

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Billy

I leave Salty curled asleep on George's bed and raise myself slowly onto my knees, turning toward the window to look out. No sign of the girls in their window. No colorful panties and T-shirts hanging from the porch railing anymore. But it's definitely them. I go to George's other window, next to his bookshelf, and look around at the back side of my abandoned neighborhood, at the Andersons' brown house, sinking in the rising sea. Next door, where the Hintons live, I think, or maybe the Guptas, the clapboards and walls of the light blue house have caved in on themselves, exposing furniture, curtains, and part of a stairwell. A fallen tree crushes the roof, squeezing out drywall and tufts of yellow insulation.

I've tried to avoid looking down, but curiosity gets the best of me, and I stare at the brown-green stew in front of the Andersons' house that's on the verge of buckling. Off to the left, caught in a tangle of shrubs and small trees, I see an orb. Face down, tiny limbs, elbows bent,

fists tight like it's having a tantrum. *Look away, Billy*, I say to myself. But I can't. It's all pale pink and wrinkled like a newborn puppy or piglet, and it's rocking in the currents, spared the abyss below that I've been looking at for three days now. It's just a doll, I tell myself. One of the many toys, cushions, shoes, cars, couches, books, and papers I've seen swirling through the canals that used to be streets. Who in this neighborhood, anyway, would lose a baby like that? I bet my neighbors got out, and the bodies I've seen have drifted in from somewhere else closer to the coast. It's my fault I'm here for barricading myself in the Vault behind those two heavy doors, headphones plugged in, pleasantly comatose from the roach I smoked at midnight.

I step back from the damp window and slam it down. I feel sad for the doll, or whatever it is. Someone either lost it, dropped it, or maybe ended up the same way. I miss Mom now and Dad, George, and Grandmother on her island. I used to like islands and water and waves.

I pull my phone out of my back pocket, put it on the bed, and lie down again next to Salty. I rub her belly with my good hand and then just hug her tightly against my chest, her fur tickling my face. Unlike that doll-thing outside, she's breathing. I wonder if the girls across the way have seen the doll and all the other shit bobbing in the water. Do they avoid looking down when they stare at the rain out their window? I gotta go over there soon to tell them about their father. To make sure they

aren't going crazy from loneliness, the smell in the air,
and the things that float by.



It's them. I tap out with my pointer finger, still cuddling
Salty on George's bed. *Can you hurry?*

Their mom too?

How should I know? I say out loud, one quick jab at
the keyboard: ?

I'm with their father. He can't reach them.

WTF???

She's with a man, a father no less. And she doesn't
know where mine is?

Can you get to them? Help each other?

They're dorks. And why isn't she worried about the
rest of our family?

Where's Dad?

Where would they go?

??????

Do you see anyone else?

Not alive.

What do you mean?

I'm fine. Can you just get here?

How many bodies?

How do you tell your mother that there might be a
dead baby floating in the brambles in front of what used
to be the Guptas' house?

Sorry you're alone. Go find the girls.

Can't leave.

How deep is the water?

Second floor. Gooley.

Gooley?

Dead stuff.

Billy?

I watch the gray bubbles rotate around and around as though she's writing a short story. In the end, nothing more appears, so I type:

People corpses animals bloated and disgusting smell is unbearable i'm not leaving the house how can i?

And then I regret what I've just texted because, surely, she's freaking out. And what is Mr. Featherstone doing to help?

Salty sits up nervously, knocking her head against my chin, ears cocked at a rattling sound outside the window. I imagine the water's rising, and something in the current has caught the ladder while scraping against the siding. I dread looking but crawl onto my knees anyway, grab the ledge, and stand to open the window as far as I can. Leaning out, I find myself looking down into the eyes of a girl slightly older than me, gripping the ladder while sitting in an orange rubber rescue dinghy.

"Hello," she says, in a pinched voice that people use when they're about to burst into tears. But instead of crying, she gives me a blank stare, one hand squeezing the second rung of the ladder, the other holding a black

rope on the side of the dinghy as it tosses her about.

"I'm Agnes."

"I'm Billy."

"I know."

Mom told me once that Mrs. Featherstone's motto was "kill 'em with kindness," but that underneath it all, she was a condescending pit bull. Even Dad, who never gossips, jumped in to say that Mrs. Featherstone had turned motherhood into an elite sport. I don't see any of that in Agnes's disoriented gaze.

"I have dog food," she says, looking down at the five-pound bag of Purina at her feet.

Her face is wet from the drizzle. Oily dark brown hair clings to her temples and cheeks. Apart from dark circles under her eyes, she's prettier than I remember from Calc II. A cute nose that's a little round at the tip and big brown eyes with long black lashes.

"Can you take this?" She points at clothing wrapped in a white sheet and two green garbage bags knotted shut. "Our house is about to go."

"Throw me that rope first," I say, pointing at the floor of the dinghy.

She tosses it at me. I pull it through the window and secure it to the bedpost. Still holding the ladder with one hand, her legs splayed, feet anchored to the boat as it rocks her, she lifts one of the plastic bags and pushes it into my arms. We empty the boat like this with real

team spirit until I remember the baby doll, which seems to have disappeared with everything else drifting by.

I'm pulling the dog food through the window when Agnes thanks me several times. I want to jump into the boat and row her back safely to what's left of her house so that we can pick up her sister. I imagine putting them in my parents' spacious room with the comfortable bed. There isn't much I can do for so many of the things I've seen pass by my house. But maybe I can save these girls' lives and mine and Salty's and get us the hell out of here.

As I grip the climbing ropes that pin the ladder against the house, I realize I should have snapped some photos of everything going on because the topography is changing so fast. People's whole lives wash through our town, and nobody knows what has been lost. Isn't someone supposed to record this kind of stuff for future generations? Or write about it beforehand so humanity can minimize the damage?

"Is your mother over there too?" I ask.

"Just Lana."

She turns her back and stares at the second-story porch that's disappearing into the currents, leaving a gaping hole in the room with the window where I'd first seen both girls.

"Do you want me to go over and get her?"

"I'm going back now."

"Let me go."

"Well, I'm in the boat already."

“True,” I say, unknotting the rope from the bedpost and tossing it back in the dinghy.

She lets go of the ladder and begins to paddle away with desperate jerking motions.

“But come back,” I call out.

“I’ll try.”

If I had a raft or a paddleboard, I could go over with her. Apparently, it isn’t easy crossing. Having listened to the commotion from a safe distance, Salty now comes to my side and looks up. As I rub my fingers through the swirl of bristly curls on top of her head, I keep an eagle’s eye on Agnes, holding her own in the currents and paddling hard. She crosses over the middle of what used to be our street. Looking at her house, I see Lana sitting on the ledge of a window to the right of the collapsed porch. Agnes steers the dinghy under the window and steadies it and herself by grabbing loose siding while her sister lowers herself on sheets knotted together.

I watch them paddle toward me and hope the current doesn’t sweep them away. As the dinghy twists and rocks with no apparent logic, they begin to argue. I can’t quite hear what they’re saying, but it clearly isn’t very nice because Agnes bursts into tears, puts her hands to her face, and sobs. I get that we’re in an emergency, but this seems extreme. I’d liked to say something comforting to Agnes, but she’s too far away. They begin to drift dangerously away from my house, toward the center of the current, where rough water sucks things into its depths.

“Agnes,” I shout as loud as I can.

She drops her hands from her face and looks at me.

“Paddle or you won’t make it.”

She finds the oar at her feet and, along with Lana, who holds the other oar, begins smacking the water like mad to get to the ladder.

I lean as far out of the window as I can. With the ropes in both hands, I swing the ladder away from the house several times until Lana grabs it and pulls the dinghy in. As she passes me the dinghy’s rope, and I secure it to the top rung, I notice that both girls’ eyes are red and puffy. I’m sorry they’ve lost their home.

Agnes holds the bottom of the ladder, and Lana stands up. As she’s testing the bottom rung with her right foot, my screen on the desk pings. I reach for it with my good hand.

At airport. Getting on a plane.

This news, along with the fact that I’m not alone anymore, makes me hopeful. I put the phone down and reach out to Lana as she stands on the top rung in her yellow rain jacket, Capri jeans, and black Vans. Her features are bumpier than Agnes’s, but she has the same big brown eyes.

“Can you pull me up?”

I grab her by the arms while she climbs onto the sill. She smells like those sweet, hard, green-apple candies but a little sour and sweaty, too. She crawls through the window and into the room. Sinking her hands into the

pockets of her rain jacket, she looks around George's room at the wall of license plates and at his bookshelf.

Agnes follows after Lana, and we make sure the rope is tightly secured to the top rung of the ladder one last time in case we need the dinghy again. They tell me they saw it drifting by and spent half of yesterday retrieving it from what was left of a tangle of small trees and shrubs behind their home. I want to ask what else they've seen floating by, but they looked exhausted and sad, so I give them towels instead. I make them each a packet of ramen, and they devour the noodles and broth in silence.