



DAY 1

28th February

Some people believe that when you drown, your whole life flashes before you. The boy in the river saw only bottles, driftwood and the dented licence plate of a foreign car. Not his life. But he knew for certain that he was drowning.

He wanted to swallow, but the muscles in his throat constricted. His whole neck and jaw, vice tight. He was pretty sure his lungs were ripping open. A searing pain pierced his nostrils and his eyes were grazed with grit. He was heavier now and the surface was retreating every second, so the light that rippled in circles over his head was getting further away.

His time was up.

But this wasn't how the boy had planned to die. In fact, he was certain he hadn't planned to die at all. Ever.

So he fought.

He punched his hand through the surface. He forced his chin up into the light and gulped. River waterfalled into his throat. He was sure his chest would explode. A wave dragged him under again and flung him hard against the bank. His shoulder buckled and in the darkness he scrambled to push himself up again for air.

He fingernailed at the brickwork. Certain his arm would break, he held on. Because he didn't want to die.

Another wave flung him hard and this time he got a tighter latch on the wall. The muscles down his arm spasmed. He kicked against the bricks, hauled himself in closer and strained his head upwards.

The third wave lifted him higher. Air tipped into his lungs and drilled inside his nose. He hung on to the lip of the wall and heaved himself clear, his legs and arms splaying, weighed down by his waterlogged clothes.

And the river fell away behind him, clinging to its cargo of bottles, paper and cans, carrying them down towards the sea.

He was on dry land. This fight was over and, for now, the boy had won.

He lay with his face pressed against the pavement.

He could still hear the river. And he could hear the sounds of a city moving all around him. But he had no idea where he was.

And he realised in that moment, there was something else that was incredibly important that he didn't know either.

Kassia was talking to a dead person.

She wasn't in the habit of talking to the dead. But she came on Saturdays to the City of London Cemetery to talk to one in particular. Her dad.

Her mum came too, but she'd given up talking to Kassia's dad while he was living and felt it was hypocritical to talk to him now he'd passed on. She visited the grave each week with her daughter because certain things were expected.

Dante never came. Kassia didn't discuss this with her brother. It was one of the things they didn't talk about.

'I'm going to take my GCSEs early, Dad,' Kassia mumbled down to the grave. 'Mum's done the paperwork. It's a great idea to get them out of the way. Focus on my A levels sooner.' She folded last week's flowers and wrapped them in a sheet of newspaper laid out by her knees. 'I'm excited about it. I really am.' A rose thorn caught the heel of her thumb and a streak

of blood cried on to the newspaper. She folded the page and then sucked the nick on her hand.

‘Kassia, please!’ Anna Devaux’s voice was pinched and her face creased like a gourmet chef who’d just witnessed a customer adding tomato ketchup to a finely prepared roast beef dinner. ‘Think of the germs!’ She took a small bottle of hand sanitiser from her handbag and passed it to her daughter. Kassia squirted the gel into her palms and rubbed them together. The cut stung.

‘I’m going to raise this with the groundsman,’ her mother continued, unsheathing a pair of scissors from her bag and brandishing them in the air so the sun glinted on the points of the blades. ‘I fail to understand why they can’t run the lawnmower round this gap.’ She bent down and snipped at the edging of grass running like a collar between the headstone and the marble slab covering the ground. ‘The amount we pay in fees each year, you’d think they would have someone on this.’ With her plastic-gloved fingers she scooped up the grass cuttings and tucked them into a small white bag she’d brought along for the purpose. Then she dropped the bag on to the folded newspaper that still lay on the memorial slab and stripped the gloves from her hands so they made a noise like an air gun being fired.

Kassia tucked the bag of cuttings into the folds of the newspaper and then unwrapped the new flowers and stood them in the vase.

‘Finished?’ Her mum slipped the scissors into their plastic blade protectors and dropped them back into her handbag.

Kassia moved closer to the gravestone. ‘You think getting on with my exams early is a good idea, don’t you, Dad? No time like the present, Mum says.’ There was, of course, no answer, just a silence that seemed to extend for ages.

Her mother reached down and plucked a browned petal from the edge of the nearest bud. She looked at it doubtfully, unsure what to do with it, and then tucked it into the folds of newspaper Kassia carried, before gelling her own hands with the sanitiser. ‘We need to try another florist,’ she added. ‘These flowers are sub-standard.’

‘Mum. I wanted to talk to you.’

‘So you have the history essay and two books to read for English today, yes? And then I’ve found some past papers online.’

‘Mum. I was wondering about school.’

‘I need the history done by Monday if I’m going to get it marked on time,’ Anna Devaux continued. ‘And it’s best you do as many dry runs of the final papers as

possible. I'm thinking twenty for each subject.'

Kassia calculated the time it would take to do this many tests online. 'I wondered if you'd thought about me going back?'

Kassia's mum stopped walking. She pulled the sleeve of her jacket away from her wrist and looked down at her watch. 'If we catch the 8.17 you could get three hours' work done before lunch.'

'Mum. About school? If I'm taking the exams then isn't there a Year 11 class that I could go to for a few months? Part-time even, if you thought that was better.' Her mother had started walking again and she was finding it hard to keep up. 'Mum?'

'This isn't the time, Kassia.'

Kassia thought of lots of smart answers in her head but she knew better than to say them aloud. 'Could we just talk about it?'

'There's nothing to talk about. Although,' Kassia waited for her mother's next words, like a dog waiting expectantly for its owner to throw a stick and shout 'fetch', 'I *do* need to have serious words with the groundsman before we leave.'

Kassia pushed her hands into her pocket. The cut on her thumb caught on the zip of the pocket and the pain made her eyes smart.

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Reverend Solomon Cockren was ready for the day. He loved Saturdays. People flocking in their masses across London to visit St Paul's. The cathedral full of visitors.

He walked briskly towards the East Door, looked down at his watch and, despite the fact it was still a little early, he turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open.

The sound was, for a moment, overwhelming. Reverend Solomon took a second or so to adjust but he didn't mind the noise. It meant the city was alive.

He liked to watch people. He enjoyed working out their stories. Looking out on the street outside the cathedral was like looking at the shelf of a busy bookshop. Tens of stories packed together, none of them connected to each other, some big, some small, some easy to read and some much more of a challenge. 'Guessing the story' was his favourite game.

This morning there was a gaggle of sightseers. Early risers, he presumed, keen to tick St Paul's off their To Do lists. There were some party goers who'd obviously been out all night and were wearily making their way home. And there was a girl hurrying along behind a woman who was clearly her mother. The girl clutched a crumpled newspaper under her arm, a bunch of dead flowers poking out the top of the folds. She must have been to a graveyard, he figured. That's the only place

he could think of where dead things tended to outnumber things that were alive. This guess made sense of her story and he was proud of himself for thinking of it.

The girl and her mother were in a hurry. As they passed the door to the cathedral, a tall black boy, with buzz cut hair, rounded the corner. The girl sidestepped and the dead flowers fell from her hands. The boy bent down to pick them up. The girl's mother was snapping and snarling, the girl looked embarrassed but the boy was unflustered, the woman's words running off him like water, as if he'd heard such ranting a million times before. Maybe he was used to things much worse than dead flowers. An unhappy home perhaps. Another story successfully deciphered. Reverend Solomon was doing particularly well today.

He made a mental note to add the two youngsters to his prayer list. He was just debating whether to add the mother too, in spite of her snapping, when he saw a story he couldn't read.

There was a teenager making his way shakily up the steps to the cathedral. He was smartly dressed. A suit of sorts, although slightly old fashioned. His red hair was long, curled around his face.

None of this was especially remarkable. Reverend Solomon was used to seeing all types of dress and

outfits in the city. Someone had once described London as a melting pot and not much of what bubbled away in the stew here could really surprise him.

But he was surprised. And confused. Because despite the fact the sun was blazing in the sky and it hadn't rained for days, the boy was soaked to the skin, his clothes dripping into a pool of muddy water at his feet.

'Are you OK?' Reverend Solomon fussed, steering the boy towards the open doorway. 'Are you hurt? Do you need help? How did this happen?'

'I don't know.'

Reverend Solomon glanced down the road at the Thames. It was the only explanation. 'You've been in the river? Why?'

'I don't know.'

The boy looked like he would fall and so Reverend Solomon helped him sit down on the steps of the cathedral. He stared into the boy's eyes and held his hand tight. 'What's your name?' he said at last.

The boy took a long time to answer. 'I don't know that either.'





**Climb
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Climb experience for one
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Results for I

Top / A



Conspiracy London @ConspiracyL
I have my theories. #RiverBoy



Tiffany Harrison @Tiff92 17h
UNREAL. #RiverBoy #LDN #hot #tann



NOAH @NOAH 20h
#RiverBoy !_-+3



Metro UK @MetroUK 20h
Young boy discovered at St Paul's #RiverBo



Joeseph Albright @BeastyJoe 20h
Fell in a river. LMAO. #NOOB #RiverBoy



flood @flood 21h
#unicornprotocol #activate #RiverBoy