



Devon, Summer Term 2023

The Jurassic Coast contains 185 million years in ninety-six miles of English coastline, like a timeline in rock, but don't ask me anything else about it. All I know is that I live at the oldest end, where the cliffs are red and date back to the Triassic Period. And I only know *that* because my football academy team, the Raptors, was named after the *eoraptor*, one of the first dinosaurs to evolve in the Late Triassic. Apparently.

On the day I found Rosie Linden standing on top of a litter bin in the middle of the high street, I was supposed to be at the club training with the other Raptors. But earlier that morning, before I'd even put down my kitbag, I'd found my name on a list





pinned to the noticeboard by the changing rooms. Next to my name, *Jude Simmons*, were the words ‘Not selected’.

Just like that, I was out of football academy. Everything I had hoped and trained so hard for, gone. Coach may as well have dropped me off those red cliffs. It was totally out of the blue. I’d thought I was well on my way to becoming a pro. It was everything I’d dreamed of.

So I’d bolted, slamming through the fire exit. Out of the building. Out of the club grounds. Out of the Raptors, for ever. *Not selected. Not selected.* The words roared in my head. I didn’t know where I was going, I just found myself running all the way back to town. And there was Rosie, standing on a litter bin outside the pound shop, wobbling slightly as she looked up at the sky.

Rosie Linden, a girl in my class, missing for four days and four nights. Everyone had been worried about her. And here she was, surrounded by a crowd.


It took me a moment to recognise her. Normally she has this bouncy, curly hair with a life of its own. She’s always on about the environment, saving tigers, turtles or elephants. A while ago, she had us




signing a petition to stop some woods nearby being chopped down for a new road and recently, she'd been handing out leaflets about a march in London. Something to do with climate change. But up on that bin, her hair was flat with grease and dirt. Her clothes were filthy, like she'd been crawling in mud. I could see her fingernails were caked in it.

'It's the girl from the news,' someone said. 'They had the helicopter out looking for her.'

But it was like Rosie couldn't see them staring. She carried on looking up at the sky, as if searching for something.



'I've called the police,' said someone else. 'They're on their way.'



'Don't go near her. There's something not right with her,' a man with a bald head said.

'She's lost it,' said a teenage girl, standing with her friends. 'She's absolutely lost it.' And they started mimicking Rosie, laughing.

I took a deep breath. My mum's a nurse, and she 'interferes' all the time. That's what she calls it. She says she can't help herself. And things happen around her. It's like people see her coming and think, *Right, it's safe to be ill now, she'll take care of me.*

Wherever Mum goes, they collapse, slice open their fingers or have an asthma attack. And she's there like a shot, 'interfering', putting their feet in the air or telling them to stay calm and feeling for a pulse.

That's the problem with having a mum like mine. You're never short of knowing what you *should* do. She would never have walked past Rosie and not tried to help. Plus, I'd seen Rosie's mum on the news, pleading for Rosie to come home, hardly able to get her words out she was crying so hard.

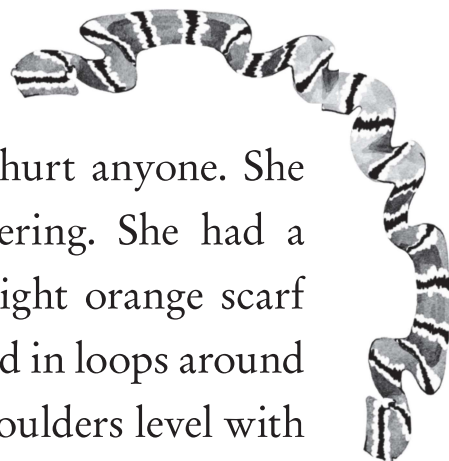
I walked through the crowd.

'Hey, don't get too close, son. She might get violent,' called the man with the bald head.

'That's right, very unpredictable they are. Leave it to the professionals,' said a woman.

'They kept 'em separate in my day,' muttered an old man. 'Now they go wherever they like and it's every other day you see a headline of someone getting stabbed by a crazed lunatic.'

I turned and glared at him. I couldn't help it. Unless he was about to take up poaching rhinos for their horns or illegal logging of the rainforest, he didn't have anything to fear from Rosie. I couldn't



see how they thought she would hurt anyone. She looked skinny and she was shivering. She had a T-shirt and leggings on, and a bright orange scarf with white and black stripes, wound in loops around her neck. I stood below her, my shoulders level with her trainers.

‘Hey, Rosie,’ I called, squinting against the sun.

She didn’t pay any attention. It was as though she hadn’t heard.

‘Rosie. It’s Jude from school.’ It occurred to me she might not know who I was. We only share one subject. Had we actually ever spoken? ‘Jude Simmons. I’m in your English class. I play a lot of football.’ Played, I should have said. Past tense. I *played* a lot of football. The memory was like being smashed in a nasty tackle, but I couldn’t think about it right then.

She looked around but not at me. Her whole body was tense with concentration. What was she searching for?

‘Rosie?’

I could feel the eyes of the crowd drilling holes in my back and wondered how long it would take for the police to come. There was a bench next to



the bin, so I hopped onto it. Maybe if I got in her line of sight, she would hear me. Up close, her face was speckled with dirt. Dry tracks ran down her cheeks where she'd been crying.

'Rosie, it's Jude from school. Can you hear me?'

She seemed so lost in her own thoughts, it was like I wasn't there at all.

My mum has this thing where she says we don't touch each other enough. She's told me about old people who go to the hairdressers more than they need to, because it's the only time they feel close to another human being. In her opinion, what most people need is a big hug. It's something to do with a hormone called oxytocin that's released in your brain. Mum says we need hugs like we need vitamins. She gets hold of me in the morning, flings her arms around me and counts to thirty. That's how long it takes to start the oxytocin flowing. Then I have to tell her to get off. My mum would do that all day if I let her. That's how much she believes in the goodness of hugs.

I definitely wasn't going to hug Rosie in front of all these people. Apart from anything else, I might accidentally knock her off the bin. I imagined what

Mum might do if she was here. Maybe if I got hold of Rosie's hand, very gently, she might notice me.

I reached out and it was like magic. She jolted and looked round, but I could tell that she didn't recognise me. Her eyes were darting all over the place, as if she was spotting things in the sky above my head. I had to stop myself from turning to look, though I knew there was nothing there.

Something was *really* wrong with her.

'Rosie, everyone's looking for you. Your mum's worried.'

She seemed to hear that time. She looked at my hand holding hers. I suddenly realised this might be weird for her. But I remembered what Mum had told me about touch. It felt important not to let go of Rosie. As if letting go would break the connection, like cutting off a phone call.

'Rosie, I'm in your class at school.' I wracked my brains for ordinary things to say. 'I'm in Mrs Wright's class with you. My name's Jude Simmons, but probably you don't know me because I spend all my time playing football.'

She gave me a thin smile. I felt like I could hear Mum's voice say, *Good, keep going, Jude.*



‘You’re best friends with Imogen, aren’t you? Imogen Richards. We live on the same street. She’s number forty-two and I’m at thirty-one.’

Me and Imogen have known each other since we were babies. There’s a photo of me naked in the bath with her and her brothers when we were about three. Imogen is the prettiest girl in our year. A few months ago, after I turned thirteen, I realised she was pretty *and* that I’d had naked baths with her, and it was just too weird. So now I feel awkward around her and we don’t really speak any more.

Rosie nodded slowly but it was as if she was only half-listening, like talking to someone with their headphones in.

‘Rosie, will you sit down on the bench with me? My legs are tired from football practice this morning.’

That was a lie. If my legs were tired, it was from running away from the club as fast as they would carry me. Running from shame and anger and disappointment. But I didn’t tell her that.

‘You’re tired?’ Her voice was croaky. She looked concerned for me.

‘Yeah, really tired, Rosie.’ Still lying.

She nodded and let me help her off the bin. The crowd gave a cheer but I ignored them and hoped Rosie would too. She didn't seem to notice. She sat down, holding on tightly to my hand. This close, I had to hold my breath. She smelled of stale sweat and rubbish. What had she been doing for the last four days?

As if reading my thoughts, she leaned in and whispered, 'Don't worry, Jude. I've been protecting you all. Guarding you. Keeping you safe.'

