

STORM OF LIES

Also by Sophie McKenzie

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**STORM
OF
LIES**

Sophie
McKenzie

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For Caro

‘It could happen in ten thousand years’ time,
but it could also happen tomorrow . . .’

*Sir David King, former chief scientific adviser
to the UK government and founder of the
Centre for Climate Repair at Cambridge
University warns that a mega tsunami, caused
by a landslide in the Canary Islands, could
hit the south coast of the UK at any time.*

PART ONE

INITIATION

1

I slam the car door shut and follow Mum and Parker into the large, brick headquarters of Mayes Cranston Engineering. I woke up today with that prickly, irritable feeling in my head again, the one I've had on and off since Dad left last summer. It's like that sensation when you're wearing something scratchy and uncomfortable, except you can change out of itchy clothes; I can't seem to change my brain.

At least we've got the morning off school.

The January chill of the car park gives way to the warmth of the carpeted lobby. It smells of furniture polish and stale air. Mum works here five days a week as an admin assistant – though she's also doing a big project for the company, which has taken up all her spare time since the new year. The last time I was here was on a 'bring your kid to work' day, nearly a year ago.

'This is going to be sooo interesting,' Parker whispers.

I say nothing. *Interesting* is not the word I'd use.

'Hello, Christian!' Mum says, hurriedly clipping her

staff key card to her cardigan. Mum's always in a hurry these days, thanks to the fact that she is almost constantly working.

I look up to see a square-jawed man in a crisply cut navy suit striding towards us, arms open in welcome. Mum talks about Christian a lot – he's the head of the engineering department and gets on with everyone, or so Mum says. I vaguely remember him from when I was here last year.

'This can't be Hollie,' he says, grinning broadly. 'She's so tall!'

'I'm actually the average height for fourteen,' I mutter. People *always* think I'm tall. It's because I'm lanky. That's the word my Great-aunt Louella uses for me; she says I'll grow into my long, skinny arms and legs. I'm not so sure; anyway, I'd rather just look normal.

'Hollie!' Mum is smiling, but there's a warning note in her voice. *Don't embarrass me!* That's what she's really saying. I cross my arms, feeling awkward. I hadn't meant to be rude, but what are you supposed to do when people make highly personal remarks? Beside me, Parker is fidgeting from foot to foot, chewing on her lip.

'And this is Parker, Hollie's friend. They're doing their science project together,' Mum explains.

Can't she remember anything?

‘It’s not a science project, actually,’ I say. ‘It’s a project-based learning assignment.’

‘To research, identify and analyse key aspects of the upgrade to our local storm defence system at Salthaven, which was designed, tested and then installed a few months ago by Mayes Cranston Engineering,’ Parker blurts out. She has clearly memorized the outline that we – by which I really mean Parker – wrote for Miss Griffin who set the environmental studies assignment.

Christian stares at her, a smile playing across his lips. ‘That sounds ambitious.’

‘It’s basically just a report on how Mayes Cranston recently rebuilt the seawall,’ I explain.

‘I’ve already done lots of research,’ Parker says proudly. ‘The original seawall was constructed in the 1990s but degraded over the years and, with global warming accelerating, it was decided a few years ago that it wasn’t big or strong enough. A new, larger seawall, with reinforced steel embedded in the concrete was finally installed last autumn.’ She clasps her hands together. ‘I can’t *wait* to check out how you interfaced with the supercomputer; maybe even try out the projection mapping software? Ooh, and I’d *love* to see how you programmed the simulation tank.’

I roll my eyes. Parker is *such* a geek.

‘No worries!’ Christian laughs, revealing two rows of perfectly white, even teeth. Parker blushes the colour of a strawberry and Mum gives her shoulder a reassuring pat. How come she can respond like that to Parker being a bit anxious, but can’t handle it when *I’m* feeling awkward?

‘Well, that certainly sounds like a science project, Hollie!’ Mum says pointedly.

I look down at the dark red carpet. Until recently, Mum and I were really close. But since Dad left, everything’s changed. It’s not just that Mum’s always working, it’s that even when she is around, she’s distracted. She doesn’t listen properly to me – or anyone – any more. I know she’s always stressing about money now we’re living on just her salary, and I get that it’s hard for her. I really do. But she’s only in that position because Dad left.

And Dad left because of her. He told me that specifically on 30 August last year – the last day I spoke to him. ‘I just don’t want to be with your mother any more,’ he said. Of course he added ‘it’s no one’s fault’, but that didn’t fool me. Mum was always nagging at him to get a job before he went. If it isn’t her fault that she pushed him away, whose is it?

‘What about you, Hollie?’ Christian’s voice brings me back to the stuffy Mayes Cranston lobby. He’s still smiling warmly. Mum, on the other hand is frowning at me, while Parker is staring at her toes.

‘What about what?’ I ask.

Mum gives a *tsk*, like I’ve said something highly offensive.

‘I was just wondering what *you’re* interested in?’ Christian asks. ‘The supercomputer like Parker here? Or maybe the engineering process? We own a very powerful scanning electron microscope that we use to check for defects in metal alloys.’

‘Oh.’ I shrug. I care about rising sea levels and the climate crisis as much as anyone else my age, of course, but I can’t imagine I’ll find anything very interesting in the new seawall, even if I use one of Christian’s super-powerful microscopes to look for it.

Unlike Parker, who has spent the past few days reading as much as she can about storm defence systems, I’m only doing this project because I have to.

‘Come on, Hollie, this is a state-of-the-art engineering company.’ Mum gives me a gentle prod. ‘I would have given my eye teeth to be shown around a place like this when I was at secondary school.’

I roll my eyes. Mum’s always going on about how she missed out on being a top-level scientist because she didn’t go to university and how important it is for me to do well at maths and science, so I can get to uni myself.

What about what *I* want?

Mum frowns, her voice growing sharper. ‘Ms Somersby has been very kind to allow your visit today, Hollie, so I hope there’s *something* you’re interested in?’

‘Not really,’ I mumble.

The silence turns awkward. Mum lets out a frustrated sigh. Christian looks embarrassed.

‘Who’s Ms Somersby?’ Parker mouths.

‘Big Boss Lady,’ I grunt. I’ve never met Mum’s boss – she only started at the company six months ago, shortly before they started building the new seawall. However, I don’t like what I know. It’s Mum’s boss who keeps her working so hard.

‘Ms Somersby to you, Hollie,’ Mum says tersely. She turns to Parker. ‘She’s the managing director of the whole company.’

‘I reckon *Big Boss Lady* works just as well,’ Christian says with a grin.

I almost smile back. Maybe Christian isn’t so bad.

‘Is Ms Somersby showing us round?’ Parker asks eagerly.

‘No, that’ll be me,’ Christian says. He taps his staff key card which is clipped to his jacket pocket. ‘I think I’ve got something to show you that even Hollie will be interested in. Are you ready to get going?’

‘Not yet,’ I say quickly. ‘We have to wait for Rex; he’s in our group too.’

As I say his name, I feel the heat rising at the back of my neck and hope nobody notices.

Rex Russell started in our year at school last September and is one of those cool boys that everybody wants to be friends with. He'd barely exchanged five words with me until Miss Griffin assigned him to our group. Which, to be honest, wasn't really fair on Rex. Every group wanted him – while nobody wanted to join me and Parker – so I guess Miss Griffin thought it made sense.

Of course it does mean that nobody got what they wanted.

Except me. Not that it's panned out like I'd hoped. Not yet anyway. Rex and I might have talked now – but only about the outline for the project. Having said that, I think he was impressed that, thanks to Mum working at Mayes Cranston, I was able to organize a visit here so quickly. I touch my hair, feeling self-conscious. Are my dark curls behaving themselves? I wish I could check myself in a mirror.

'So, I found out from my search that the new seawall is bigger, with steel inside the reinforced concrete, but how else is it different?' Parker asks, phone in hand and all poised to take notes.

'Ah, we also improved the resilience of the deadmans at the wall's base in the seabed,' Christian explains. 'Not

even a tsunami could get through that now! Ha, ha! We tested . . .’ His voice fades away as I turn towards the glass front door next to us and peer out at the drizzle.

Rex should be here by now, shouldn’t he? I offered him a lift with me and Parker, but he said he’d make his own way here.

A sleek, black car turns into the parking lot. It glides past all the other vehicles, including Mum’s battered estate, drawing to a halt just to the left of the main door where we’re standing. A uniformed security guard appears from around the corner and rushes over to open the driver’s door. A woman in heels and a cream trench coat steps out. The sharp lines of her bob swing forward as she speaks to the security guard, then bends down, clearly talking to whoever is in the passenger seat. I sense movement behind me and turn. A serious-faced youngish man is standing by the reception desk, holding a laptop and a reusable coffee cup.

‘She’s here!’ he calls to someone out of my eyeline.

I turn back to watch the woman. This must be the boss, Ms Somersby. She’s still talking to whoever is sitting in the passenger seat. The security guard strides to the front door of the building and holds it open for her.

‘Hi, Geoff,’ Mum says to him.

He nods at her. ‘Morning.’

As Ms Somersby shuts the driver-side door with a click, I glance at Mum, with her unstylish mop of greying hair and her shapeless cardigan. A horrible thought darts through my head: maybe if Mum looked as groomed and sophisticated as Ms Somersby, then Dad wouldn't have left.

The thought evaporates as the passenger on the other side of the car gets out and strolls behind Ms Somersby towards the building.

My jaw drops. It's Rex Russell!