

Chapter 1

If Islands Were Conkers

Margaret dangled her wellies over the edge of the world. The blue one hung looser than the green, but they still fit well enough. Clumps of mud tumbled into the foggy abyss as she kicked her heels against the side of the island, never to be trodden on again.

“Don’t lose your wellingtons,” her brother said.

She groaned. Why was he so difficult these days? Cyril just had to criticise her every action, no matter how innocuous. There was a big, scary world drifting around out there, and her younger brother had only ever walked upon a fragment of it. The same sixty acres of floating farmland for as long as she’d known him. And yet somehow, he now felt as if he’d garnered sufficient wisdom to tell her, an adult, how to conduct her own affairs.

As of late, she couldn’t so much as nip to the edge and take a shit without the nagging thought that Cyril was about to pop up and tell her she was doing it out the wrong hole.

Today, however, Margaret wasn’t here for that. Today’s business on the edge was even less pleasant, although it would certainly provide its own kind of relief once it was over.

Today was collision day.

She started kicking her wellies again — partly to wind up her brother, mostly to shepherd her thoughts away from that *thing* sailing towards them.

“I’m serious, Margaret. Wellies aren’t going spare. Poor old George’s been working the fields in a pair of clogs. Tell her, Dad.”

Their father sat behind them on a stool, the sunrise glazed across his heavy brow. “You’re the only pair of clogs I’ve seen around here,” he chuckled, without shifting his gaze from his binoculars, fixed keenly on the marmalade-washed sky.

Margaret scooted away from the edge and cozied up beside the stool. “Any movements?”

“Geese. Pigeons. Couple of sparrows. Thought I saw a buzzard. Could’ve been a kite...”

“Oh, piss off.” She gave him a nudge. “You know what I meant.”

Looking at it seemed easier when her father was beside her.

Across the abyss, the hulking silhouette of a city loomed large. It was very close this morning — less than a mile of sweet, breezy nothingness between them now. Margaret had never seen an island so enormous. Great spires and clock towers stabbed at the heavens like raised swords. Beneath them, squat buildings rallied to form a rigid blockade, almost entirely eclipsing her view of the rising sun. Light slipped through the seams where it could — mostly between the legions of chimney pots stationed along the rooftops.

Further down still, the terrain rose from a point — a sort of upside-down mountain, its peak engulfed by the spectral fog of the abyss. But Margaret could make out no more detail, no colour — just mass, shape and silence, creeping ever nearer with the quiet certainty of another passing cloud.

“No sign of any visitors,” said her father. “But she’s coming in a bit high. If it was flying lower, I’d know for sure.”

“I wouldn’t worry, Margaret,” said her brother, “It’ll be another ghost island. It usually is.”

Margaret tried to remain unfazed. She knew better than either of them what could happen when it *wasn’t* a ghost island. She’d learned that lesson before Cyril was born — with a different family, one that wasn’t around anymore.

“Shame,” she said, “I was hoping for slavers. Thought I might swap you for a new pair of wellies.”

Cyril scrunched his upper lip. Then, with a roll of the eyes, he simply turned his back.

Margaret couldn't believe it. Cyril, turning the other cheek? *Cyril*? She'd been prepared for a nasty retort, but this was something more audacious altogether. Come to think of it, she hadn't been able to get a decent rise out of him all summer. All those extra hours in the fields must've burned the cheer away.

She would tolerate this no longer. If that *was* death on the horizon, she'd meet it with the boy she grew up with, not this *stranger*.

Besides, she hadn't come here just to idle around and ponder the prospect of total annihilation. She'd come with a plan. A distraction. And as it happened, it was Cyril's favourite game.

"Know what that is?" She pointed at a lonely tree fifty yards or so down the way. It looked half-asleep, all slumped over the side of their island, its bronzing fans waving lazily in the wind.

"Horse chestnut," Cyril said, quick and certain — he knew every tree on the island by name. Then it dawned on him. He snapped his head towards her like a spooked deer. "No, Margaret, we're not playing conkers."

But that little glint in his eye told her otherwise.

"Why not?" she said. "There's still a couple hours before..." She made a vague gesture at the city. "...y'know."

Her fingers fumbled around in the pockets of her dungarees until they found a familiar smoothness. Her chestnut champion. She tugged the seed out by its string and swung it in front of her brother like a hypnotist. "Loser mucks out the chickens."

Hardly a gruelling forfeit these days — there weren't many chickens left.

"Aren't we a bit old for conkers? I don't even remember the rules."

Margaret raised her eyebrows. No need to dignify such a blatant lie with a response. There weren't any rules to forget — you just took turns swinging two nuts against each other until one of them smashed. They'd played it... what? A hundred times?

"Never too old for conkers, boy," said her father. "Use this." He pulled a lace from one of his work boots and tossed it at his son's feet. It was stiff with old mud, woven deep between the frayed fibres, but it would do. "Find yourself a big one," he added. "Big conkers always win."

Cyril forced a huff, pocketed the lace, and plodded over to the tree with the gait of a child sent to bed without supper.

And so, Margaret waited. The autumn wind tickled her cheeks. It had an earthy smell to it, like the island was exhaling, bracing itself for the cold months to come. She leaned back, pressed her hands into the turf, and let the grass mingle with her fingers.

Squinting at the city, she let a weary raspberry flutter through her lips. In the absence of mortal peril, this could have been a very nice day.

She paused; her thoughts were getting the better of her again. *Mortal peril? Really?* These collisions always played out the same way: a few sleepless nights as the islands drew closer, only to end with the discovery of another vacant ghost island, or a brief exchange with a handful of natives no less anxious than they were.

But it only had to go wrong once. One bad collision to change your life — or, as she knew all too well, end it. And there was something about this city, this *behemoth* of a city, that ravaged Margaret's soul each time she set eyes on it. What had her father said about big conkers?

If islands were conkers, this one was surely invincible.

No. She was being silly again. Islands were not conkers. Who would hold the string?

As she contemplated this, a faint oink called out from the wheelbarrow beside her. Her father had packed it with what little of the harvest they could spare: carrots, oats, a couple of the smaller piglets — the sort of foods he didn't much care for himself — just in case the city wanted to trade. And between the tattered sacks, Margaret had hidden his shotgun — a Westley Richards. Just in case it didn't.

Her father's heavy arm wrapped around her shoulder.

"Your brother's in a fine mood."

"Oh, he's alright really." She met his ugly mug with a smile. His eyes were hard and sunken, like flint in a furrow. "The harvest's been tough on him. On all of us. And collisions are never easy — least of all when it's with a chuffing great city."

He grunted. Margaret's father made great use of an extensive vocabulary of grunts — too much time spent raising pigs, she reckoned.

"I wouldn't expect much," he said, returning to his binoculars. "Can't imagine anyone lasting too long in a place like that. These chunks of the old world — they're all tarmac and cobbles. You'd be hard pressed to grow a patch of grass, let alone a barley field. Might've had some bits and bobs once — petrol, cigarettes, that sort of thing — but that'll have been picked clean donkey's ago."

He leaned back and scratched at the stubble on his jaw. "Mind you, my old man said city living was all the rage in his youth — before the Tearaways, that is."

Before the Tearaways. Margaret still struggled to comprehend such a world. A world where the islands didn't fly, but sat together, resting down below, surrounded by all the water you could drink. A world where you could walk in a straight line for months without falling off an edge.

A world where anyone could go anywhere at any time. That sounded like the sort of world that would eat you alive.

"Let's have a peek, then."

Reluctantly, her father gave up his binoculars. The rims were warm, having spent the better part of an hour pressed right up against his stupid face. Through the lenses, the black mass sharpened. What had been a distant smudge now took on uncomfortably vivid details: windows, doors, the odd tree here or there. Right on the edge, Margaret could see inside a ruptured building — torn clean through by the Tearaways — its interior laid bare like a dilapidated doll's house. A crooked weathervane perched atop what remained of the roof. Margaret spied on it for a moment, waiting for it to twitch in the wind, if only to prove that something *could* move in this city. But it refused to budge, remaining yet another stubborn witness to the stillness.

Then the scene changed.

“Wait.”

A shadow flickered — just for a moment — between the silhouettes of two chimney pots. The motion was blurred and brief, but a touch too deliberate to be the work of the wind.

“We’ve been waiting all morning,” her father replied.

“No. Dad — shut your face — I think I saw something.”

She kept the binoculars trained on the chimney pots, breath shallow. Her gaze combed the gaps where the shadow had slipped through.

“A pigeon, I reckon. I must’ve seen about a dozen pigeons.”

“I dunno, Dad. It looked more like a—”

She heard it before she felt it. That telltale *thwonk*— the all-too-familiar sound of her brother pelting a chestnut at the back of her head.

“—Wanker!”

“Found my conker,” Cyril announced, holding the nut above her. “And it sounds like she’s a winner.” He began threading it with his penknife, sporting a nauseating grin.

Margaret subtly rubbed her head, trying to ease the pain ringing at her skull. Surprise conker assaults had been a staple threat throughout her childhood, but they weren’t quite as endearing when your assailant was practically a grown man.

“Just in time, boy. Your sister’s spotted a pigeon,” said their father, who’d somehow reclaimed the binoculars during the kerfuffle.

They shared a thuggish giggle at her expense. Margaret scowled. The memory of the shadow played over and over in the back of her mind, stopping and starting with the throb of her crown. Perhaps the shadow *could* have been a pigeon — if she shrank it down, gave it a beak, and persuaded it to behave even remotely like a pigeon would.

No matter. Feathers or not, Dad never missed a trick. Cyril, meanwhile, was looking a bit *too* pleased with himself.

Margaret dangled her conker out before him. “Go first, if you want.”

Cyril accepted the challenge with a bow steeped in sarcasm, sizing up Margaret’s conker as he descended. He had a wicked confidence about him, and when she saw his own conker, she knew why. Just looking at the thing stoked the stinging at the back of her head. It was an absolute beast — brazen and bulbous, the outer shell burnished with a sherry red sheen, much like the stock of the Westley Richards. The nut dwarfed his dirty fingertips as he took aim; this was a conker bred for war.

He let it fly.

The conker swung down in an arc, splitting the breeze with a menacing woosh. A crisp clacking rang out as his conker smashed against hers, before fading out into the void.

She checked for injuries: No chips, no cracks, no worries. This little nut was ready to go again.

Reluctantly taking the defensive stance, Cyril clutched his father’s bootlace and let the big bastard hang, clearly baffled he hadn’t won in the first throw.

“You’re a lucky bugger. That was a perfect-”

Margaret lashed her conker forwards. The swing lacked the same graceful trajectory as her brother’s, but found its target all the same.

“Like shelling peas,” she quipped, pointing to the crack before Cyril clocked it.

Cyril stared down at his seed as its pendulation came to a rest, solemn and dejected — like he'd staked any potentiality of happiness on the well-being of his fractured little chestnut.

Then the grief melted from his face, only to curdle into something more sour. He glared at Margaret's winning nut, slapped it from her hand, and set upon it with a barrage of wellington heels. He inspected the wreckage. Not a dent. Margaret's champion appeared to be immortal.

"Cheat!" He cried, pointing at her as if some invisible tribunal for regulation conker-conduct were watching over them. "It's been tampered with! What have you done to it?"

"Passed it through a pig." The confession leaked through her slightly upturned lips, as every other muscle in her face laboured to restrain her glee.

His stare retreated behind tired eyelids. "You passed it... *through a pig?*"

"I passed it through a pig." she confirmed. "The stomach acid dries the conker out and makes it go all hard. Dad told me."

The man on the stool grunted.

"So *this* is what you do all day? Rummage around in pig shit? No wonder we're all going hungry."

"Come on, Cyril." Margaret giggled. "It's only a bit of fun."

"This isn't the time for fun, Margaret. This is serious reconnaissance. I thought you of all people would understand that. But oh, no! You brought a toy to play with. A lump of bloomin..." He gawked at the subject of his indignation. "...*tree matter* that's probably caked in disease and who knows what else. All so you can cheat at a *children's game* — which, if you'll both remember," Cyril hurled Margaret's conker towards the city. "I didn't even want to fucking play!"

Margaret took a deep breath, revising her brother's tantrum for quotes that she might repeat later to make him feel a bit silly. It was true, the island was going hungry, but this little outburst was a rich harvest indeed.

She turned to her father, hoping to catch his eye and induce a burst of laughter that might ease the tension. But, as could have been expected, he had returned to his birds, head quite literally in the clouds, as it often was when conversations grew delicate. Margaret got the feeling that, in his mind, any problem that couldn't be fixed with an adjustable spanner was a problem that could fix itself.

Margaret turned to her mismatched wellies, confronted by a rotten feeling that told her the teasing could wait. Not an unfamiliar feeling, but one that, especially in recent years, she found difficult to bottle up. There was a word for this feeling, but Margaret was strongly opposed to the labelling of affections. Once a pig had been named, it became more than passing pork, and the upkeep of one's emotional discipline grew unnecessarily complicated.

But as her brother looked out at the city on their doorstep, unsure if he should act scary or scared, Margaret was reminded of a little girl. A little girl who had stood on the edge of a very different island, and looked out at this one, terrified of how her life might be changed in the hours to come.

Margaret decided she couldn't stomach the rotten feeling any longer.

"You're right, Cyril. I *do* understand — that we might be looking at a collision with raiders, killers, or worse. But I've also come to understand that, in any case, there's really not much I can do about it. Because when all's said and done, we can sit here shit-scared until the end of the world does or doesn't arrive, or we can have a game of conkers."

Cyril huffed and sat cross-legged. "I s'pose that's fair enough." He plucked at a bundle of turf and tossed it into the breeze. "But you're still a cheat."

"I'm sorry I cheated." Margaret lied.

For the next hour or so, the family found themselves playing a different game. It wasn't given a name, but the rules seemed simple and unyielding: the first person to make a sound lost. Margaret did not enjoy this game. There were no strategies to plan, no pieces to fidget with, and little to look at other than the city. It was so very near now, and in full colour, lit by a mid-morning sun that usually meant elevenses.

Once or twice, when the immediacy of her surroundings became too much to bear, Margaret would shut her eyes and take refuge inside her own head. But her imagination staged nothing but the memory of the shadow, taunting her between the chimney pots. Today, even the hallowed halls of her skull were not impregnable.

She'd tried counting bobbles — ninety-six by her estimation. Margaret would have liked to be a bobble, aimlessly bouncing about the sky without reason or purpose. One of the orbs had bumped against her face — a sign of good fortune, if you believed in that sort of thing — leaving a damp patch on her cheek as a parting gift. She'd watched it drift on, all the way to the outer rim of her lousy pocket of infinity.

Their father, by contrast, relished the new game, his victory all but guaranteed. He had his binoculars, and was therefore immune to the blights of boredom — until, much to Margaret's horror, he was first to forfeit.

"Fetch the others," he said.

"What's wrong?" Margaret asked, already knowing the answer.

"Blokes. Blokes on the roof."

Cyril sprang into action. "How many? Let me see!" The boy snatched the binoculars and pressed them to his eyes, masking the panic alight in his gaze. Then, for the first time that morning, Margaret's father rose from the stool. He snatched the binoculars back with one hand and slapped Cyril across the face with the other.

The rotten feeling had returned, and it hadn't come alone.

“Do as you’re told, boy!” he roared at his staggering son, who didn’t yelp or whimper or scream. He only stared, eyes wide, mouth slack, a thin trickle of blood forming on his lip. Margaret was always astounded by Cyril’s propensity to totally lose his rag — and even more by his refusal to do so in situations where it would be entirely justified.

“Well?” the man said, returning the stare.

“He’s right, Cyril. Let’s go.” said Margaret, trying to channel their energies towards what was, in her silly-woman’s opinion, the more immediate threat. They ignored her; Father looked ready for a fight, and Cyril looked ready to be punched.

A shrill hiss zipped through the mid-morning sky.

At first, it appeared Cyril had won the fight without so much as twitching. With a half-yell, half-scream, Margaret’s father buckled at the knees and toppled onto his side. A light pattering of red blossomed over Cyril’s white flannel.

“Dad?” Cyril’s voice was small and uncertain, like he’d been woken up by a strange noise downstairs.

A proud bang called out from across the abyss.

“They’ve got guns,” Margaret said, to the surprise of nobody — least of all her father, who clutched his side as another guttural howl tore through his throat.

“They’ve fucked my fucking hip!” he cried.

Margaret’s brother turned to her, eyes pleading, but she too was completely paralysed.

“I don’t know what to do.” Cyril’s words snagged on frantic, shallow breaths. “I don’t know what to do.”

It was happening again.

Cyril crouched over his father. “What do we do?”

Another zip. Dirt spat up at Margaret’s face. She jumped back, shaking off her pathetic daze.

“Run, you pillocks,” yelled her father. “Leave me and run!”

Finally, Margaret had a coherent idea. She grabbed her brother by the scruff of his collar and pulled him away from the bleeding man.

“Behind the conker tree,” she said. “Go.”

Cyril’s eyes flicked between Margaret and his father. Then, with a nod and a swallow, he bolted for the tree.

Margaret took a good look at her dad. She tried to think of something to say to him, something kind. Something that meant “Goodbye”, “Thank you”, and “I’m sorry” all at once. But there wasn’t enough time, and the words wouldn’t come.

“Look lively, girl.” His voice was softer now. “He’s a good shot, your pigeon.”

Margaret immediately pivoted away from him; she didn’t need telling twice, and he didn’t need her tears. The words “Take care” stumbled from her quivering mouth.

Shame trickled down her face as she scarpered along the island’s edge towards the conker tree. *Take care?* Was that really all she had to say to him — the man that had taken her in and loved her unconditionally for the past fifteen years? She should go back and do it properly. Maybe she could fetch her cornet and serenade him. Yes, he’d like that. A proper goodbye.

Then, another zip. Unsure of where the bullet had landed, she gave her body a once-over. But what was she looking for? A big hole? No. It was a miss. She was fine.

Actually, fuck it. Dad was a write-off — no point pretending otherwise. There was no time for lullabies, and music was for the living. She'd been through this before, and she'd go through it again. Twice an orphan — that's our Margaret. She'd paddle through the pig shit and be a harder nut because of it. She only had to keep running.

It was like shelling peas.

She threw herself behind the tree and huddled next to her brother. Back against bark, he sat in a jittery ball, sputtering and wheezing like a busted kettle.

"They're gonna kill him," he whispered. "Any second now, they're gonna kill my dad."

"They won't. No point wasting bullets on someone who's..." The words died on her tongue as she understood their meaning. A verbal miscarriage — but probably tactical, all things considered.

"Someone who's what? As good as dead? Thanks Margaret, really, that's just splendid. Besides, you don't know that."

Margaret sighed. She *did* know that, but squabbling time was scarce. What mattered now was finding a way for her and Cyril to return to the village without catching a bullet in the neck.

The only thing between them and the village was a peninsular field. A week ago, the two of them could have vanished into a forest of corn stalks, and the gunman wouldn't have had a clue. But, of course, Cyril and George had since had the bright idea to strip it bare, leaving nothing but a patchy carpet of ankle-height stubble. Bastards.

It was so typical of her brother — to cut down ten acres of maize before even *thinking* about shaving that sad, hesitant wisp of a moustache that had been crawling along his upper lip for the better part of a year.

She had a nosey around the foot of the chestnut tree, searching for something — anything — that might give them a chance of making it to lunch. But Margaret found only conkers.

Hundreds of ruddy conkers scattered in the shade. She winced, recalling the earlier skirmish with her brother; the memory of her “chestnut champion” now decidedly unimpressive.

Hang on. They had a weapon — a proper one. An all-singing, all-dancing, 12-bore shotgun, no less. If, by some fabulous miracle, she could survive until the collision, the only firearm on their island was probably something worth having.

She winced again as she remembered where she’d left it.

In the wheelbarrow.

Over *there*.

Truly, she was a most distinguished moron. How had she spent so many precious moments moping around with her father’s corpse-to-be and not once thought to grab the Westley Richards?

“I think... I think we can save him.” her brother said, voice trembling.

“No Cyril, we can’t. Even if we both tried lugging him across the field — there’s no cover, and it’s too slow — he probably can’t even stand. They’d just shoot us. Our best chance is legging it back to the village.”

“What about the wheelbarrow?”

Cyril gave her a meek nudge. “If we can get him in the wheelbarrow, maybe we can push him to the village. Someone’ll have bandages and... y’know... plasters and things.”

Margaret pulled her hair over her eyes. She didn’t need this. She didn’t need *any* of this.

“Cyril, I’m not risking my life to put your dead dad in a fucking wheelbarrow, okay? Forget it.”

Cyril buried his face in his hands. Good. With any luck, he'd go back to his bawling and give her a little more time to think.

“Why are you being horrible?” he cried. “Dad’s been shot and now you've gone all horrible!”

The situation, Margaret concluded, wasn't actually that complicated: the longer they sat behind this bloody tree, the nearer the city drifted – and the nearer it drifted, the easier they were to shoot. In other words, the best time to run was five minutes ago.

Cyril stood up and dried his eyes on his sleeves.

“Ready to run?” she asked.

“No. I'm getting Dad,” he said, peering around the side of the trunk.

“Oh for fuck's sake Cyril, please just come with me. It's not like he ever really-”

“Did the city have writing on it? Before?”

Writing? Margaret couldn't remember any writing. She leaned around her side of the tree.

An enormous, champagne-pink banner had been draped across a row of terraced housing, the fabric pulled taut by muscular ropes tied around the chimneys. Each of its letters looked to be the size of a window, frighteningly easy to read from this distance:

*We do beg your pardon, we are not here to trade.
We're the Conductor Extraordinary and his Bastard Parade.
So shelter your daughters and muster your sons
for a symphonic slaughter of trumpets and guns.*

“Read it for me,” said Cyril.

“I... I can't — it's in French.”

“I’m not stupid.”

“Read it yourself then.”

There was a pause — long enough for the city to drift another yard closer.

“Fine. Go,” said Cyril. “Run back to the village and tell everyone how you left Dad to rot like wet silage. But I won’t be coming with you. The good farmer doesn’t dodge his obligations — we do not fear the cockerel.”

Before she fled, Cyril had given Margaret a look, as if his words had made a point. But the words weren’t his; Margaret didn’t even know what wet silage was and she doubted Cyril did either. She ran with her head down, eyes glued to her wellies. The stupid boy was just saying things, and she didn’t have to listen.

Except one word. One word in that slurry of oral horseshit that just wouldn’t leave her alone. Because just like that, he’d named her fucking pig.

That perennial bane of gaiety: *obligation*.