

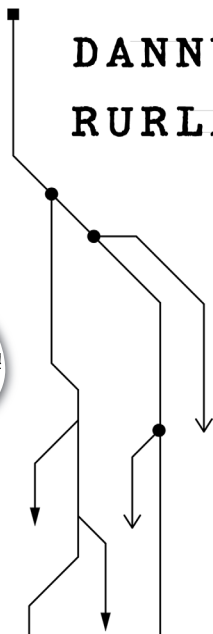


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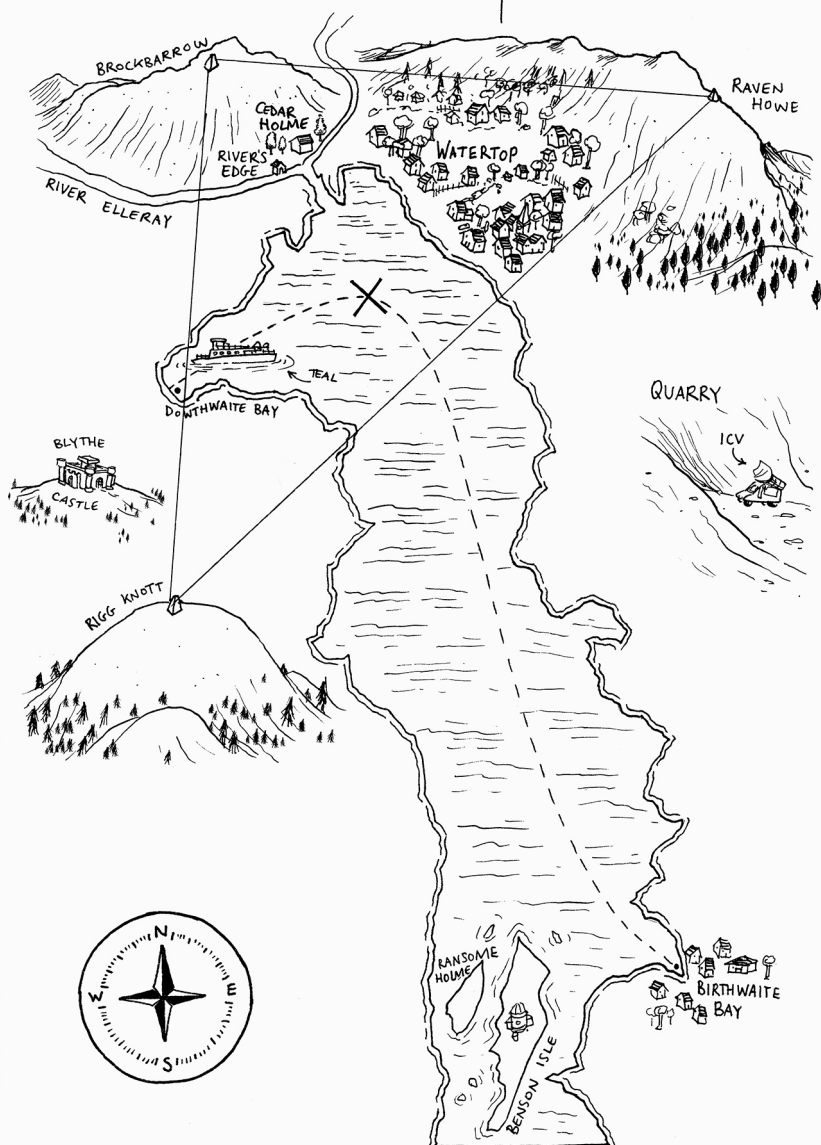
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*For my children:
Esme, Chloe, Lachlan and Lucy*

‘You haven’t seen a tree until you’ve
seen its shadow from the sky.’

AMELIA EARHART

To Hollowdale





CHAPTER ONE

It was an hour before school, and Tom Hopkins was beginning the return leg of his morning flight. A half-eaten plate of toast at his elbow, he turned north and followed the drystone wall up the side of Raven Howe. A few Herdwicks, their russet flanks catching the morning sunshine, watched his shadow warily as he passed overhead. He drew level with the top of the hill, the sheep now brown dots on a cloth of green, and was about to continue over it before heading back across the lake for home, when he noticed a man looking straight towards him through a pair of binoculars. He backed away and tried to make himself disappear into the oblivion of

sunshine, his heart thumping as he set the controls to hover. The man was tall, with a smart jacket and a shock of white hair showing beneath a straw hat – not the usual hiker or dog walker Tom would expect to see this early on the fell tops.

At last the man turned away. Tom blindly stuffed in a mouthful of toast and followed his gaze down the slope to where a hazy outline of fells was mirrored in the strip of water below. Making its way up from the group of wooded islands that divided the lake in two, the passenger steamer *Teal* was the first boat to break the morning calm, like a knife slicing open a sheet of tinfoil.

‘Thomas, dear, do you know what time it is?’ The voice of his aunt drifted across the lawn from the kitchen door.

He glanced at the clock in the corner of the display. Six minutes before he needed to leave for the bus.

He was about to head for home, when he noticed that the man was now typing into a laptop that was resting on top of the concrete pillar of the trig point. He zoomed in to try and see what was on the screen, but the man’s back was in the way. He stopped typing and turned his binoculars to the opposite shore. Tom followed his gaze and saw two boats emerging from behind a headland and moving towards a narrow inlet. The first, an orange speedboat, was towing a boxy old motor cruiser behind it.

Tom shut down his motors and glided low over the canopy of the beech wood, to get clear of the man with

the laptop. When the hill was well behind him he powered up again, crossed to the other side of the lake and circled above the boats to take a closer look.

The speedboat's name, *Invincible*, was visible on the side, and Tom could see why: the row of three massive outboards would make her one of the most powerful boats on the lake. There was a man and a woman on board, and they seemed to be waiting for something. The woman had red hair and wore a camouflage jacket. She was looking back up to the top of Raven Howe through binoculars. The man had his hair in a tight ponytail. He sat hunched over his watch, occasionally glancing at the sky.

'Thomas, you'll be making the bus wait for you again.'

He could hear the concern in Aunt Emily's voice. If he lingered much longer he'd have to face a busload of stares as he stumbled up the steps.

He was close enough to read the name of the old motor cruiser: *Clementine*. She was drifting with no one on board. Something strange was going on. *Let them stare*, he thought. *Let them stare*. He had to see this play out.

Tom swivelled back to Raven Howe. The man with the straw hat raised his arm and then lowered it, like someone starting a race. At this signal the couple in the speedboat sprang into action. They cast off the tow rope, throttled away from the cruiser for a hundred yards, and then curved back in a tight circle to face it. They sat there for a few moments, staring at the other boat.

Tom was aware of the workshop door opening.

‘Thomas, it’s five minutes till the bus.’ He did not look up, but could picture the bewilderment on her face. Since his great-aunt had taken him in, he’d had a nagging feeling, despite her endless kindness, that he baffled her. ‘He’s just at that age,’ he had overheard her say to the physio once when Tom had skipped a session. But that wasn’t it at all. ‘Can’t you press pause, or something, and finish the game later?’

He met her eyes now and tried to look calm, while delicately holding a steady hover. Why did she have to choose *this* moment to butt in? ‘Don’t worry, Aunt Emily,’ he said through gritted teeth. ‘I’ll be right there.’

‘You won’t want me driving you in again, Thomas, will you? Not on the last day of term.’ When she’d gone, the metal door of the workshop crashed behind her like a warning.

He whipped his head around to face the monitor. He had taken his eyes away from the screen for only a few seconds, but when he looked back, the *Clementine* was engulfed in flames, black smoke swelling into the air like a bruise, and jets of fire spurting from the hatches. Then the bow tilted into an angle that made Tom’s stomach churn and the boat sank so quickly that, by the time he engaged the camera and started filming, there was nothing but a circle of simmering water and a thinning cloud of smoke where the cruiser had been.

Three minutes later Tom slumped into a seat on the bus and realized he was shaking. He stared at the

chequered headrest in front of him and tried to replay the last few minutes of the flight in his mind: the man and woman on the *Invincible* looking on while the old cruiser blazed and sparked, then the *Clementine* going down in flames like something in a war zone. And the tall man with the straw hat and laptop, watching everything calmly from the top of Raven Howe.