emojis beside it.

Someone had already found one of Brechtje's profiles. It was public, around eight hundred followers. Twenty-three hours ago, she'd posted the same photo that was on the missing person posters. In it, she was standing outside the ice-cream shop in San Carlos, a town twenty minutes away from here. She was making a peace sign with her left hand, holding a cone in her right. I clicked on the caption to translate it from Dutch.

taking some cute pics before i inevitably disappear from the island forever

It was the sort of dumb thing Adri or Luca would write, not actually meaning it. Brechtje looked happy

in the photo, the same as most of the other faces in missing person posters that were papered all over the island. The thought of what happened next, whatever that might have been – it was really scary. But I'd never have told my friends that, except maybe Carlos.

As I went to close the app, I paused. I hadn't noticed in the posters, but there was something off about the photo. When I held the screen close to my face, it clicked: Brechtje was smiling, but she wasn't looking right at the camera. She was staring just behind it, and once you noticed that, her expression changed. Her grin was tense. The fingers making the peace sign were bent and her other hand was loose around the ice cream, like she was about to drop it.

Reading the caption again, it didn't seem like a dark joke any more. It seemed like, maybe, Brechtje de Bries *had* been saying goodbye.