



THE
QUIET
AT THE
END
OF THE
WORLD

LAUREN JAMES

WALKER
BOOKS

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For Chris, for a childhood spent digging holes
in the sand in search of treasure

*Whence, I often asked myself, did the
principle of life proceed?*

Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, *Frankenstein*

*We will now discuss in a little more
detail the Struggle for Existence.*

Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*

- OPERATOR 1** Hello, emergency service operator, which service do you require? Fire, police, or ambulance?
- CALLER** Ambulance please.
- OPERATOR 1** I'll just connect you now.
- OPERATOR 2** Hello, this is the ambulance. What is the nature of your emergency?
- CALLER** Hi. Er, my mum – she's got a nose bleed. It won't stop, it's been going for ages. What do – what do I do?
- OPERATOR 2** A nose bleed?
- CALLER** Yeah, it's – really fast and . . . sticky.
- OPERATOR 2** All right, duck. Try to stay calm. Can you give me your location?
- CALLER** Home. We're at home. She's – should I drive her to the hospital?
- OPERATOR 2** If you give me your address I can send an ambulance.
- CALLER** Right. It's, er, Maya Waverley. 18 Horn Street, Oxford. How – how long—?
- OPERATOR 2** They're leaving now. Stay calm, duck.
- CALLER** Oh! Oh God!
- OPERATOR 2** What is it? Maya? Are you still with me?
- CALLER** I've got it too! I'm bleeding! It's everywhere!
- OPERATOR 2** Stay calm. The ambulance is on its way. Stay calm, Maya.
- CALLER** I'm fine! It doesn't hurt. I've got a towel. It's

just – a shock.

CALLER Hello?

CALLER Hello, operator, are you there?

OPERATOR 2 I'm sorry. I just. My nose is bleeding too. I'll – I'll be right back. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. Oh, damn – sorry, sorry, damn.

CALLER What's happening? What's happening to us?

OPERATOR 2 I don't know. I don't know. My colleague – her nose is bleeding too. Oh, damn.

CALLER What do I do?

OPERATOR 2 I don't – I'm not sure, Ma'am. I think I need to—

CALLER Hello? Hello? Hello?

**EIGHTY-FIVE
YEARS LATER**

CHAPTER 1

TIME	DATE	LOCATION	OBJECT	NOTES
12.17	04/04/2109	51.508474, -0.121292	EMBOSSED EMERALD- GREEN PLASTIC WALLET, CIRCA MID-TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY.	Found by LIMBW.

“We haven’t got long,” I shout, already jumpy with adrenalin. “I’m going in!”

Before Shen can reply, I fall backwards into the manhole. I’m swallowed immediately by pitch black air. It smells of warm death down here, rotting and ancient.

I drop far enough that my stomach flips before the rope kicks in and catches me. Holding on to the carabiner clip of my harness, I walk my feet down the curved tiles of the ceiling, guiding the rope through my gloved hands.

Shen shouts to me from where he’s crouched on the pavement above with Dad, “Watch out for the sewer alligators, Lowrie!”

“This isn’t even the sewers! And that’s a myth!” I yell back.

“You can never be too careful.” He ducks back out of sight to buckle on his own harness.

My foot hits an old fluorescent lighting tube and smashes it, sending glass into the water below. Wincing at the sound, I step off the wall, so I’m hanging freely from the rappelling line. Then

I lower myself down again, twisting around so that I can see the tunnel on all sides. I'm trying to read a sign hanging loose from the wall when I hit the surface of the water with a gasp. It's ice cold, despite the moist warmth of the air.

Treading water and trying not to shiver, I unclip the rope from the harness and call up, "All OK!" My teeth are already chattering.

The rope is lifted back up, clip jangling merrily.

"Very good, Shen," I hear Dad say. "Slowly does it."

Not wanting to stay in the freezing, foul-smelling water for any longer than necessary, I swim over to the platform and pull myself out. There's a tile on the floor warning me to MIND THE GAP, and the old London Underground symbol – a red circle with a blue line through the centre – covers the wall. Posters dangle from their holders all along the platform wall, dripping shredded plastic that advertises insurance and movies.

This was part of the Circle line, back when there were enough people to justify running the Tube lines. Now the flooded underground tunnels are just another relic of the past. The small number of us left in London have all but forgotten about them. Shen, Dad and I are probably the only ones who've been down here in the last twenty years.

I reach out to grab Shen's hand as he descends on the rope, guiding him on to the platform, so he doesn't land in the water too.

"Perfect timing," he says, unclipping his harness. "It's raining up there."

I look pointedly at his wetsuit.

He shrugs, grinning. “I don’t mind getting wet in the name of treasure-hunting. Drizzle is a different matter altogether, Shadow.” He calls me Shadow because when we were little I used to follow him around like one, apparently. It is a controversial and much-debated nickname, but he doesn’t seem likely to give it up any time soon.

Dad lowers himself into the tunnel after us. He comes down here a lot to collect plant and algae samples from the water, and we’ve been coming with him for years, ever since we were big enough to fit in the harnesses. It started because he wanted to get us interested in horticulture, but it kind of backfired because we were both more interested in exploring the tunnels.

I keep hoping we’ll be allowed to come here on our own soon, but realistically that isn’t going to happen. My parents and Shen’s still think that we’re not old enough, even though I’m sixteen and Shen is seventeen. For now, we have to make do with tagging along on my dad’s botanical outings – although he gets so caught up in his findings that he often forgets about us anyway, so it’s almost like being on our own.

“Lowrie, you need to let your rope out a little more slowly next time,” Dad says, as he unclips his harness.

“You always say that,” I say.

He huffs at me. “Well, you always do it too fast.”

“I’m always excited to get started.”

“Safety first, exploring second.” As he says it, Dad is already leaning in to the wall to examine lichen growing on the tiles.

Shen says, "Are you sure it's not 'Plants first, safety second, exploring third'?"

"Well. You said it, not me." Dad grins.

I think Dad would choose plants above anything else in the world. Except me, I suppose. And even that would be a close call.

"Go on, then," Dad says. "Be off with you. I don't need your attitude while I'm working."

"See you in forty minutes!" I say, biting back a smirk.

"Twenty," Dad replies immediately as I knew he would.

"Thirty."

"Twenty-five."

"Deal." I salute him, bouncing on my heels.

"And keep your helmets on," he calls after us.

I wave a hand in his direction in lazy agreement.

Shen and I come down here to search for treasure. The Tube lines are full of old decaying junk, washed in from the River Thames, which is what makes them so fun to explore.

Shen is all about the unexplainable oddities: the Curiosity Cabinet treasures. Things that won't necessarily be registered by a metal detector. Ancient fossils, bleached white and smooth by time and pressure; fountain pens from the fifteenth century; ivory and textured silver; anchors from ancient ships, dropped into the Thames when shipments came into harbour.

I'm here for the jewellery. You'd be amazed at what you can find - gold and silver and platinum, embedded with rubies and diamonds and amber and sapphires. Cameo brooches with dark silhouettes surrounded by gilding. The kind of things which takes

hours to clean, rubbing cotton buds through the delicate filaments until the texture and design appears.

“I don’t know why you bother arguing with your dad for more time,” Shen says as he pulls his handheld metal detector out of his rucksack. “You know he’s going to take at least an hour anyway, once he finds something good.”

I glance back along the platform to where Dad has already crouched down to gather a lichen sample. The plants he studies all look the same to me, but each to their own. “I’ve gotta practice my bartering skills before the next jumble sale, you know that.” Since there aren’t any shops any more, the local second-hand sales are the only way to get things, so competition over certain rare items is legendary.

Shen hums. “You can’t let Mrs Maxwell get the screwdrivers first again?” “Don’t even joke. I still wish I’d got that chisel. The blade was Japanese steel. I’m never going to find one like it.”

“Just wait. I bet she only wanted it so she could give it to you for your birthday.”

“I hadn’t thought of that!”

At the end of the platform, we walk down the steps and wade into the grimy water covering the disused train tracks. It comes up to my knees and is so cold that it makes me shiver. I have to breathe through my mouth to ignore the smell.

As we follow the curving metal girders along the line, Shen and I fall into a companionable silence. The only sound aside from the swish of the water is Shen’s metal detector, which emits an oscillating beep as it passes over a piece of iron sticking out

of the water. We're stirring up thick and putrid sediment as we walk. A rat swims past me, ears flat back against its head. I twist, grimacing, to make sure it doesn't touch me.

As the tunnel drops down at a gentle incline, the water steadily deepens until it's almost at waist height. I grit my teeth against it and kick off the floor to start swimming. Shen follows me, more slowly. He's always cautious about hurting himself in places like this, whereas I'm more than willing to risk a grazed knee in the name of treasure-hunting.

When the tunnel ahead twists into view, I catch sight of something looming in the darkness ahead. "There's something there."

"What was that?" Shen says. He's deaf in one ear. He fell off a horse while practising jumps when we were ten. Sometimes when he's distracted or not paying attention, he misses things people say. I used to get really annoyed that I had to constantly repeat things to him, until I realised he wasn't doing it on purpose.

"There's something there," I say again, shining the torch on my headlamp to show him. The light picks out something large and metal. We both grin at the same time. It's a train. We've never found one before. This alone makes the trip down here worth it.

We swim towards it. For once I'm glad that the water is so deep. It means that we're level with the driver's door. When Shen tugs on it experimentally, it opens, releasing a musty, cotton smell. He pulls himself up out of the water and into the train, hesitating a moment to see if I need help – I don't – before passing through the driver's compartment into the front carriage.

After dragging myself out of the water, I take a moment to poke through the booth for anything interesting before following him.

In the main carriage, the floor is covered in padding from the seats. It must have been gnawed on by rodents. The whole place looks as derelict as you'd expect from something that has been standing in water for decades. I grab the chrome railing running along the ceiling to steady myself, wary that rot might have made the floor dangerous. Then I pick my way down the carriage after Shen.

It's hard to imagine this small vehicle packed full of commuters. I can't even wrap my head around the idea of seeing this many people, let alone being squashed up together in a confined space like this. There are only three hundred people in London now.

Eighty-five years ago, a virus stopped humans from being able to reproduce. It infected everyone in the world. No one knows exactly where it came from – whether it mutated from an animal disease or was somehow caused by pollution – but within weeks it had spread across the planet. The symptoms weren't even that bad, nothing worse than a mild flu. It was only in the months afterwards that everyone began to realise that the entire population had become infertile.

The births didn't stop immediately. Eggs and sperm that had been frozen for IVF treatment before the virus spread remained viable. A lot of them were used up in the first year after the virus, before everyone realised how widespread the infertility really was.

By the time people understood how long it might take to find a solution for the sterility, the samples had nearly all been used up. The remaining eggs were kept safe after that, and babies were only born occasionally. Finally, seventy years after the virus first spread, there was only two eggs left: Shen and me.

We are the youngest people in the world. Our parents thought it was only right that we grow up together, seeing as we might one day be the only two people on the whole planet, so his parents moved from Beijing to London.

We've grown up surrounded by a community of people who are nearly all seventy years older than us. The youngest of them are in their eighties, and were born from the other frozen eggs. They're the last surviving members of the youngest generation, born in the decades after the sterility. More and more people die every year.

There's no one else at all my age, except Shen. We're just left-overs, really. Being the youngest doesn't mean I'll necessarily be the last person to die. There's no assurance I'll live to my full life expectancy. But I'll definitely be around to watch the population drop below a few dozen. The thought terrifies me. Who is really brave enough to knowingly watch their species go extinct?

So far no one is anywhere close to working out how to fix the effects of the virus. It didn't affect any animal species, just humans, and it appeared completely out of nowhere. Shen's personal favourite theory is that aliens brought a weird space disease to Earth.

Whatever caused it, there's not much we can do except wait

and hope that the scientists will create a cure before it's too late.

"Find anything?" I call to Shen, who's opening the door into the next carriage.

"Nothing but mouse droppings," he says warily.

I smile. Shen would never admit it, but he's a little scared of mice. He has no problem with rats, but he thinks that mice are too small and quick. Apparently that makes them "suspicious".

I kneel down to peer under the seats. There's an old newspaper, shredded into dust, a shopping bag and something at the back in the shadows. My fingers hook over it, and I tug it out into the light.

It's a purse. A cheap one, because the plasticky material hasn't rotted as much as the seating. In fact, I can still make out the faded design – the logo for something called *Loch & Ness*. I try the zip, but it's sealed shut with grime, so I run the blade of my penknife along the edge of it and the purse flops open, revealing rows of plastic cards. When I tilt one to the light, I can make out an embossed name: MS MAYA WAVERLEY. I call Shen back and he takes the card from me, pulling out his magnifying glass at the same time. "You can look at it later," I tell him, checking the time. "We should probably find our way back to daylight if we don't want to be late for the community meeting."

Everyone comes to the weekly meetings. As far as we know, London is the only occupied city now. As the population got smaller and smaller, people migrated towards the capital cities. Then, when we were about five, it was decided that everyone left should move to one place, to make it easier to keep energy and

water supplies running. London was chosen because it's where Shen and I were already living.

I make a note of the purse's location in our Discoveries log-book on my tablet: "Embossed emerald green plastic wallet, circa mid-twenty-first century". I also note down the coordinates of where I found it. The purse is mysterious, which sometimes makes a discovery more interesting than it being simply valuable. Often, I'll find something weird and take it home just to work out why I like it.

Shen likes to joke that only people like us would think sifting through mud and sewers for junk is a hobby instead of an act of desperation. He says we're so used to having everything we need that the only thing really valuable to us any more is the element of surprise. I don't think that's true, though.

We are lucky that we don't have to worry about food supplies or anything like that. Our parents, and their parents before them, planned meticulously for the time when there would be only a few humans left. We definitely don't need to scavenge for items for anything but fun. But I don't think we're ungrateful or spoiled. The reason I enjoy treasure hunting is because I'm fascinated by history. When you know that there's no future, the only thing that's interesting any more is the past.

I want to know who Maya Waverley was. I wonder if I'll be able to track her down on the old social media sites people used to post on. It would be nice to find out what happened to her.

Once, I traced the owner of a lost engagement ring back to the grave she shared with her husband, based on the names and

date engraved on the inside of it. The gravestone was in a local cemetery, and was completely hidden under brambles and moss by the time Shen and I tracked it down using the county records. We cleaned it up and left the ring on a chain, hanging over the stone. People may die and civilizations may fall, but little pieces of the past linger.

Tucking the purse in my utility belt, we swim down the tunnel until we reach the next platform. We walk up a spiral staircase to the old Westminster station entrance and climb out through a gap in the boarded-up doors. The fresh breeze is a relief after the stale air in the tunnels, but the wind makes me feel even colder in my wetsuit.

We walk towards home along the bank of the Thames. Shen and I are allowed out on our own, as long as we stay in central London, where the buildings are safe. Beyond that, it can be too dangerous. Everything is falling into ruin. Our parents don't let us go out there without an adult.

I call Dad and say, "We found a way out at Westminster. Where are you at?"

He sounds distracted. "I'm still here. I found a – well, I'm not sure what it is, but I think it's in the *batrachospermaceae* family. I'm going to be a while."

I roll my eyes at Shen, who smirks. "OK," I say to Dad, "see you at home."

Dad makes a distracted noise of confirmation, and I hang up.

We head down the foreshore. The tips of my boots dip in and out of the brown waves, leaving half-moon footprints in the sand

which quickly fill with water. Even though we didn't find much in the Underground today, we might have more luck in the Thames. Everything ends up here. People have been dumping sewage and rubbish in this river ever since London became a city. Most of it sank down to the bottom, where it has remained for centuries.

Now, when the population is so low as to be negligible, the river bed has started eroding instead of building up. The Thames is cleaning itself of humanity's presence. The infertility of the human race was actually quite a good move, from an environmental perspective.

Year by year, the layers of history are peeling back to reveal older and older treasures. Shen and I have made it our mission to find as much of it as possible, mudlarking nearly every day. That's what it's called, when you search the mud of the Thames for interesting stuff.

An old robot is plodding along the sand ahead of us. Their body is so old that grey-green moss and bird droppings fill the crevices of the joints, curving over the round body. They lift their head as we walk past, but look back to the ground with disinterest. I try not to take it personally. They are such an old model they're barely functional any more. Mum says they were installed on the riverbank in the twenty-twenties as a lifeguard after a tourist drowned.

They are solar-powered, so for decades they have been walking up and down the river, scanning continuously for anyone in danger. Mum calls them "Mitch", after some lifeguard character in an old TV show. It's a joke that only the adults find funny, but

the name kind of stuck.

We carry on, past Mitch, and past the remains of a collapsed Victorian redbrick which the maintenance bots haven't demolished yet. Our ancestors designed bots to keep things safe, even when there weren't many humans left. Eventually though, when the last of us dies and there isn't anyone around to service the bots, they'll all start breaking down too. Then all the buildings will finish their slow descent into ruin, like this one.

"You can see the rock, look." I point at the building. Slabs of softening concrete have torn away the tarmac of the road above, exposing layers of the earth in lines of soil, clay and sand.

"Isn't it strange to think that in a few million years, all that might be left of the human race will be a millimetre of rock like that?" Shen asks. "I wonder what an alien would make of it, if they visited Earth then?"

I reach down to twist a glass bottle out of the mud. It comes out with a squelch. I've never given up hope that there'll be a message inside one, one day. I rub away the mud to read the name embossed in the glass. Coca-Cola, as usual. "Well, they'd probably think Coca-Cola was a religion, for a start."

Shen gives a small smile and then tilts his head, eyes on the ground. "I read this thing that said that the carbon dioxide we released from burning fossil fuels will last longer than anything else humans have ever made. So I reckon alien archaeologists would be able to work out from the carbon dioxide caught in the rock that *something* happened on this planet a long time ago."

"I wonder if they'd work out that the carbon dioxide came

from an intelligent species burning fossil fuels, though,” I say, intrigued by this idea. “They might think it was a freak natural event.”

I look at the stones at my feet: the shards of slate and glass left in the soil. What would I think had caused them, if I was an alien and knew nothing about humanity? Would I see any difference between sandstone and concrete, or glass and amber, or plastic?

Once, I was 3D-printing a tool box when a fly got stuck in the molten plastic. It’s still frozen inside of the transparent plastic, perfectly preserved like a butterfly in amber.

Would an alien see any difference between that plastic and a fossil? Maybe the man-made materials would mean nothing to them. They wouldn’t see them as any different to the other layers in the earth. Maybe they wouldn’t even be looking for an intelligent race.

“The aliens definitely wouldn’t know about us, then,” I say. “A boy and a girl, living on the outskirts of a collapsed civilization, watching their species go extinct.”

He swallows, Adam’s apple rising and falling. “Nope.”

The metal detector lets out a short beep, and Shen pushes his toe into the silt, flipping over the dirt to reveal a bottle cap.

“You never know, though,” he adds. “Maybe us humans will leave something behind. There are caves full of drawings made over forty-thousand years ago. The conditions have preserved them perfectly. They’re going to survive centuries after the last buildings have collapsed, at the very least.”

“So if humanity does leave a message for the future, it’s not

going to be from us. It'll be from the first hunter-gatherers." I picture ochre handprints stretching upwards to the sky, welcoming extra-terrestrial visitors a million years from now.

Shen grins. His cheeks have turned pink with cold. "I mean, they've probably got more of a right to it than us. Those caves had people living in them continuously for thousands and thousands of years. A lot longer than humans have ever lived in buildings. We're the dead end in a long line of generations. The ones who broke everything."

I swallow. The thought hits home, probably more harshly than he meant it to. I think about the legacy we're leaving behind all the time: pollution and plastic and buildings and everything else. As one of the last humans, my choices and decisions are imbued with the full weight of the billions of lives that came before me. It feels like my ancestors are watching me, waiting to see how I ensure their legacy, how I remember them.

That's why I like mudlarking, because it feels like I'm actually doing something to record the history that's being lost. I'm so helpless, in the face of the infertility. But I can make sure that someone remembers the lives that came before us, if only for a few more decades.

Overhead, a helicopter thrums as it heads downriver. It must be Alexei Wyatt, on his way back from one of the abandoned cities around England, where he goes to pick up scavenged items in an old army helicopter. He'll be heading straight to the community meeting, which means we've got just enough time to go home and change into dry clothes before we have to join everyone

at City Hall.

“What song are we doing today, do you know?” I ask, as we walk. Our choir always rehearses after the meeting. I sing – and weasel a rap solo out of Shen’s mama, the choirmaster, when I can. Shen’s voice is terrible, so he plays bass guitar instead.

Shen hums a few bars of melody. “That one. Mama was singing it in the shower this morning.”

I hum it back to him, trying to remember the name. It’s catchy, annoyingly so, and I’m still singing it in my head when I realise there’s something wrong with the helicopter. It’s tilted at an angle, skittering in the sky like a glass about to fall off a table. It looks like it’s been caught in a gust of wind – but the air is still and calm.

“That doesn’t look—” Shen begins, but before he can finish, the helicopter drops out of the sky. The tail rotor catches on a lamppost on Westminster Bridge, and there’s a shrieking explosion of metal.

I take an involuntary step backwards as the helicopter whirls in a tight circle, swung around by the force of its spinning rotors. It’s thrown across the bridge and into a support beam. Sheets of metal pull away from the cockpit, and I think that surely it can’t keep going, that it must come to a stop soon, but it doesn’t. It swings around in another violent arc and collides with the clock tower of Big Ben.